

Meeting Max

I've always enjoyed the occasional ride through the various worlds of the Maze. This particular ride was taking place shortly after I had graduated from my second school. At the time I was trying to figure out how best to put it to Daddy that I wanted to take over the little alchemy company that he'd bought. Other girls would have just smiled and asked politely. Or perhaps they might have stabbed their father in the back with some sort of boardroom games. Neither was my style. So I rode and thought and tried to figure out just what my style was.

After eight years of school (four in magical workings and four in finishing), just outright asking seemed... well wrong. Just taking it wasn't an option either. It was Daddy's new business and he had the right to do with it as he saw fit. Even if that meant running it into the ground which was exactly what was happening with it.

Off in the distance I spotted a small plume of smoke. By this time I needed to reprovision so I gave my horse, Juji, a little nudge and headed towards the smoke.

Perhaps I could just buy it from Daddy? Hmm. I absently chewed on the end of my riding crop while thinking. Perhaps, if I included the buy offer in as part of something else. Maybe part of a larger deal. But what? Daddy would probably see through a deception like that anyway. He's known about my love for alchemy since I was eight.

That was when he'd found out I was seriously into alchemy. It was also when he'd confiscated my opium, powdered dragon blood, and other supposedly dangerous ingredients. He'd even taken away my pet scorpions and snakes. I had hidden away stores of the various venoms, but after an obnoxiously thorough search, he'd found those as well. His search had pretty well destroyed my rooms which had left me more than a little upset at the time.

Smiling at the memory, I noticed absently at first that there didn't seem to be many people in town. Hmm. The further I rode, the more I realized that I hadn't thus far seen anyone. In fact, the village seemed completely deserted. Riding on, I dismounted in front of what appeared to be a general store. Going inside, I helped myself to the provisions I needed and left a handful of silver coins on the counter.

Most peculiar.

As Juji and I were leaving town, I noted that the smoke I'd seen earlier appeared to be coming from a seemingly abandoned forge. This additional oddity, combined with the complete lack of people, sounded numerous alarms in my head. Curious now, I ignored them and began following a large grouping of tracks leading out of town.

Riding, my thoughts drifted back in time again. Later that year, Daddy had given me an alchemy lab of my very own. It had been a rather wimpy version of a lab to be sure. No really powerful ingredients or reagents. However, it had come with a number of interesting new formulas and recipes. Immediately, I began experimenting.

Three weeks after my eleventh birthday he went back through my rooms and confiscated another batch of the more interesting reagents and such that I had re-accumulated. It seems that me turning a table full of gold bars to lead had caught his attention in a rather negative way. I grinned to myself at the memory and noticed the bite marks on my riding crop. I supposed I have to break myself of that particular habit. It was neither seemly nor a good idea.

So Daddy knew and knew well of my passion for alchemy. Most likely he was waiting for me to ask him about it. That would be like Daddy. Further, that was probably why he was running it into the....

That was odd. Most of the village seemed to be standing around a large pond.

Forgetting all about the alchemy products company for the moment, I rode over and had Juji nudge his way through the crowd. Standing at the front of the crowd of fifty or so was what seemed to be slightly better dressed peasants. Probably the town council or something akin to it. I wasn't particularly familiar with this world fragment despite the fact that I'd ridden through it a couple of times in the past. Also in front of the gathering stood a young woman wearing only a thin shift and a leg iron connected to what appeared to be a large cannonball. Well, this was certainly interesting if nothing else. Thus far, this ride through the maze of worlds had been uneventful. Perhaps a little too relaxing. The villagers all seemed rather surprised to see me.

I politely asked them what was going on.

They politely told me it was a local matter and none of my concern. They then invited me to leave.

I politely declined and instead got down off my horse. It occurred to me that my riding dress was split in such a way as to be almost no hindrance at all while fighting. This was not some happy coincidence and the thought brought another smile to my lips. I asked them why the young woman was nearly naked and manacled to the big weight.

One of the men stepped forward and indeed stepped up right to my face. He was a big man and he looked down on me from well inside my personal space. This probably intimidated a lot of people. Those people probably didn't have Lloyd and Marcus Diamond for uncles. I did.

Glaring down at me, the big man announced loudly that the girl was a witch and they were going to prove it.

A witch? I mean come on. How stereotypical can you get? I looked around to see if one of my family was watching all this from a distance, having set this whole thing up for the amusement value. I even brought up a Diamond filter to look around but I didn't see any of them lurking about concealed by magic or one of the powers. Hmm. Evidently, the big man had felt me bring up the filter.

More to the crowd than to me, he rather loudly asked what sort of ill magic I had brought to their godly little village.

