

Miho Airi PM

Before entering the rooms, as the entire group was heading off to go explore, you used **Festive Hand** on Alexander. You feel calmer knowing he is safe.

That night you decided to enter **The Ho-ho-ho Gift Shop**. You note that Rosemary, Bolshka Shandall, Luna Valentine, Karl, Aurelia, Nil'Aurelias "Nils" Verbenti, and Alexander the Average explore The Ho-ho-ho Gift Shop tonight as well.

You're immediately met with an uncomfortably heavy, still air. Patches of darkness sprinkle throughout the room with several lights flickering off and on in various places across the massive shop. Hundreds of bins filled with broken goods encircle a series of a dozen or so checkout counters in the center of the huge room. A short minute long holiday jingle plays on loop over an intercom on low volume. You don't recognize the tune, but you can tell it's been slowed down a tad.

Christmas trees, broken lights, and dull ornaments decorate the shop giving life to its lifeless shelves and bins. There's nothing useful that isn't already broken, destroyed, or in too many pieces to count. Broken ornaments, glass, and more litter the floors, but strangely the checkout counters in the center of the room and the designated snaking queue lines are spotless.

Making extra sure to not step on anything too loudly you begin searching The Ho-ho-ho Gift Shop for loot.

...

During your search you found an **Enchanted Crossbow** and a **Runed Shield**. You also found **10 tokens!**

You also find a strange note. It reads...

The Fate's toe thing forces your soul to sign a contract... we can't disobey that contract, can we?

...

As you wrap up your search for loot you decide to look around for your ally, the target that you must protect, Alexander. You start to grow anxious as you realize the air in the room feels... different.

After a few minutes, panic growing all the while, you spot Alexander standing in the middle of an open section of the Gift Shop. From your position you see that he is definitely not alone. Luna Valentine runs up to him, energetically waving as she approaches.

Luna Valentine...!?

You can't help but notice she's struggling to carry a sword much too large for one her size. On the outskirts you see Bolshka, Karl, Aurelia, and Nils. The four have Alexander and Luna surrounded.

With your eyes glued to Alexander, you begin fumbling as you attempt to load your newly found crossbow. *This is bad! This is bad!* you think to yourself. You survey the field looking for any chance to break in and save Alexander from this surefire plan to pluck him from the game on during the first night.

Alexander turns his back to Luna and bends over to pick something up. Luna Valentine clumsily lifts the sword high and heaves it through, sending it crashing down onto Alexander.

You recoil before the blow connects, squinting your eyes shut and turning your head away; the crossbow falls into your lap.

“UUHHHHHGGGHHHHH!!!!”

A woman's scream. A woman's scream? You peek over from your vantage point to see Aurelia on one knee where Alexander once stood, her back lined with a nasty gash. “Wha..?” you whisper to yourself.

Aurelia, without missing a beat, throws two shurikens as she turns to face her assailant. The two projectile weapons pierce Luna Valentine's thigh.

“AAHHHHH!!”

The holy priestess, clearly an experienced and formidable warrior, stood upright despite the grave wound inflicted upon her. She started walking toward Luna, pulling out two more shurikens as she stepped closer.

Luna Valentine winced in pain, dropping her sword to the ground and clutching at her wounded thigh. You're too far away to hear Aurelia speak, but you can tell by the look on her face that she wasn't about to show any mercy. As Valentine quivered before her accidental victim, allies of hers rushed in and stood between her and Aurelia. A palpable tenseness that reached even you could be felt from the five that stood where Alexander once was.

Alexander!

You begin to survey the area once more. You've done a good job navigating the Gift Shop thus far; finding many advantageous positions and lookout points with your experience in the

dreamlike world. From your position you're not able to hear their conversation, but you can clearly see their faces, gestures, and reactions.

They're not going to stop. They're going to try again!

Just as you're about to begin searching for Alexander the party before you splits up. Aurelia, Bolshka, Karl, and Nils seem to move the discussion they were having to another section of the room. Luna Valentine lay on the ground, crying, as she struggled with pulling the shurikens out from her flesh.

My chance.

You deduce that Luna Valentine must be their ringleader. She did lead the previous attack, afterall. *If she's dealt with then that'll be one less person to go after Alexander.* With a bolt still readied, you get into firing position.

A bead of sweat forms near your brow. Anxiety building, fear too. What feels like an eternity passes before you find the resolution within yourself to pull the trigger.

"Oh no :(it is an ambush :(be careful :(" Karl the shark shouts, pointing at you from far across the room.

