

Chapter 34B: Year 2 Day 20 - Annit

The last time Annit had tiered up, it had been almost accidental. She hadn't really been pursuing any specific Class at the time, just following what she knew from her clan, but that had been years ago. Not many years, maybe, but long enough that she had changed tremendously in the interim. Her dreams and aspirations had changed, as well as even what futures were open to her.

The Soul Prosthesis she wore around her neck hummed with tension whenever she gained a level, reminding her of the deficit she was operating from. She had no idea what would happen when she ascended a tier, and neither did anyone else. The prosthesis might fix some of the damage, or the prosthesis itself might burst from too many changes too quickly, though if that happened Shayma promised her a new one.

Shayma had *also* promised her a new weapon if she managed to transform into storm Affinity. Annit was reasonably confident that she had a chance at that, since there was a definite wild and cold edge to her air Affinity. She couldn't quite manipulate water directly, but according to the records that wasn't actually a problem. Incorporating a second Affinity was extremely rare, and generally it happened right from the start.

The bowgun was a reassuring weight in her hands as she took aim at the wood borer. Borers were massive insect-moles with bark-like hides made from the stuff of the Wildwood Tree itself, and while they were normally found in large swarms that needed fourth-tiers, occasionally they fell off and made perfect, valuable prey for smaller parties or lower levels. Like her. She'd been tracking it for over a mile, Keri at her back, and finally had it in her sight.

Even deep in the heart of Wildwood she could smell the sheer concentration of its Affinity mana over the scent of water and trees and bushes. The Wildwood Tree itself was nearly overhead, the waterfalls cascading down a dull roar in every direction, making it far easier for Annit to sneak up on the thing. She'd tracked it for over a mile, with Keri there every step of the way, and now they were ready for the takedown.

Shayma was somewhere. Annit had no idea where, because if she wanted to be she was totally invisible and insubstantial, but close enough to keep an eye on them. Which was ridiculous, but that was just how Shayma had been from the moment Annit had met her. At least Shayma left the actual tracking and killing to her and Keri. She'd seen more than one person stall out because they were helped *too* much and never learned how to do anything properly.

"Ready," she whispered to Keri, and she felt the wash of Keri's magic go through her. At this point, instead of having Keri attack the enemies directly, even if she could, it was better to have Keri help Annit. Keri could grant her a preternatural focus and keep her in top form for far longer than she could maintain otherwise. It was a benefit of having a healer along that she hadn't really considered, and she wasn't sure that another healer could quite do what Keri could, but it meant that she had no hesitation at all as she aimed her bowgun and put an ice bolt straight through the fist-sized left eye of the oversized borer.

It reared up and let out a wheeze, staggering one way, then the other, before Annit put a bolt through the right eye and dropped it for good. Even though it had collapsed in the way that almost guaranteed it

was genuinely dead and not pretending, she waited and watched before moving forward. Keri stayed behind her, booted feet soft on the grass.

“You’re really good with that now,” Keri said, and Annit snorted.

“I’d better be,” she replied. Part of her regretted leaving the blowgun behind, but as a weapon it really couldn’t compare. She knew some Classers maintained that Skills were all that mattered and it was just a matter of properly using the weapon type, but those were usually Classers already using good weapons. Often enchanted, and usually of the more common type. There was a reason people used bows and spears more than slings and whips.

“No, really,” Keri insisted. “It’s not like you were ever bad but you’ve definitely gotten a lot better recently!” Annit nodded thoughtfully. Considering the source of her new weapon she was a little surprised that the Wildwood records had an entry for bowguns. It wasn’t at all common, and the sketch diagram didn’t look all that much like hers, but it was the same principle and same handling.

According to the Status scry that Shayma provided, Annit was closing in on the upper ranks of [Ice Bowgunner], the Skill she’d formed to handle the weapon in question, and that made a lot of difference. Proper habits were becoming ingrained, it was easier to harmonize with her sensory and movement [Skills], and she was really making it her own. The threshold between Skill and skill was blurry most of the time, but it really mattered at the higher levels of Skill where people who used the same kind of Skill would diverge.

“I don’t think there’s much more I can do without evolving the Skill, though,” Annit pointed out. [Ice Bowgunner] was at nine last she had checked, and it would probably tick over to ten soon, possibly even after she made it to tier three. Not that she had more than the vaguest idea of where to go with that particular Skill, though she *did* have an understanding of where she wanted to go with her Class.

It was no longer sufficient for her to be a [Hunter]. That part of her life was behind her and while the lessons were valuable for the future, neither she nor Keri were going to be spending their future hunting down animals. Instead of Keri being support for Annit’s activities, Annit was going to support Keri’s. While a hunter Class was an odd way to go about it, Annit figured that she would end up some sort of [Protector].

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Keri said confidently, wrapping her arms around Annit from behind to give her a hug. “Nothing’s stopped you so far.” Annit smiled and shook her head, putting her hand over Keri’s for a moment.

“No, but that doesn’t mean it’s a sure thing.” Annit shrugged it off. “I suppose I shouldn’t be so worried, though. With the support that we have it’s just a matter of putting in the work, and I’ve never been afraid of that.”

“Definitely not,” Keri agreed. “I think—”

Annit didn’t hear what Keri thought because the wind whispered of multiple somethings coming their way. Annit whirled around, leveling her bowgun. It *wouldn’t* be Shayma, first of all because she popped out wherever she liked and the wind had very little to say about her, and because there was only one of Shayma.

