

CHAPTER 18:

GRIM GRIFTER

Darren did his best to keep his expression as blank and innocent as possible. It helped that he now had a skill that assisted him, keeping him from sweating and blustering as he normally would.

Who knew you could get a Profession just from lying through your teeth?

“I want Matt to be alive more than anybody else,” he lied.

His greatest fear was that Matt was not only alive, but *pissed*. The man might be too soft-hearted at times, but he was absolutely ruthless to anybody who crossed him.

There were so many spiders, Darren thought. There's no way he's alive. If he was lucky, he probably ran away. That's what I did. You can stay and die or run and live another day. Either brave in the grave or strive to stay alive.

It was an easy choice when it came down to it.

The concept that he could gain some *actual* power here was only just now beginning to dawn on Darren.

As soon as Sam turned away, having believed his charade like a sucker, Darren looked back over the last notification he had gotten in the middle of spinning his tale about Matt.

New Profession Unlocked!

[Grim Grifter]

Some believe that hard work, honest living, and quality craftsmanship are the key to a long happy life. You know better. Why sweat and bleed for something when you can have somebody else do all the hard work for you? The Grim Grifter is capable of insinuating into other people's thoughts, turning their words into poison and convincing all but the most stalwart of minds to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Grim Grifters are more than mere thieves. They don't take from the unwilling, instead they make the unwilling into willing marks. The Grim Grifter doesn't need to know how to pick a lock, because their mark will happily hand over all that they own with a smile on their face.

As a First Order Profession, Grim Grifters gain the following stats per level up:

+3 Insight | +3 Awareness | +2 Agility

+2 Vigor

+2 Bonus Points

Starting Skill Spheres

[Deceit], [Sleight of Hand]

Starting Ability

[Insinuate], [Weave Tale]

Starting Trait

[Trust Me]

Mana Types

[Mirage Mana]

Darren tried hard not to goggle at everything he read.

He had to keep calm.

Finishing the story of what happened to Matt had netted him a single level up. *Just from lying!* It was too good to be true.

And the stats! Man, oh man, 12 stats per level put Sam's Fighter Job to shame. It was double the growth, just for lying to people!

As if that wasn't good enough, the abilities were to-die-for.

[Deceit] allowed him to lie better and more smoothly than he ever could in his mediocre life back on Earth. [Sleight of Hand] would allow him to do things without people noticing, such as planting evidence or removing it.

[Insinuate] gave him the ability to push through a person's normal disbelief, gaining their trust and making it easier to turn them to his side.

And [Weave Tale] was the icing on the cake. Like [Deceit], it lent that extra *oomph* to a lie, but instead of being a skill sphere, it was an ability.

What that meant, Darren didn't really know. Maybe it would be stronger, but more temporary.

He didn't know and, quite frankly, didn't care. Power was power.

[Trust Me] made people less likely to outrightly ignore him as he was so used to, and Mirage mana just sounded cool as hell.

Altogether, he couldn't *wait* to put these things into effect.

Even if Sam continued to level past him, the wannabe Hawaiian would need to get *two* Fighter levels to rival his one Grim Grifter. And Darren didn't even need to lift a finger to get those levels.

Oh yes, things were definitely looking up for Darren. *Just as I deserve. Now to make sure that Matt doesn't go ruining everything. I'm done playing second fiddle to him or anybody else ever again.*

Despite the dangers that the darkness presented, nobody really wanted to stay at camp with the half-dozen spider corpses littered about.

Not only were most people afraid they would come back, but that something else might make its way to them, lured by all the shouting and sounds of battle.

Darren capitalized on their fear, making his rounds and talking about a new plan. Instead of just sending out a search party for Matt, his plan was they should *all* go.

They'll find Matt on the way, Darren convinced them. And if they didn't, at least they would be together and, on the move, away from this clearly unsafe place.

A place, Darren was quick to point out, where they had already been attacked, *twice*.

So, despite the cold night, the rough camp was broken down and Sam packed up the things into his Inventory once more, now significantly less clean and crisp.

The fire, however, Sam left for last, unsure of what to do about it. Staring at it, Sam could see the nameplate clear as day.

[The First Flame]

Despite the grandiose name, there was nothing overtly special about it that he could see. And yet... he found himself inexorably drawn to it.

Even Komachi watched the First Flame with fascination, calmed by its warm presence.

There was something... primordial about the tiny ghostly flame within the greater campfire. He felt a connection to the fire like nothing else. As if it were a part of him and he, it.

Kale laid a hand on his shoulder. "Aloha, Sam! You good? We've been trying to get your attention for the past minute. I know things are... not great, but we can find another place to hunker down for the night."

"Huh?" Sam said, snapping out of his reverie. "Yeah, yeah, sure." As his friend started to walk away, something sparked in the back of his mind. He had no idea why he thought about it right then, but he called to Kale, "Could you bring me a stick with some webbing wrapped on one end?"