Waving his arms frantically, Nils points at you and shouts to Luna, "She's got you in her sights!"

CRAP!

The weight of the trigger pushes against your finger. You instinctively look away.

Whssszzzz

The recoil of the bow shakes you to the core. A strange glow emanates from the weapon, dissipating quickly into the air after the arrow was fired.

A miss.

You don't have time to think. A gigantic blast explodes behind you sending hundreds of fragments of obliterated merchandise flying at you like projectiles. You turn to run. Two shurikens whiz by you, grazing both your hip and bicep.

The sudden pain surges you into flight. As you hop down from your strange perch you're pelted in the back with a broken snow globe, effectively knocking the wind out of you. You take not more than a second to catch your breath, but it proves to be a costly mistake. As you start to move again a gigantic stick flung at you crashes into the back of your head sending you

tumbling into the ground.

“Guuaggh!”

Your crossbow slides across the floor in front of you. You see stars, but power through the pain and daze. Nearly slipping as you get on your feet you grab your crossbow as you dash to safety.

Once away you evaluate your damage. No serious cuts, nothing broken, and hopefully that head trauma won't come back to bite you in the ass later. Though, you feel real beat up after that onslaught of strange ranged attacks. The weight of the crossbow in your hands feels heavier than before.

They're not going to stop... and now they might be after me, too. Your grip on the crossbow tightens painfully so. *I can't afford to miss.* You begin searching for Alexander -- confident that he must be somewhere.

It doesn't take you long to find him. You see him putting on a shirt in the middle of a ruined portion of the Gift Shop.

“ARGGHHHAAGAAHHH!”

A burly shout of pain summons you into alertness. Alexander, his arms halfway in the shirt he was putting on, is curled over with a shuriken lodged in his upper back. *Alexander!* From your position you have a clean shot on Aurelia while watching Alexander's back.

“Your cheap tricks won't best me, coward!” Aurelia shouts from across the room, readying more Shurikens. It's then that you notice Luna approaching from the side, charging Alexander.

I have to do this... I have to do this! If I mess up, Alexander will die!

You steel yourself, feeling that uncomfortable weight pressing against your finger as you begin to pull the trigger. Your head turns away.

No!

You flinch, but fixate your gaze on the opponents ahead.

Whssszzzz

The recoil shakes you, sending shivers up and down your body; the marvelous glow fading in mere seconds once again. The glowing crossbow bolt flies through the air and pierces Aurelia's calf. “Ahhhghg!” she lets out a coarse scream.

Alexander takes the chance given to him and rushes forward. He dodges the untrained Luna's swing and throws her to the side in the process. His charge not ceasing, shouting, "**TIME TO FEAR, FOR NOW I, ALEXANDER, AM HERE!**" as he hurls a brass knuckled punch with his entire weight behind it straight into Aurelia's gut, launching her five feet into the air and some fifteen feet back. He immediately falls to his knees afterward.

Alexander!?

Luna had gotten back up and stealthily charged the man on his knees with his back turned.

"Fr-freeze!" you shout, holding an aimed crossbow at Luna Valentine.

A bluff.

You had not enough time to reload, but prayed Luna did not know this. She froze, mid swing, mere feet from Alexander. It was clear Luna was panicking as she shook like a frail tree in a strong wind.

"Back off Alexander." Luna took cautious steps backward, keeping her sights on the crossbow all the while. Once far enough away she turned and ran at full speed out of sight. Sometime during the commotion Aurelia had vanished as well.

Alexander, still on his knees, shirtless, sat with a complex expression on his face. Something akin to anger? Or perhaps sadness?

"Are you okay?" you ask him hesitantly.

He clumsily sprung to his feet, pointed up to the non-existent sky, and shouted, "I, Alexander, am just fine! Just another stroll through the fields for me! Ha-ha-ha!"

Tap.... tap.....

You hold a hand up. "Shh. I hear someone." Without taking any time to explain you rush to a nearby perch atop some new vantage point.

There were more of them.

With Alexander in your sights and your crossbow loaded you continued to scan the area and wait... *There!*

“The land person :) he is here, friend :)” Karl shouts as he and Nil pop out from a partially destroyed shopping isle. Karl, carrying a large brown stick, and Nil, wielding some strange wooden crested object, rush toward Alexander.

“Stop! N-Not a step closer!” you shout from your advantageous position once again.

“We might be able to take them.” Nils says to Karl, both staring at you intently.

