

“So, has Oswald been able to give you some more information about life as a Player?” Thomas asked as he entered the room. Oswald gave the two of them a final sad smile and then greeted his master. He gave a nod and a hint of a bow, and then he walked past Thomas towards the corridor and the room where Jennifer was being healed.

“I’ll go check on her now.” He said dryly.

Thomas smiled at Oswald, and then at Sam and Finn.

“Yes but... it was happy information.” Sam said tears were still welling up at the corners of her eyes.

“Well, being a Player is often not a happy business,” Thomas said as he sat down in the chair Oswald had just been using. “Being a Player is about survival, overcoming obstacles and fears. About getting dealt a bad hand but making the best of it.”

“We got magic and skills and so many other wondrous things, how can you call that a being dealt a bad hand?” Finn asked.

“Sure, we got some nice stuff. But along with all that nice stuff we also got a boatload of bad to very bad stuff. And on top of that, you can add good old humanity. Always able to make a bad situation worse by selfishness and all of our other flaws. If you make the sum, you’ll see it is a bad hand in the end. It is not useless, but you are worse off now than before, wouldn’t you agree?” Thomas poured himself some tea.

“Well... yes. I suppose so.” Finn said. Sam sighed a sad and deep sigh. “I’m sorry if I had known this... I would have never pulled you along in this.”

“No, I asked for it. I wanted to know, just like you. We did this together. No need to blame yourself.” She smiled at him as she took his hand and squeezed in it.

Thomas smiled at the display of affection between them, it showed once again to him that they were people with the right kind of heart. At least to be his apprentices.

“So, have you had some time to go over your new points and levels?” He asked.

“Ah, yes we have,” Finn said, looking back at Thomas now. “We had quite a bit to go through after these past few days.”

“I’d thought so,” Thomas said with a chuckle. “So, tell me, what did you end up doing?”

Finn and Sam froze for a moment, Thomas watched them. Patiently waiting. Was this a test? Would he judge them based on their choices? Finn cursed in his head, should they have spent more time on deciding what to do?

“Well,” Sam was the first to speak up. “I have spent most of my points in Arcana and Grammerie skills. Also a bit in Cultivation.”

“I see, and why is that?”

“Well,” Sam hesitated and blushed a little. “Well, we have seen recently that I am not that good in the heat of battle. At a distance, I can manage to help out by... by attacking. But close up. I just lock up and panic. I am also better than Finn at the Grammerie things. It seems to... well, just click for me? Finn has more effort with it. So we agreed that I would put a deep focus on magic while Finn would spread out his points more in other areas.”

“I see,” Nodded Thomas. “And you?” moving his gaze to Finn.

“Well, I put a few points in Arcana and Cultivation as well. Most of the other points I put into Strength, Agility and Health. I unlocked some extra skills with that. I also unlocked Channeling, but had no points left to invest in that.”

“Channeling? Already? What are your Arcana, Cultivation and Health at now?” Thomas sounded impressed.

“Ah... Arcana is at 22, Cultivation at 15 and Health at 20.”

“Incredible,” Thomas muttered.

“Why?” Finn asked a bit uncertain.

“Normally the system shouldn’t have given you Channeling yet. There is a small difference in the levels at which Players unlock certain things, but these vary only by two or three levels most of the time. Channelling is usually only unlocked when your Arcana is at least 30, your Cultivation as well and your Health 40. So it is quite surprising to see you having unlocked that already. Can you channel now?”

“Ah yes, but I don’t know really any techniques. I never have done it before, only tried out moving the mana really.”

“That is fine, just move the mana. I will be able to sense that.”

Finn swallowed and then closed his eyes. Envisioning his mana veins, as the guide had told him about, and then pushing his mana from his reserve through the veins, moving it throughout his body.

“Yes, that is enough. You actually are able to channel. Amazing,” Thomas said as he leaned forward onto his knees, hands folded underneath his chin. “Did you unlock any new skills?” He asked Sam.

“Ah, yes,” She said, blushing as she cursed herself for not telling it earlier. “I unlocked a skill called ‘Aurem’. But the pop up did not say much. All I know is that it is an extension of the Cultivation skill.”