I raised an eyebrow and told him in a voice that carried that I brought no ill magic to their little gathering. But, I did wonder aloud how such a big, godly man as himself came to be so afraid of a little girl. He flushed bright red. Actually, the girl seemed to be in her late teens. Not quite little girl status any more. Not much younger than myself in fact. Of course the fear in her eyes made her seem younger. I absently wondered if I could incorporate that into an anti-aging formula but events began progressing at a more rapid pace and I had to let the line of thought drop.

Very loudly the big man yelled that the girl was of the demon. That we were both of the demon. He then nodded and people behind me began advancing. I spun, grabbed an outstretched wrist and pulled. As the man crashed into the moving fellow next to him, I pulled his belt knife. Simultaneously, I lashed out with my foot and caught the big man in the knee. I didn't wait to see how any of this was panning out but instead kept maneuvering my way around the crowd. Almost a dozen people came at me. I picked up another knife

along the way just in case things became serious and commenced to breaking bones and separating joints. I also blacked the occasional eye and created a strong need for a talented dental surgeon. It was over with very quickly. Good exercise but I'd gone through much worse at school.

Not everyone had been foolish enough to try to apprehend me. Most had stood back. They were obviously brighter than they looked.

Rather to my surprise, the girl was now standing next to Juji. Juji was used to this sort of thing and unless he smelled a lot more blood than had been spilled here, he wouldn't get spooked. I noticed that the ball and chain were in the same spot they had been in. The manacle didn't seem to have been opened. Interesting. Maybe there was something to the girl after all.

Walking over, I asked her just what they had been about to do to test their witch theory. In a quiet voice that shook she explained as I angrily shook my head.

I then announced loudly that I suspected that the big man had been taken by the demon and that I would test him for the village. Since he'd only suffered a broken left knee in the tussle, he was rather vociferous in his naysaying.

Picking up the ball and chain, I did a quick opening cantrip before turning to the big man. I saw worry in his eyes. It became magnified when I attached the manacle to his foot. He began asking for people to help him. Since I had a pretty good idea that the girl had begged the same from him, I told the people not to mind him - it was just the demon talking. He was beet red by now and he attempted vainly to prevent me from picking up both himself and the ball and chain attached to his ankle. I proceeded to give him a pitch and he and the cannonball landed with a splash near the center of the pond. Both instantly sank from sight. Eventually, the bubbles stopped coming up. While waiting for this sign, I informed one of the local women, who seemed to be about the girl's size, that the girl looked cold. I further informed her that I was sure that her dress would fit the young woman nicely and would be a good gesture on her part. She looked like she'd bit into a bad lemon. But, she stripped off her dress all the same and gave it to the girl who gratefully put it on quickly.

That done, I turned and walked into the pond. The water was a little warm compared to the air and felt quite pleasant. I'd have to remember to do a cleaning cantrip after I'd gotten out or the muddy water would probably stain my dress. With a little dive I found the big man right where I'd expected him. On the bottom. I grabbed the chain and proceeded to drag the fellow out of the pond. Not as easily done as it sound with the slope as muddy as it was. However, due to my excellent sense of balance, I managed to accomplish my task without falling down even once.

Back on solid land, I undid the ball and chain. Holding it up, I turned back to the crowd who hadn't moved an inch since I'd gone into the water. I announced rather loudly that the big man seemed to have passed the test. Did anyone else need testing? The unanimous consensus seemed to be to the negative. I then told them to go back to their village. A couple of them seemed to be interested in taking the big man's body but I told them to leave it alone.

The villagers leave-taking took longer than I liked but some of the wounded seemed to need a lot of helping. I could have done first aid on them but I figured this would leave more of a lasting impression. When the last of them was out of sight, the girl turned to me and asked me what was to become her? I told her to wait a moment.

Turning my attention to the big man laying at our feet, I told him that he could get

up now. He didn't move. I then told him to move his sorry, shapeshifting fae butt or I was going to give him something that would require real healing.

He stood up.

The girl fainted.

He asked what I was going to do with him. I told him nothing. Go home. All the way home. He thanked me for completing the scenario as designed. I had read a little about some of the games that various fae-folk played while over at Granpa's. I'd also talked a bit with Uncle Linden when I'd asked to apprentice with him. I hadn't been sure this fellow was one of the fae when I'd first approached, but I had suspected. The Diamond filter had confirmed it. I asked him why he'd done this. He asked me why I'd saved the girl.

I told him it was the right thing to do. He answered that the same was the reason he'd concocted the witch-hunt scenario. Fae and their stupid games. I sighed and waved him away. He bowed and began trotting away. Long before he should have been out of sight, he faded away.

Setting the girl across Juji's saddle, I began leading the horse through a nearby transworld corridor. I still had a lot to think about. A weird fae (but weren't they all?), how to get the company from Daddy, using fear as part of the formula for a youth potion.

Oh, and just who was the girl laying across my saddle?