“It is okay :) we retreat :) everyone will :) be fine another day :) fehehehe :)” Not letting up in the slightest, with a firm grip you nudge your crossbow away from them - pointing them toward a way of escape. The two get the memo leave hastily.

You climb down from your sniper’s spot and declare, “They’ll be back.”

“What!?” Alexander says, still shirtless, exasperated.

Without another word you once again go off to find an entirely new place to camp. *They’ll try to corner me where I was... so I’ll need to be somewhere where I can use that to my advantage.*

*Thud... thud... thud....*The sound of footsteps. This time much rougher than before.

“You sure that they’re over here? That’s too good to be true! I bet there are all sort of awesome things to find here.” You overhear a familiar voice.

“Quiet, you’ll give our ambush away.”

“Ambush not necessary :) we have :) girl trapped :)”

You read your bow, fixating the aim on the newest addition to the attacker’s party and the one appearing to lead the group, Bolshka.

“Do you, now?” you say confidently, crouching atop a still standing cabinet leaned against a wall. There is no easy way for them to close the distance on you nor any cover to avoid a free hit or two. Bolshka’s grip visibly tightens on the cheap, plastic sword she’s carrying.

“Leave.” You say commandingly.

The three of them trade looks with one another. Alexander begins to visibly fidget as if prepped to go.

“Alright, alright. We’ll get going. Looks like we had bad intel from fish boy over here.” Bolshka says as she shrugs.

“Intel not :(bad :(Girl is smart :) and evade us :(. ”

The three carefully turn to leave. Once they'd left your sights and couldn't be heard anymore Alexander walked up to you. “Thanks.” He said bluntly. You try to smile, but nothing natural comes. You let out a massive sigh.

“Welp, time to find another shirt.” Alexander declares with a small dose of cheer as he ventures off in a seemingly random direction.

I don't think we can rest easy yet, you can't help but think to yourself. You decide to discreetly overlook Alexander while he embarks on his quest for a new top.

As has been the trend tonight, trouble seemed to find its way to Alexander once more. From your position you spot Bolshka stealthily closing the distance on Alexander. *Oh, no. There is too much cover around. It'll be too difficult to hit her... and she knows that!* Seeing Bolshka creep closer and closer to the defenseless Alexander sends you into a panic. Your eyes dart every which way looking for a solution. Time slows, seconds beginning to feel like minutes. A farfetched idea pops to mind and with uncharacteristic confidence you run with it.

You focus your aim on a series of damaged ceiling panels just above the flooring between Bolshka and Alexander. Just then, Alexander raises a shirt with the picture of a globe on it above his head, obscuring the target tile you wanted to shoot.

“Yes! THIS IS IT!” you hear him shout ecstatically.

I have to do this! You take a deep breath and pull the trigger.

Whsssszzzz

The sound of clanging metal and broken glass echoes after Alexander's new shirt is birthed a massive, burnt hole through its center. The path between Alexander and Bolshka had become hardly traversable and easily defensible against anyone stupid enough to cross. Bolshka's surprise attack had been utterly thwarted.

“Damn you, I had him!” you hear Bolshka shout as she turns tail and runs.

I did it... barely. You notice yourself shaking. You look up to see Alexander with a pained, sort of angry expression. He walks off without saying a word, clutching his destroyed shirt in the fist at his side.

Feeling as if the worst had passed, you let your guard down for a brief moment; a wave of exhaustion overtakes you. Your watchful eye over Alexander laxes as you finally take a moment to recuperate.

“Ghhhh :(ah carp :(only girl :(intel actually bad :(this time :(“ You’re met with the worst sight you could imagine at that moment. Bolshka, Luna, Karl, Nil, and Aurelia stood on the other side of a jungle gym of broken racks and equipment just in front of you.

“Hahaha. Is this gonna be a running gag, fish boy?” Bolshka spits out, bent over laughing.

“:(“

Luna Valentine steps forward and speaks with strange conviction, “M-Miho, you’re the lynch pin for this duo! Getting rid of you will ensure the safety of e-everyone else.” Luna’s body stood unflinching, but her voice did not obey such command.

For once you’re thankful that Alexander is nowhere in sight. With all five of them here in one spot you’ve at least got nothing else to worry about, but what to do?

What can I do?!

What can I do?!

What can I do?!

What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?!

What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?! What can I do?!

What. Can. I. DO?!

