

REAPER

“Keep it cool, Mark. You're not in control of yourself right now.” The bandit was looking rather concerned. “You'll squander all of our money. Garnering it took us months!”

“Shut up! You may have forgotten it, but I'm still the boss. You obey my orders or I'll find a place for your head better suited than your neck. Understood?” The bandit audibly gulped.

“Good. Either way, I'll get my money right back and then you can thank me for making us rich.” Mark adjusted his sunglasses, attempting to come across relaxed, but the droplets of sweat on his forehead gave the lie to his behaviour.

He wiped off the beads with his left hand, his right one still holding the cards. If the air just wasn't as stifling... But they were in the very middle of the messy anthill that was Tai Hom Village. A modern anthill, admittedly - a clear advantage compared to the forbidden castle where they didn't even have constant hot water - but an anthill nonetheless.

Mark was sitting in a corner of an old casino that had somehow managed to survive amongst the skyrocketing buildings Tai Hom nowadays consisted of. Someone was playing the piano, but his strumming stood no chance against all the laughing and shouting of the half-drunk people in there.

The casino itself was mostly comprised of heavy, dark furniture which, legend has it, was older than the village. The table he was sitting at right then was one of those very pieces. Scattered across the room, these tables built the isles shattering the flood of people into little groups of stranded survivors.

Which was exactly what they were – stranded. After the Little Fighters had defeated Julian, all his minions and accessories were suddenly out of work. Some had managed to get a regular job and live a mostly normal life, safe for the alcohol they used to wash away the memories of their life as a servant of evil. But most of them ended up the way Mark and his followers did – as scoundrels, rogues, crooks, sub-prime criminals altogether.

“Worried?” the figure on the other side of the table asked in a condescending tone. “You'd better be.”

Mark fixated his eyes on it, showing a glance even a basilisk might be envious of. However, the impressiveness of his stare was severely limited by the fact that he was still wearing his sunglasses. As much as they were helpful for maintaining his poker face – in this situation he would have been better off without them.

“Oh shut up, you freak. You take a pride in your flawless poker face? Well, guess what? You don't even have a face.”

Even though his antagonist was lacking any kind of facial features, Mark could have sworn that he was smirking at that moment. It was a weird feeling. He could sense the smirk was there, but he couldn't see it.

“Ow, that really hurt. Perhaps I could get yours, seeing how you're already risking your skin in this game.” Now Template's invisible smirk had turned into an outright grin.

“Alright, that's enough. Just continue the game, we'll see who laughs last.”

“That's right. We will see indeed.”

Template took another look at the table. The Flop had been a jack, one ace and a king, the Turn Card a mere five. Mark glanced at the two aces he already had in his hand. He was in a good position, but he had to be careful. A handful more loses and he would be broke.

“How much money do you still have?”

Puzzled by the question, Mark remained quiet for a few seconds.

“Well, whatever. I'm pretty sure it's far less than a thousand.” With these words, he took a large chunk of his chips and pushed them towards the middle of the table. Still Mark didn't move.

“What's up? That's your chance to get back all the money you lost during the last couple hours, your ticket for the return journey, your little time machine if you want so. Don't tell me you chicken out now.”

One of his gang members put a hand on his shoulder, but Mark shook it off. A dead grin seized his facial features.

“Alright, all-in.”

He turned towards the dealer who burned the uppermost card, then took the next one from the stack and placed it face-up on the table. It was another king.

“I guess it's time to say bye-bye to your money. Full house.”

“Time to say goodbye indeed. But worry not, I will grant you a minute or two before the departure.”

With these words, Template threw his cards on the table. The other two kings. For a second, Mark was paralysed.

“You're not getting my money, you freak.”

“I've just won it. You've got to kill me if you want to get it back.”

Mark bared his teeth. “Well, maybe I will.”

In a blink of an eye he pushed over the table, making Template fall over. With a sudden fierceness Mark leaped at him, determined to make him pay for all this. His arms found Template's neck when he suddenly felt a searing pain in his left arm. Shockingly, it was bleeding out of a deep cut just above the elbow.

“What the fuck?”, he muttered, turning back towards Template, only to find that Template wasn't there anymore. In his place, Rudolf stood, one of his swords speckled with blood.

“No! You are... That cannot be. I -”

“Oh, for fuck's sake, spare me your stuttering. You can account yourself lucky as I'm not in the mood for fighting right now. I'll just take my money and then I'm outta here.” With these words he took the notes the dealer gave him in exchange for his chips and slashed himself a way towards the exit.

“What the hell? That was all of our money. We can't let him take it.”

“Shut up. I'm not going to mess with Rudolf again. Remember the last time? Half of our gang had been cut into package-sized pieces. I'll find us another source of income.”

“You better do. Because if you don't, we will just take whatever we can get from you.”

Outside of the casino, it was already pitch-black. The dim light of the neon signs was the only thing that illuminated the streets. Template turned right into a back alley, walking on for a few hundred meters until he was out of earshot.

Then he started to laugh maniacally. It had all worked out. Nobody could tell the difference between him and Rudolf. It had taken him more than a year to perfect his shape-shifting, but it was well worth it.

Now he would have his revenge on the Little Fighters who didn't let him join the fight against Julian, telling him he wasn't even meant to exist. Template, the creators prototype stopped halfway in its track. They did not understand he wasn't a mere scheme, but the base of all other persons. And thus, with a bit of training, he could become anyone. They did not understand, but they would soon see.

This time he really was smirking. The Little Fighters had no idea what they were getting into.