

Intruder?

A minor commotion arose in the growing community of Velauhart early in the morning, well before daylight. Any minor issues or anomalies were usually resolved on their own or with the intervention of one of Alicia's close aides; namely Rufus, if the problem is a security concern, Ramiel, if it's anything related to livestock. Agriculture, apiaries and the forestry management was Dryssia's responsibility, waterworks along with the newly founded aquaculture duties were Llynbel's, and although a secret, the internal code of conduct and regulations - that is, in other word the law of the region - was drafted almost solely by Rosalia, the enforcement of them, however, so far has been mostly unneeded. Alfred was in charge of everything else, including administration and management. Alicia's Araneae leaders, as they are highly independent, would need sufficient justification to take orders from pretty much anyone. Only ones who could exercise absolute authority over them was none other than Alicia and Alice themselves, barring one exception: Alpha. Whilst she was by no means exempt from Kindred's power, as the one given the charge of leadership, Alfred had considerable sway over her 'younger sisters' decisions.

The problem at hand, unfortunately, did not solely fall into any specific responsibility, which resulted in a spontaneous gathering of multiple representatives. Unable to reach consensus the problem was quickly elevated to Alpha, who brought it directly to Alicia in her room.

- "“A nudist who claims to be a dryad was found trespassing in the plantations and was detained for assaulting the thunder goats this morning...” Excuse me, what?”

Though Alpha wore her usual passionless look on her face, the corners of her mouth had only slightly turned upwards. It was as if someone just told her a joke and she was trying her best not to lose it.

- “Absurd isn't it?”
- “They claimed to be a dryad, but you couldn't tell?”

‘Well, it's not like I'm in a position to censure anyone for not recognizing if something is a nymph or not, let alone a dryad... As far as I know, I only know one dryad for sure and she basically looks like a normal person. ’

- “The suspect was observed to be a humanoid bipedal ungulate, with curved horns.”

'Satyr...? Wouldn't wander alone... Maybe a Chyort...? Would make a lot more trouble if it were a Chyort... hm...'

- "How humanoid are we talking?"
- "Very. Almost like a person. It should also be noted that her horns appear to be constituted wholly by semi-porous fibres, nothing like an animal horn. Though, despite the material makeup, it is as strong as the thunder goat's horns and has been observed to be able to grow and retract at considerable speed."

'Her? And fibers... like wood? Maybe she is a dryad...'

- "Where are they now?"
- "Safely bound up in silk specially spun by November, with disciplinary electroshock as a deterrent she's waiting to be evaluated by either Miss Dryssia or Miss Llynbel."

A concerning individual came up in that passage.

- "That's fine but... Are you sure Tesla isn't going to fry her...?"
- "She made it explicitly clear that she will be using extremely low voltages."

'So it's extremely low voltages this time. I've seen her demonstration of a 'low level voltage' last time... More like a convulsive level. Wait a minute...' Alicia tensed up in remembrance of unsavory memories related to Nikolai and Electricity.

- "And did she 'ground' the culprit?"
- "She's currently bound to a chair against a tree. We do not have a spare room to lock her in. If such instances grow more prevalent, we may require a prison or a dungeon."
- "Wha- No not that, I meant Electrical Grounding."
- "Pardon my misunderstanding. Yes, she has direct contact with the ground with no chance of a short circuit."

Letting out a long sigh Alicia relaxed again. There would be no Electrical Explosions... yet.

- "Where'd Dryssia go then?"
- "Before she left, it seems that she had informed a few Elves that she would be going over to the mushroom caverns. I've already sent Rufus to catch up and bring her back."
- "And Llynbel?"
- "She has been trying to bring up a new spring, a Well of Power."
- "Remind me what that is again?"

- "According to her own explanations, an invigorating fountain that only wells up in places with high concentration of energy, a superior variant of a healing fountain. Supposedly it's waters can cure all that ails you, even aging at times."
- "Sounds useful... Speaking of which... How's Priest doing with her... *"Alchemy"?*"
- "Paxton believes that she's close to perfecting her formulae. If the fountain of power is as effective as it is claimed to be, using it as a base she might get the breakthrough she was looking for."
- "She do something about the taste?"
- "Her words: Working on it."
- "Well... tell her not to overdo it too much."

With her report contents over and having received a go ahead with their current plan, Alfred made a quick bow and turned to the door. Since gaining a vaguely humanoid form, the Bride of Death has become infatuated with magical potions that could heal wounds and cure diseases in a single swig of mixtures of dubious origin. An antithesis to what she was, a venom monger that only dealt death. Trying to turn her lethal toxins into something else... something curative. Though at first she only created decoctions fit only as poison for the local oversized rodents she has since made great strides. Enough to move onto human trials. Though she was sceptical at first, Alicia has come to recognize her honest effort, but one thing remains a mystery, why did she come to have such deep fascination with, what is technically pharmacology. While Alicia was pondering such diversions she noticed Alpha who was just about to leave froze in her tracks. She turned her head to the side, as if intently listening to the whispering leaves of the trees outside.

- "Alfred?"
- "I have been informed that both Miss Dryssia and Miss Llynbel have returned and are on their way to their the suspect to verify their claims."
- "Ah good. Take me there."
- "Of course, Mistress."