Your thoughts race as the seconds remaining on your life tick down in front of you. Sudden clairvoyance strikes, you notice a strange line running along the ceiling and floor perpendicular to you and your attackers, dividing the two parties. A thought crosses your mind.

You look toward the center of the room - the central island checkout counters some fifty feet away...

In there... there must be a switch, or some sort of button.

Careful to not tip off your attackers, you slowly shift your eyes and spot an aged fire alarm alongside several registers.

I didn’t see any fire alarms around before. This.. You end your thoughts. It was now or never.

With experience under your belt you load your crossbow with increased haste. Your opponents, seeing your action, take cover.

All except Luna Valentine.

Without a moment's pause, your crossbow now loaded, you aim at the fire alarm.

Please work...!

Whssszzzz

PTNNNGGGGGG

The sound of metal being blasted by the enchanted projectile echoed throughout the room. Luna Valentine, terrified, stood helplessly as a series of steel walls shot down from the ceiling dividing the gift shop in two.

THUNGKT

"W-w-w-w-w-what!?" Luna turned around to see she had been completely separated from her allies. A slight smirk creeps up your face at the satisfaction of yet another incredible gamble panning out in your favor.

"H-h-h-how! H-how did you?!" the girl shouted while flailing her arms dangerously, sword still in hand. "I need to get to my friends!" Luna ceased her erratic movements, calming herself. "I need to... I need to protect them!"

Taking the opportunity, you begin loading your crossbow. Luna, spotting this, charges you.

Crap.

Before you can reload a sword comes crashing down. You pull out one of your Runed Shields, barely able to deflect a life ending blow. The shield, hardly made for protecting against slashes, serves little more than to block sight of you.

"You need to die! I-I mean... s-sorry!" Luna shouts at you as she swings her sword wildly. You manage to dodge the first few blows.

"**AAAAHHHH!**" you let out a pained scream as the sword digs into your flesh, carving out a shallow, but long cut across your left leg. You hop back, continuing your slow backward retreat in the face of Luna's onslaught of rough, erratic attacks.

Every few attacks dodged is followed by one more connecting.

“UUGHRHHHH!” another pained scream escapes you as the sword scrapes your shoulder.

“AAAAHNGGGHHH!” a wincing howl as Luna’s sword makes a nasty connection with your torso. Had it not been for your imbued leather tunic you’d have certainly been dealt a lethal blow.

Realizing that you were en route to an inevitable defeat, you attempt a counter attack barehanded. Side stepping a downward vertical thrust, you throw your fist at Luna’s head. Agonizing pain clouds your vision as the several scrapes and cuts tear and burn with every stretch of the motion; your fist fails to connect properly and instead hits her bicep.

Luna panics. She swings the sword in front of her madly and a lone frantic defensive strike unluckily connects, horribly cutting into your left thigh. Your left leg, now severely damaged, begins to heavily impact your movement.

For the next several attacks you only succeed in avoiding lethal blows, but each swing results in a scrape here or there. Some ten or twenty now line up your arms, legs, and torso.

True, unfiltered, instinctual fear begins to set in unlike ever before.

“AAHHGHHHH! HELP!!!” you shout out desperately to no one in particular. All you can afford to do now is give a moments longer extension to your pain filled, fear fueled life. Tears well up in your eyes as you turn your head from your attacker behind your ineffective shield. Every pause a new moment of agonizing uncertainty wondering which corner of your body will be next to be tormented by an agonizing, insufferable burst of pain.

CLNKKK

Luna’s sword bounces off the floor from terribly missed attack.

There was no plan. No coherent logic. Only a pure, desperate, animalistic need for the pain to stop.

Every fiber in your body pushed forward, charging into the unknown behind your misused shield.

“AAAGGHGHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

BRGHHBP

“AHHH--!”

THUD

The two of you crash into a rack filled with broken goods. The collision sends the majority of the broken objects spiral downward onto Luna's head; your shield doubles as a helmet, protecting yourself from the raining projectiles.

As hastily as your bloodied hands would allow, you loaded your crossbow and pointed it straight at Luna, but only as Luna simultaneously brought her sword within a foot of your head. The two of you stood there, unmoving, for more than a minute. Not a word was spoken.

Luna, taking the draw as a defeat, slowly crept backward. Carefully, Luna stepped back until she was far enough away to turn and sprint out of sight. Looking up you see Alexander had found a new shirt. He stared at you, dumbfounded.

Why...

Not uttering so much as a whimper, and barely able to still hold onto your crossbow, you began the long trek back to your quarters, limping the entire way.