

Teaching

I watched Felix as he ate from the can, and wondered where he managed to put it all, he looked barely able to fit half of what he had eaten in the last day. Still, I was glad that he felt comfortable enough to eat in my presence. I had always found the simple act of eating a meal to be somehow... vulnerable.

The sun had risen above the horizon, and with it went most of my strength. In a perfect world, I would've waited until nightfall to go and explore again, but with Felix here I would have to adapt. Still, even during the day I was stronger than most humans, and while I wasn't at my full strength I was still a vampire. Even weakened, my senses were superior to those of a human.

"So," Felix started as he finished his meal. "Why are you wearing a mask and glasses?"

I had expected that question, though if I was honest, I had thought that he would've asked that before now. Still, I did have an answer, somewhat at least.

"You could say that I am a very private person," I said. "But, it is also practical."

He tilted his head. "What does that mean?"

"It means that there are skills that can flash bright lights and there are those that can spread disease through the air. One has to be smart, and protected," I tapped the mask and the glasses.

The kid's eyes widened. "Should I wear it too?" He asked.

I almost laughed, he didn't even question it. But then again, he was still a naïve kid.

"Well," I started slowly. "Probably not, I'm just paranoid."

It even was the truth, I was not going to get myself caught off guard again. Or at least I didn't plan to.

The kid looked like he wanted to argue, but I stood up. "Now, why don't you tell me where your home is, I plan on getting you back by nightfall."

The kid really shouldn't be out here in the wild, if the bear that nearly killed him was anything to go by, he was completely unprepared for the dangers that lurked around.

Felix didn't answer, instead he got... fidgety. "I can't," he shook his head. "I can't go back, not like this. They'll throw me out."

I tilted my head. "Why do you say that?"

"There... isn't enough for all of us. I need to be useful, or..." He trailed off, then bowed his head to the ground.

I remembered some of what he said to me yesterday, about overhearing others say that he was a drain on their resources. I could see how desperate people could think that, a Student Mask didn't have much to offer to a community that was fighting for survival. Though, it had potential, the issue was that they had no idea about anything concerning Masks. They would have no idea about how Masks evolved with each Investment tier.

"I need to find the dungeon," Felix murmured, just barely audible enough for me to hear.

"Felix," I started. "You are in no way equipped to do that."

The kid had gotten what I thought was a big wake up call last night. Though it seemed like it hadn't really sunk in. "If I wasn't there last night, you would've been dead."

He winced, but I knew that harsh words now might keep him alive tomorrow.

The kid clenched his fists, and then raised his eyes up to glare at me with determination set in his face.

"I'm not going back! I'm going to the dungeon."

I tilted my head. I could see that he was resolved, even though it was stupid and he was going to get himself killed. I thought about how to respond, letting him sit there in silence for a bit. I could just tell him that he didn't have a choice, there wasn't much that he could do besides refusing to tell me where he came from. But I wasn't that concerned with it, I doubted that he could've gone far from his home, the mountains had been dangerous even before the Grand Spell arrived. I would find it eventually.

"Why are you so set on going there?" I asked, curious. "You must know how dangerous it is."

Felix shook his head. "I need to find it before the others get there, I've overheard them planning a trip. They want to get to it before it breaks open."

"What do you mean "breaks open"?" I asked.

"You know, when monsters start to spill out of it?" Felix said, then immediately continued. "We can't let that happen so near the church, and the raiders aren't going to be back this way for at least two weeks. So the hunters are going to go and try to beat it."

Monsters spilling out? I wondered if perhaps the rift here was different than what I had encountered on Ish Vimza.

"And you think that you can fight monsters, all on your own?" I asked.

Felix scoffed. "I'm not stupid," he answered. "The hunters came this way just last week, and they didn't see the dungeon. That means that it's a new one, so it's probably not that difficult. Or I could get lucky and get a puzzle one."

I narrowed my eyes at the new information, drawing some conclusions. "You're telling me that the rifts break open?"

He nodded. "Dungeons, and yes, the longer the dungeon exists the stronger the monsters inside get, until eventually the dungeon breaks open and they spill out and start attacking everything."

"Rifts," I stressed, I had to at least try and make people move away from the terminology I heard from Felix. Not because it particularly mattered what something was called, but because using the terms he had been using, mainly ones from games, was dangerous. It might make them think that things were less dangerous than they really were. "Have you seen any rift break before?"