“Aurem? You unlocked the Aurem already?” Thomas asked perplexed. “Incredible! Show it to me please.”

“I-I can’t. I don’t know how,” Sam said apologetically.

“Ah, well. Close your eyes, and do the same as when you would cultivate.”

“Yes,” Sam said and then closed her eyes. Letting the gentle ease of Cultivation flow over herself, cloaking herself in the warmth it gave. “I have.” She said.

“Now, focus on the flow around you. The warmth. The soothing. And envision grabbing it, moving it, forming it. Does anything change?”

Sam tried to do as Thomas said. At first, nothing happened but then she started to get a sensation. Like when you try to grab hold of wet, slippery rock and your fingers glide off the entire time, unable to pick it up. As she kept trying, her ‘grip’ got better and better. But she couldn’t grab hold of it. She gasped in frustration. “Yes, I can feel like I can almost grab it. But I can’t keep hold of it.”

“That is enough, no need to rush into this,” Thomas said and Sam opened her eyes again. “Amazing, I could see it form and shape, you definitely have unlocked the Aurem. What are your Arcana and Cultivation at?”

“Arcana is 30 and Cultivation is 28.”

“Again, far too low to be able to unlock the Aurem. Why is this happening to you two?” Thomas asked, leaning back on his hands.

“Maybe it is because of the stress of the last few days?” Sam proposed.

“No, stress and duress are good teachers, but most Players experience them daily. This won’t have any effect.”

Sam didn’t exactly feel happy with that answer.

“Maybe it is because we have had more experienced Players near us for some time? The battles were far above us but we took part in them.” Finn said.

“No, no, you might have gotten more experience but in general the system is very good at balancing things like that out. No, it has to be something else. Mira wouldn’t have shared knowledge either. Jennifer and Oswald don’t know-how. I haven’t either so why did it trigger these abilities early for the both-” Thomas suddenly stopped speaking. “Could it...” he suddenly said, his eyes distant. Thinking. Then they focussed on them again. “You two, you are lovers right?” Thomas suddenly asked.

Sam and Finn both started to blush, stammering, neither of them giving a real or clear answer. Afraid to say no and make the other one pull back, but also afraid to say yes in the off chance the other one wasn’t feeling the same yet. Thomas chuckled.

“That answers my question. Hmmm, I think I might have an explanation then. But I’ve never seen it before. It is something my old Master told me about. She had seen it in her youth. What did she call it again? Milda’s bond or some such? I am sure I have a book about it somewhere here...” Thomas started to mutter to himself.

After a few awkward moments of that Finn cleared his throat. “Um... I am sorry ... sir. But, what does this mean?”

“Ah, yes. Well, not much I can say yet. Only that the two of you are special. Your love is special, in that it is recognized by the system. And this has given the both of you a special, hidden skill. I think people used to call them bonds. But it has been quite a while since one was seen. Bonds historically gave their Players great boons. Yours seems to have to do with unlocking skills early. A great boon indeed. But I will have to look for my book and read up on it before I can give you a certain answer.”

“So, this is something rare?” Sam asked.

“Yes, quite rare. I don’t know of it occurring since my master’s youth, which would be four hundred years ago, give or take a decade.” Sam gasped.

“So, this is another reason for others to hunt us down then?” Finn asked softly.

“Yes,” Thomas said a bit sad. “Reason the more to keep it secret. Come, follow me for now.” He said as he got up.

Thomas walked into the corridor and to the room where Jennifer was held. Jennifer wasn’t screaming anymore and when they walked in she was sitting upright in a couch. She still looked ill and in pain, but far less than before. Her arms were also back to normal, leaving only her hands black.

“Jennifer! You are okay!” Finn said happily.

Jennifer grinned. “Of course kid, I’m not that weak.” She coughed right after she said that, gaining a chuckle from Oswald. “Can it,” Jennifer said with a frown.

Thomas walked further into the room and Finn took a moment to look at it properly. The room was large, larger than the hall they were in before, but it didn't feel like it because it was filled with large bookcases, desks, things Finn didn't know the name or purpose of and some furniture. A large wooden globe was in the middle as well. Covered with blinking and pulsating lights, probably created by magic.