Alicia was led just outside the storehouse for temporary stockpiling and sorting of the plantation's produce before it was sent to the cold storage underneath the lodge. There she could already see Llynbel, Ramiel

and November along with a few Elves stealing glances of the perpetrator from a far. Strangely Ramiel seemed to be keeping his distance from the new girl, Alicia had thought the contrary - that the goat would find the girl's presence more appealing. It would be more of a surprise if they didn't, she was completely different in appearance than anything they've seen so far in their life in this forest if at all. Naturally she stood out with her ligneous horns, cloven hooves whose fur-like fleece spanned the majority of her legs, thinning down and stopping about the thighs, about what she had expected from Alfred's account.

But a few other significant features she had failed to mention struck out: her hair. Long fluffy hair with soft and loose curls that reached to her lower back; it looked woolen white with hints of pink that became exponentially more vivid as it neared the tips, and at the end becoming completely orange. In addition, her skin tone rosy beige¹ seemed slightly off... almost... treen in appearance. From the simple clothes that she wore it was highly probable that November had to make them on the spot. Simple woolens over a chemise.

'She's a little shorter than I expected, and more modest in the chest department, compared to the other Dryad I know...'

As Alicia and Alfred approached the group took notice.

- "Welcome, milady."

November's eyes were typically dull and black, but they had become a vibrant violet as she greeted her Mistress.

'She's not usually this excited... Wonder what happened to make her like that... If she's happy it's either bad or really bad... I'll have to ask what she set aflame this time, afterwards.'

- "Ah, it's good you've come."
- "Since our guest here is out of her binds, I'm guessing she is what she claims to be, Llynbel?"
- "On principle yes, though she could have done a more thorough job at introducing herself."
- "Meaning...?"
- "I'll let her do it herself."

¹ Wise Owl #cdbca6

With the conversation shifting to her the girl started fumblingly speaking, in a manner similar to lambkin unsure what to do. Her panic seemed to only multiply with the weighty gazes of Alfred and Tesla.

- "G-Greetings! Master! I am the new *'Flockgrover'*! I mean... *'Guardianflocker'*! No... wait..."
- "Uhh..... Right... Alpha thanks for guiding me here, I think I took too much of your time, you can go back to working now, I'll take it from here."

Very much so gladdened to be of service, Alfred would do much more for her even without the motivation, but she could also read in-between the lines, and understanding Alicia's intentions, made her departure, dragging along Tesla with her, who whilst unwilling, complied with her leader's judgment.

'Here I thought it was an actual security concern. Well better a false alarm than no alarm.'

- "Epimeliades, that's what she is."

Llynbel, unable to stand her blundering, spoke for her from the side.

- "Epidemic what now?"
- "Also known as a Grove Tender, they are usually borne from an Apple tree, though any fruiting tree can become an Epimeliad from what I know. They're a little unique in that they also bond with and watch over flocks of sheep or goats, which also earned them the title of Flock Guardian."

'So I was right... Ramiel should have a good compatibility with her...' Alicia's gaze turned to the Ram, inquisitively. *'So why is he trying to maintain distance with her?'*

- *'I find her... enthusiasm... over me concerning...'*

The goat sought to appear unconcerned under her probing scrutiny, but yielded eventually revealing his worries.

- *'Too much affection... or something like that?'*
- *'...'*

A wordless affirmation came as a reply.

- *'I see, so that's how it is... Do you want me to do something about it?'*
- *'Please...'*
- "Hm... you'll need a name won't you. Before that... from what kind of tree are you from?"

Fidgeting a bit, still nervous.

- "S-stone fruit."

'Stone fruit tree? Must be a native tree, I don't remember having any of them planted though...'

- "Ah, must be a Highland plyme tree then, you're a long way from home."

'You're not making it any clearer for me, Llynbel...'

"I believe they're called Apricot trees around these parts."

- "You could have just said that in the beginning and I would have gotten it you know?"
- "I'm not as well versed with current human culture as I used to be."
- "Anyway, Apricot huh, that's a lovely name already. Is it okay if we call you that?"

She nodded vigorously in answer.

- "Okay, then from now on you're Apricot. Is there anything you would like to do...? Something you're good at."

>Processing Request.

'Huh...?'

Excitedly she answered.

- "I would like to go with the buzz sheep! Can I do that?"
- "Buzz-? You mean... the thunder goats?"
- "Mhm!-Mhm!"
- "Err... sure, bu-"
- "Yaay!"

In her delight she started to sprint towards Ramiel - who started to run away, but too late did he realize her intent and his belated reaction meant that she caught onto him wrapping her arms around his neck. There was no escape now, only distraught bleating came from him as he was quite aggressively nuzzled against.

'Ah... so he was the morning's victim eh... Clingy...'

- "Apricot, if you're going to pla- I mean, watch over Ramiel's herd you have to promise me not to hug them suddenly."
- "Eh! But... But..."
- "Light petting is fine, just don't run up to them and try to snuggle them so suddenly, it scares them, you see. Especially Ramiel here is not good with physical contact"
- "Is that so...? Oka~ay then!"

'Bit childish... again... like a certain other Dryad.'

- "Maaaasteer!!!"

'Speaking of which...'

From a distance riding on top of Rufus, Dryssia came with something... else in tow behind them.

'What in the-'

It looked like a tree that had uprooted itself and started to walk.

'Looks like it's going to be a long day...'