Kale gave him an odd look but nodded and set off, leaving Sam to stare into the soothing, flickering flames. He felt that, oddly enough, the *fire* had given him that little nudge.

Was it somehow sentient?

Crouching, Sam gently reached out his gloved hand toward the flames. They were warm and soothing, banishing the chill of the night.

Most people were still riding high on the after-battle adrenaline. *Been there*, Sam thought. Not just at the battle of Islegard's end, but during HEMA tournaments. You just stopped noticing the cold for a while, but it would come back with a vengeance.

They were still afraid, and Sam found that he couldn't really blame them. It was just that the prospect of losing sleep by walking around a foreign forest at night was still worse.

Or you're just mad that Darren essentially stole your idea. Sam ignored the thought.

Not to mention, having torches would be useful if they had to go out into the night.

Darren was still going around, talking to nearly everybody. He was surprisingly convincing. It was like he had suddenly gotten an injection of charisma.

The man could have pissed off a wet mop normally, but now everybody was lending him their ears, nodding along.

Well, that's a worrying trend, he thought to himself. The silver lining was that when Darren tried to approach Komachi, she arched her back and hissed at him until he went away.

Without much else to do but snuff out the fire, Sam found himself wishing he didn't have to. But what else was he supposed to do? Stay at this single campfire forever while the First Flame grew?

Besides, they hadn't looted the spiders. What if they had something valuable on them, or were in some way useful?

Kylie had gotten a Skill Sphere just from interacting with the lizard corpses. Perhaps somebody else would get something interesting from the spiders.

That is, if they stayed to loot them. Sam could stay behind, but that hardly seemed like a smart choice. The group was dead set on leaving the camp behind.

Fine by me, Sam thought, waving a hand through the flames with only a mild tickling sensation. *I'm not about to go walking out into the lizard-and-spider infested forest all on my own.*

"Here you are," Kale said, handing him what looked a lot like your typical fantasy torch. Except, instead of rough linen wrapped around the top, it was glistening spider silk.

"Mahalo." Without another word, Sam stuck the spider silk end into the flames. At first, nothing happened, but Sam kept it submerged.

He kept trying to push it into the ghostly flame within the campfire, but it kept... moving out of the way.

“Listen, I don’t think spiderwebs work—” Kale began, before a large rush of flames blackened the spiderwebs and gave off a funny light within the campfire.

Removing the torch, Sam now saw that the flame burned a strange greenish-blue hue and was significantly brighter than a flame had any right to be.

On its own, the torch lit up the small clearing ten times better than the roaring campfire.

“Pass these out,” Sam said. “And get me some more. We’ll need them.”

Kale squinted his eyes at the bright flame, then at Sam. “You knew this would work.”

Sam stared into the First Flame. It had lent him some of its power, but it had only been the catalyst to setting the silk on fire. His plan to try to carry the First Flame with a torch, however, had failed. “I had an inkling.”

Looking around to make sure nobody was close enough to overhear, Kale dropped his voice. “How? Something’s up with you. You’re able to wield that massive sword like it was lighter than a feather, you rush toward danger like it’s an old friend. What’s up?”

“Just sorting through some things,” Sam deflected. “I’ll tell you about it later, yeah?”

“I’m going to hold you to it,” Kale said, heading off.

Everybody joined in on making the torches, along with several extra. Lisa, however, only stayed near the fire on the other side across from Sam and said nothing. She flinched whenever she saw spider silk near her.

Emmit took two torches each in a hand and thrust them into the flames, only for nothing to happen. He waited until Sam had lit two sets himself before cursing loudly.

“What the hell, man? How are you doing that?” he asked Sam.

With a shrug, he took Emmit’s torches and thrust them into the flames. As if to make a mockery of the man, they instantly ignited.

“Beats me,” Sam admitted, handing them back. “I’m not doing anything different from you.”

Which wasn’t exactly true.

Nobody else could get the fire to light onto the torches. Only Sam could, and he could almost feel himself willing the flames to do it. The more he focused on them, the faster they jumped to the torches.

The fire within the fire, what Sam was now certain was the First Flame, refused to leave the campfire behind.

When all was said and done, out of all the torches made, Sam’s torch—despite being a pathetic little stick with a baseball-sized wad of silk on the end—burned the brightest by far.

Stabbing the butt of the torch into the ground, Sam reached out to the campfire. He had heard of people taking coals and putting them in sand to keep them hot, so they could transfer them to a new campfire, but they didn’t have any supplies on hand that could come close to mimicking that.

“I’m sorry,” Sam muttered to the campfire. “I don’t know what to do. Help me.”

Komachi meowed placatingly at the fire.

For a brief moment, as if in silent response, Sam could just barely see faint threads forming a whorl of Fire mana around the campfire.