Thomas walked up a small ladder to a second level causeway that hugged the large bookcases, allowing people to reach the upper half of them. He vanished behind the corner of them, leaving Sam and Finn with Oswald and Jennifer.

"So, what did the old man say hmm?" Jennifer asked after another cough.

"Jennifer, show some respect to the master."

Jennifer grinned and kept staring at Sam and Finn, ignoring Oswald.

"Well," Finn started. "He said we unlocked some skills too early. Like it shouldn't be possible for us to have these skills already? And then he said we have some sort of bond?"

"Yes, he called it Milda's bond I think," Sam said.

"What is that?" Jennifer asked.

"We don't know, he didn't either I think. He is looking for some book that has more information about it. He said it was something his old master had talked about. And that it hadn't been seen since her time." Sam said.

Jennifer looked amazed, she whistled a low tune. "Damn, do you know anything about these bonds Oswald?"

"No, nothing," Oswald said dryly, he was clearly strained by healing her.

"Well, what skills did you unlock then? The ones you shouldn't have yet?"

"Well Finn got Channeling," Sam said.

"What? You can Channel? Already?" Jennifer said, jumping upright. Oswald swore under his breath and tried to push her down again.

"Calm yourself, woman! This is hard enough as it is."

"Oswald! The boy can Channel! What is your Arcana?"

"22," Finn said.

"You have no right to be able to Channel then dammit!" Jennifer said exasperated.

"That is what Thomas said," Finn replied.

"What is this bond and how do I get it?" Jennifer exclaimed loudly. Oswald laughed and in the distance, they could hear Thomas laugh as well.

"Not something you can force or take Jennifer," Thomas said from the distance.

Jennifer groaned and then looked at Sam. "And you? You can also Channel?"

"No," Sam said a bit shy.

"You didn't unlock a skill too early then?"

"No, I did, just a different one. But I don't really know what it is or how I use it."

"Well, what is it called?" Jennifer asked curiously.

"Well, the popup called it 'the Aurem', but that is all I really know and-" Sam stopped as Jennifer suddenly screamed.

"WHAT! YOU HAVE AN AUREM ALREADY?" She was half standing up now, one leg out of the couch. Oswald cursing as he tried to push her back down. "How is that possible?"

“I-I don’t know,” Sam stammered. “Thomas said it was this bond thing. That my levels aren’t high enough either and..” Sam was blushing more as Jennifer looked bewildered.

“MASTER!” She screamed. “MASTER, GET HERE AND GET ME THAT BOND!”

“It doesn’t work like that Jennifer,” Thomas’ voice came from somewhere in the room.

“I DON’T CARE, I HAD TO TRAIN FOR FIVE YEARS BEFORE I GOT MY AUREM. AND NOW YOU ARE TELLING ME THIS MONTH OLD PLAYER HAS HERS ALREADY?”

Oswald started to laugh at Jennifer’s screaming, winking at Sam and Finn. “Don’t worry, she isn’t angry at you two, she is angry at the system. Happens all the time.”

“Oh shut up you! It happens not all the time,” Jennifer said, mimicking the voice of a child when she repeated what Oswald said. “But he is right, I’m not mad at you. Sorry that I yelled at you, Sam. It is just, it took me a lot of time and effort. It makes no sense you just have it unlocked. It is too early. Far too early. It is also dangerous to unlock it so early, as you won’t have a single clue what it is.”

“Correct,” Thomas said as he walked towards them from behind some bookcase. “Which is why you will guide her and teach her how to use it properly. Before she gets herself hurt.”

“What?” Both Sam and Jennifer reacted.

“Jennifer will teach Sam how to use her Aurem,” Thomas repeated, looking at everybody. “Is that clear enough? Well, if Sam decides to stay with us of course.” He added and gave her and Finn a wink.

“Doesn’t sound like I have a choice...” Jennifer said. “But I’ll teach her. She’ll need a good teacher.”

“Glad to hear, now, you two focus on getting her healed,” Thomas said, looking at Jennifer and Oswald. “And you two come with me for a moment.” He looked at Finn and Sam now. Then he left, through the door that led into the tower. His quarters.