Felix nodded. "I've seen it once, yes," he answered, his tone subdued.

"And these "monsters" did they have red lines covering their bodies?" I asked.

Felix shook his head. "No."

I sighed in relief. "Then they were beasts, just animals, not monsters."

Felix frowned. "They weren't animals anyone recognized, they looked like monsters, giant wolf-like monsters with wicked teeth. Like hounds from hell."

I waved my hand. "Just because something looks scary, doesn't make it a monster. Not that they are any less dangerous," I said slowly. "Any beast was dangerous, but if you ever see one with red markings on its body, like it is diseased, then you run no matter what," I told him.

I didn't know if there even were any monsters on Earth. Shadow had said that they were rare on other continents, only Ish Vimza seemed to be a place where they were more common.

"Did you encounter something like that in a dun--rift?" Felix asked, his eyes falling to look down at my weapon.

"Something like that," I answered. Then I pulled the topic back on track. "So, you want to find this rift and beat it. You still haven't told me exactly why you want to find it before the others?"

"For the loot, of course," Felix answered. "And to level!"

I opened my mouth to press him further, but they paused as I realized that the kid's motivation probably didn't extend far beyond exactly what he had said.

Felix seemingly took my silence as a silent question, so he continued. "If I could get a weapon like yours, or just one level, I know that I can get a skill and be useful."

The poor kid had no idea, a Student Mask was unlikely to grant him anything that would be useful in his eyes. Still, I could understand that feeling, wanting to be useful. Feeling like you could be discarded at any point just because you were a drain on the already strained resources. Hell, I was discarded just like how he feared he would be, my parents sold me to the cartel in order to put food on the table.

I took a deep breath, then released it slowly.

"Do you know how to make a fire?" I asked.

Felix frowned. "What does that have to do with my Class?"

I tapped my fingers against my knee and glared from behind my glasses. He sensed my attention and coughed, then corrected himself.

"My Mask, sorry," he said, and I detected just a tiny amount of pouting in his tone. Progress.

"Every Mask gains Investment in a different manner. What your Mask requires depends on what type it is. You said that you were taken on hunts?"

"Yes, I got to stab a deer with a knife, after the hunters took it down, make the killing blow. I didn't get any le--uh, Carvings."

I nodded. "That is because you gained no Investment that matched what your Mask required, or you gained very little of it."

He blinked. "So what do I need?"

"You have the Mask of the Student, that means that you gain Investment when you learn new things."

Felix frowned. "Learn?"

"Yes," I responded. "You gain more if you are taught by someone too. Now, do you know how to make a fire?"

"With matches or a lighter, yes," the little smartass said.

I gave him a look, that was probably lost on him because of my face being covered up. "Without that," I said, and he shook his head eagerly.

I gestured for him to get closer. I pulled out my knife, the one that I got from Shadow and a piece of flint I recovered at the estate. I collected some branches and started explaining how to properly arrange them to get the best possible start. I showed him once, then had him repeat the work, putting the thin sticks in a loose pyramid shape with a hole in the middle. I pulled out some paper and a small piece of char cloth.

I explained how to strike the knife against the flint properly, and how to get the fire going. Then I let him try it, only offering instruction.

It took him a while to get a consistent spark, and a while more until he finally managed to ignite the cloth.

"I did it!" He exclaimed and I pointed.

"Quick, the paper and the pile."

He scrambled to set the paper on fire, then push it into the hole beneath the pyramid pile. Thankfully, he managed it in time. As soon as the pile started catching fire, he froze and I saw his eyes go wide. After a second, he turned to gape at me, then his face transformed into a wide grin.

"I got it! I got a level and a skill!"

"Carving," I corrected. I was glad, but the fact that he got it immediately probably meant that he had already been very close to the investment threshold. I doubted that a single lesson would've been enough for even a single Carving. "What is the skill?" I asked.

He blinked. "[Fire Learning]?"

That sounded interesting, and it fit what Shadow had told me about how Mask skills worked. What skills one gained was directly linked with what a person did to earn investment.

"You'll need to go to your soul space and check what the skill actually is," I said.

"My what?" Felix asked, his eyes confused.

I paused. The people on Earth got their Masks based on what fit them the best, they didn't have a chance to choose. *Was it possible that they didn't know?* "A soul space, the place where your Mask is," I tapped my chest. "In here."

Felix blinked, his eyes still filled with incomprehension.