A few moments later, a party of four appeared among the towering trees. Or rather, a party of *five*, but the fifth was a scout or something, circling around the perimeter to keep a watch out. At least, Annit assumed so; the way the person was angling to be *behind* the two of them made Annit's back itch.

Any meeting between adventuring parties out in the wilds, like in a dungeon or a mana spring, was fraught with some degree of tension. In Orn, at least, people didn't tend to be outright murderers but at the same time the sorts who went out into the wilds were rougher and more independent. Some *were* criminals, though places like the Wildwood Retreat tried not to cater to such people. No matter what, though, there was the knowledge that they were all armed, dangerous, out in the middle of nowhere, and without any idea of who the other party was.

It was exactly issues like that which had kept Annit from being confident about adventuring as a two-person party to begin with. She had no idea how Sienne and Giorn Ell had managed it, but having a void Affinity Class probably did wonders for keeping other people from bothering them. Of course, Annit and Keri *weren't* a two-person party, and while Annit couldn't see Shayma she felt a faint hint of amusement that made her certain the fox-girl was there and watching.

Watching, but not interfering. If they wanted to learn to get along in life they had do so without constant coddling. Shayma's absurd power meant that there was really nothing that could challenge her in the realms that Annit and Keri could actually traverse, so she was mostly there as moral support and to reduce the time spent slogging from one point to another.

"Hello!" Keri said brightly, stepping out from behind Annit and smiling at the newcomers. Of the two of them, Keri was by far the more charismatic so Annit was perfectly fine letting her take point. "How has your hunting been going?"

The four traded glances. There were three men and one woman, with the fifth as an unknown, which seemed a little odd to Annit's eye, but she was hardly in a position to pass judgement. Still, she trusted her gut and an uneasy feeling was enough for her to keep her bowgun loose and ready.

"We've been tracking that borer for two days," the apparent leader said after a moment, one of the men, whose face scruff didn't quite cover a chin sharp enough to cut glass. "This was supposed to be our kill."

"Two days is a long time," Keri said with a frown. "Are you sure it's even been here that long? We only tracked it for an hour or so before we found it, right?" She glanced at Annit, who nodded silently.

"My brother's a high third tier," the woman said. She looked like she had a permanent sneer on her face. "He actually saw it fall when he was fighting on the Tree and sent us out here."

"Well I'm sorry you wasted all your time, but you can hardly claim a beast that has been in the wild for days," Keri said reasonably. Reasonable, because she didn't immediately accuse them of lying, which Annit would have been tempted to do. "But if one fell down, maybe there's another one around."

"No it was this one, I'm sure," the woman said, crossing her arms. Annit sighed. Whether or not their story was true, they were certainly trying to steal Annit's kill. In a sense it didn't matter, since Annit had plenty of wealth squirreled away at this point, but at the same time it was *her* kill. All Shayma had done was give her a cardinal direction where something interesting had been.

"Then I guess you're too late," Keri said with sympathy, but didn't go so far as to admit that their claim had any value. Though Keri was perfectly sweet, she wasn't at all stupid. "But if you're this deep already I'm sure there's plenty around to do. Surely you didn't intend to come all the way out here for just one target!"

The woman opened her mouth and then closed it again, and Annit almost laughed. It was just so difficult to argue with Keri's earnest and honest comments, something she'd found out for herself early on and was just glad Keri didn't actually use it against her. From their faces, they really *wanted* to argue, though, so Annit decided to push things along.

"This kill is mine, so you should go ahead and find something different. With all of you, it shouldn't be hard to take down something large." She tilted her head slightly, listening to the scout approaching them from behind.

"No, this is *our* kill, so *we'll* be taking it," the sour woman said. Annit almost rolled her eyes, but she was too focused on keeping the five in her perceptions. This was rapidly turning into a kill-jump and Annit wasn't having it. To be fair, five against two, when they were all second-tier, was pretty good odds. It was just unfortunate these idiots had decided to press their luck against the two of them and their guardian spirit. The moment the scout tried to ghost in behind Keri, Annit whipped around and pointed her bowgun at him, ready to shoot.

"Back off," she said, vapor rising from the ice of her bolt. "I have no issues putting this right through your face." The scout froze in place, a slight man, or maybe a woman, with a sour look on their face.

"She's bluffing!" The first woman said, and without looking Annit snapped her bowgun around and fired. Sometimes people needed a demonstration of someone's willingness to engage in violence. She had no idea what Skills the others had but she didn't aim for a kill anyway, not at first.

The woman screamed as Annit's bolt went through her thigh, dropping that threat to the ground before Annit's movement Skill carried her backward fast enough to bull into the scout, sending them tumbling to the ground. Annit rolled back to her feet and pointed the bowgun at the scout's face again, scowling over at the others.

"Well? Going to back off?"

"Get her!" The men ignored the woman's yell, apparently more concerned with the person Annit had at gunpoint than with the woman's ire, which actually raised them a notch in Annit's mind.

"Yeah, we'll be going. Synnet, come on," the sharp-chinned man said, beckoning to the scout, who glared at Annit and tramped back over despite the woman's cursing.

"Good idea." Shayma finally appeared, popping into existence between them and smiling sweetly at the kill-jumpers. "I suggest you head back to the Retreat directly to get that healed. You're lucky that is *all* the healing that you need." She turned to look at Annit and Keri, apparently unconcerned with the others. "How about I portal you and that back to Wildwood."

"I'd appreciate it," Annit said, finding herself tasting the aftereffects of adrenaline, when she hadn't even noticed it at the time.

"I know Shayma's a [Hero]," Keri said, putting her arm around Annit. "But you're *my* hero."