Uneasy, Finn followed first and Sam followed, taking his hand. The door lead to a stairway that circled around the wall of the tower. The first floor was a sort of study meets laboratory. They skipped that as Thomas kept walking on the stairs. The next floor was another study, this time without anything resembling a laboratory. Filled entirely with notes, paperwork and books though. A clumsy mess seemingly. Thomas still kept going and the last floor was a personal room. A bed, some furniture. A cosy home.

“Please sit,” Thomas said, pointing at a comfortable looking couch. “We need to talk.”

A bit uneasy and uncertain they sat down. The couch was comfortable and Thomas returned to them with some tea and cookies, sitting in a couch opposite of theirs.

“About what?” Finn asked carefully.

“About you two, and what you are going to do.”

“Ah”

“Yes,” Thomas said and sipped his tea. “I know it is a tough decision. And I know how you feel after hearing the stories of Oswald and Jennifer. But that is the reality of our world. A bad hand, as I said.”

“Hmm,” Finn looked depressed, Sam squeezed in his hand. He smiled at her and squeezed back. “I think, we want to join you. Become your apprentice I mean.” He said as he looked at Sam.

“Yes, we would like to do that.” She said.

“But?” Thomas asked.

“But,” Finn said, hesitating.

“But,” Sam picked up. “We don’t know if we can cut our families out of our lives. Our families are everything for us. We can’t just cut them out.”

“I understand,” Thomas said.

“So, we can’t become your apprentices then?” Finn asked.

“No, you can,” Thomas said. “But you don’t have to decide on what to do with your family yet. You still have some time before you are supposed to resume your college correct?”

“Yes,” Sam answered.

“Well, why don’t you tell your parents you’ll spend some more time doing whatever it is that they think you are doing now,”

“They think we are out hiking, on vacation,” Finn said.

“Yes, nice. Tell them you are vacationing until you have to get back to college. This gives you plenty of time to decide about this matter right?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “About a month, a bit more.”

“Plenty of time to decide,” Finn said, both of them seemingly happy at the prospect of being able to postpone the decision.

“Very well,” Thomas smiled. “With that matter solved. On to the next issue at hand.” Thomas put a heavy, old book on the table that sat between them. The title was in a weird script, a language neither Sam or Finn understood or could read.

“What is that?” Finn asked.

“The book of Bonds, is what it is roughly called,” Said Thomas. “It is a collection and study of all the different kinds of bonds that occurred over the ages. Or well, the ones these people came across.”

“What people?” Sam asked as she bent over a little, taking a closer look at the book.

“Ah, people like me. And perhaps you someday,” Thomas said. “Members of the Circle.”

“Circle?” Finn asked as Sam studied the book.

“Yes, my guild. Well, guild is perhaps a wrong term for it, we are more like a collective or something. But we are called the Circle. The Circle has been around for quite some time. This is the work of some Masters of the Circle of... well, quite some time ago.” Thomas said, patting the book. He looked somewhat proud.

“Oh, so this book, it talks about this bond we have?” Sam asked.

“Yes, well I hope it does. It talks about all sorts of bonds. I just hope yours is among them.” Thomas replied with a smile.

“Well, I hope so too,” Finn said.

“Now, this is old stuff. It is written in.. well an old and odd way. It is going to take me some time to sift through this and study it. I can’t have you do nothing in the meantime of

course, now that you are my apprentices and such.” Thomas winked. “So, while I’ll be studying in this book, I have some things to do for you two.”

“What kind of things?” Finn asked a bit suspicious.

“You,” Thomas said as he looked at Finn. “Will be training and studying this.” Thomas lifted another book and put it in front of Finn. The title was in English.

“The book of spell swords? What is this?” Finn asked curiously, picking up the book. It was heavy and thick, the pages yellowed by time.

“A book that will be useful to you, and your skillset and mindset. What remained of the old spell swords are the people that created the Circle. Many in the Circle could be called a spell sword as well. It is a sort of self-imposed rank some Players give themselves. It means they focus on certain skills and magic, to create an efficient archetype. It fits how you fight and how you are levelling. And it will help to make you able to defend yourself in this world much faster than traditional training would.”