"Okay," I started, then put my hand over my chest again. "Have you ever felt something here, like a sense of pressure?"

Felix tilted his head, and then hesitantly nodded. "I think so? Back when the light came, when I heard the words in my head."

"Good," I said. "I want you to focus on your chest, on that exact spot, and think about getting pulled into it. But, once you go there, don't do

anything, don't choose anything if you are offered it without talking with me first."

It was pretty intuitive to figure out, as Shadow had said and I had experienced. I doubted that the Grand Spell wanted it to be difficult for people to figure out.

Felix nodded and did as I asked. Quickly I saw his eyes go unfocused, and I watched in fascination as he entered his soul's space. He looked... kind of goofy, just staring into nothing with his mouth open.

"Do I look like that too?" I asked.

"Feedback: Yes," Saia's voice vibrated out of my bracelet.

I grimaced, then shook my head. "What do you think?"

"Feedback: There is a lot of information in the few things that the child has revealed. But their ignorance is apparent."

I realized that I would have to start sharing, telling people what was really going on. Perhaps, that was the purpose of Exemplars in the first place. I just had to do it in the right way, find people and teach them what I knew.

Felix stirred and started blinking his eyes. "Wow," he said. "That was awesome! It was a big school room, with blackboards all around-" He continued describing his soul space and I only half listened. Then he switched topics. "And I got the option for something called an Ornament?"

I nodded. "Yes, Ornaments are additions for your Mask, that can eventually merge into your Mask, making it stronger."

He immediately got interested, his eyes flashing. "Like sub-classes?"

I glared at him, and even from behind the glasses he seemed to get it.

"Ornaments, right," Felix said slowly. "I got the options for a Hunter, Cook, Woodcutter, and... Survivor."

I blinked at the last one, but didn't comment. I knew that life experiences shaped what Masks and Ornaments one got access to, and I could imagine what happened to him when the Grand Spell arrived from the few details that he had shared.

"You can pick one, but you should wait for your second one, try to get a better option," I told him.

"What should I pick?" Felix asked.

"It is your choice," I shrugged, but then continued. "I would recommend something that you can advance quickly. The Hunter Ornament would mean hunting, obviously, Cook, cooking, and so on. Survivor though might be interesting too. You should think about what kind of skills each of those options will give you too. Speaking of, what is your new skill?"

"It said that learning all fire related knowledge is accelerated, what does that mean?" Felix asked, a hint of disappointment entering his tone.

I could see how he would be disappointed, of course. He had probably expected something that he could use to fight. But that wasn't how the Student Mask worked. Still, it could be a good skill.

"I have a Student Ornament," I told him, and saw his eyes widen.

"Really?"

I nodded. "I have a skill called [Practical Learning], it means that I learn faster through practical means. Just because your skill doesn't give you a direct tool doesn't mean that it isn't useful. You will need to find a way to make it useful on your own, it is your Mask. But, you should also know that your Mask will change after you reach ten Carvings and gain your first Investment tier, or at least you will have a choice to change it. What you do now will all be taken in account."

He blinked, then started thinking about it. "Wait, can I get something like a mage class? Throw fireballs around?" He made throwing gestures.

I opened my mouth, almost laughing, but then I paused. "I... perhaps," I didn't know the specifics, but there were Mage Masks. Of course, some type of knowledge was required for it, but... Source existed all around us now. Perhaps just wanting it bad enough would be enough.

I saw Felix's eye brighten at the idea, and I could tell that he was already enamored by it. I wondered if I should try and curb his excitement a bit, but then decided against it.

He entered his soul space again, and picked his Ornament, deciding to go with the Survivor, surprising me.

"Why did you choose that?" I asked after he came back out.

"I... I don't know," he mumbled.

I recognized a difficult topic, so I let it go and changed the topic.

"Now, tell me where's the rift?"

He raised his head and looked at me. "Are you going to take me with you?" He asked.

I wanted to tell him no, to take him back home first before exploring it. I had to admit that I really wanted to check it out, see what the differences were between a rift here and one that I was in before. I didn't think that I would be in much danger, though having to protect the kid might make things difficult. On the other hand, him going with me might be a good way to get some Investment. I wanted people on Earth to grow, and starting with one young kid might be the best.

"We'll see," I said slowly. "first, I need to learn just how dangerous it is, then I'll decide."

Felix looked like he wanted to argue, but then he sagged in defeat. A moment later he told me.