“Oh wow...,” Finn said, going through some of the pages. “And what is a spell sword then?” Finn asked as he was sucked into the dense literature.

“In short, a Player warrior that fights mainly by spell and sword. Focusing on fast and aggressive sword skill as well as on quick, crude magic. You’ll have to deal with lots of spell rot because of that and well...” Thomas got an apologetic look. “You’ll learn to deal with plenty of pain as well. But it will fit your style, I am sure.”

“Hmmm, okay.” Finn said, a bit unsure how he felt about that last bit. “Thanks.”

“No need to, you are my protege now, I need to guide you. Oswald will show you where you can train later on. Now for you,” Thomas said, looking over at Sam now. “You will be spending a lot of time with Jennifer. This Aurem, it is an amazing skill and truly a gift that you have unlocked it so early. But it is dangerous if you don’t know how to use it as well. So Jennifer will teach you and guide you.”

“Okay,” Sam said, a bit scared.

“Now, I know Jennifer can be a bit ... direct and intense. But she is kind at heart. Try your best and she will be happy to teach you. She is very good at what she does as well. She is one of the best Aurem users that I have come across. You’ll be in good hands.”

“Thanks,” Sam said with a smile.

Thomas smiled at both of them and then stood up. “Right, let’s go back then.” He grabbed the Book of bonds and walked back down. Sam and Finn followed him down along the stairs of the tower.

Back in the main hall, they saw that Jennifer was laying down in one of the couches. Her face was a bit sour. She was drinking some wine, Oswald sat nearby with a tea.

“Ah, better?” Thomas asked.

“Hmmm, enough to be able to lay down without being in pain,” Jennifer said.

“She is fine. She can heal on her own now.” Oswald said.

“Perfect, because you need to do something for me, Oswald,” Thomas said as he plopped down in a couch as well. Motioning to Sam and Finn to do the same.

“Again already?” Oswald asked with a hint of annoyance.

"I'm afraid so," Thomas said. "You see, Jennifer will be training Sam, and Finn will train on his own with the book I have him. And I can't have my apprentices do nothing, you know that." Thomas smiled, clearly enjoying his little jabs. "But this is something you'll want to do as well, I am sure."

"What is it then?" Oswald asked, then added. "Master."

"I want you to go to the Maruza, and investigate."

"The Maruza?" Oswald asked with clear surprise.

"Yes, these Angels. You saw they had Ancient Grammerie. They shouldn't have, but they did. And now I worry they will get their hands on Ancient Scripture as well."

"I see, so I get to go back there and see what I can find."

"Yes, but Oswald, please don't see this as a leisure trip. I don't need to tell you what things could happen if they get their hands on certain ancient Scripture."

Oswald got a grim look and nodded. "Of course Master."

"Good, you'll leave in the morning then."

"So soon?"

"Yes, I don't want to lose time with this Oswald, it is giving me a bad feeling for some reason. I also have sent word to our Nordic friends. I hope to hear back from them soon. Report back to me daily as well Oswald."

"Daily? But master-"

"I know, costly. But do it."

"Okay," Oswald nodded.

"Now, you can go prepare for tomorrow, but first show Finn the training grounds. Finn," Thomas looked at him. "You can start training now if you please, I know the day is close to over but, well. I say you start training now and that is all you need to know really. Off you go." Thomas smiled as he watched Oswald and Finn nodding and then leaving.

Sam felt her heart sinking as she saw Finn walking towards the inner sides of the keep along Oswald.

"No worries Sam," Thomas said. "You'll see him again tonight. But for now, you will follow Jennifer and listen to her guidance." Thomas said it in a manner that made it clear, to Jennifer, that this was not a request. Jennifer sighed but nodded and stood up.

"Come, child, it is time I show you magic." She said as she walked off. Sam quickly jumped up and followed her.

Thomas sat alone now, sipping from a cup of tea. He sighed deeply and for the first time in days, he let go of his control. His face becoming sad, frowning.

"What a time," He said to nobody particular. "So young. Why did they have to come around now?" He looked up, not at the ceiling, at something more distant. "You play wicked games, but I'll best you nonetheless."

Thomas returned his gaze back down at his cup and took another sip. "And I will make you pay." He said in a soft, spite filled voice.