

Things often seemed to progress in chunks, like the toothed blade of a saw. After danger, you had a period of conflict, then some time to recover. Tension led to further danger, and the cycle repeated. Sawing someone in half was a classic magic trick, but when it was reality trying to split your existence into different parts, it stopped being such a spectacle. The issue with realizing the movement of the waves was any lull just felt shallow when you knew the wave was coming. Still, less chance of getting swept away if you were always prepared.

“Max? Max.”

I awoke, briefly unaware of where or when I was. Why my mornings had devolved into someone calling my name to wake me, I didn't know - but any brief annoyance quickly fizzled out when I saw that it was Ren. The elf was already dressed and looking bright-eyed and energetic.

“How are you already this *alive*?” I groaned and covered my eyes with my forearm. It felt like another week and I might be ready to face the world. *Might*.

“Elves need less sleep than humans, it seems.” There was some mirth in her tone, a life to her I'd rarely heard previously. “But it's been fifteen hours or something ridiculous, so get up, trickster.”

I relented to sitting up, my muscles aching with every movement. A grimace crossed my face as a sharp pain flashed up my injured side. Healed, but complaining from the trauma. Good morning to me.

“I'm actually going to take Wolf and do a bit of shopping. Try not to die while I'm gone? Meet us at the town board when you're ready.”

My head nodded, and I watched her leave. She turned to chuck me the key before shutting the door. Not only did she have the energy to be up before me, but also make plans for the day - and looked *happy* while doing it. As happy as she ever looked, anyway. The blanket had been removed from the window and bright morning sunlight illuminated the room. I shuffled my aching body up against the headboard and sighed.

[Health Status]
[No reported Injury]

If only I could bounce back from the trauma that easily. The thoughts of turning into a demon had played on my mind, even though the long sleep had made me question how much of yesterday was real. The flare of pain in my side told me the answer was too much of it. There was some worry about letting them out of my sight, but I couldn't allow myself to live in paranoia like that. Despite the dead bodies that hopefully weren't still littering the other room, the town in bright daylight seemed like a safe enough place.

Better check the skills from my level up, at least.

<Stacked Deck> had the shortest description, which easily made it the first target of my morning-dreary eyes. Ten percent bonus to <Pick a Card> damage. It should hopefully allow my magic cards to stay relevant against more than unarmored or exposed opponents. Time would tell. The amount of Intelligence I was stacking was certainly helping to—alongside my

apparent ability to funnel more mana into the skill than intended. Or perhaps it was intended? It was hard to tell with the System.

I left Bloodletting for last because the name alone gave me the chills, and I wasn't keen on seeing the path the System wanted to drag me down just yet. I switched my focus to <Vanishing Act>.

[Vanishing Act] [Make a medium or smaller object that isn't being held or equipped invisible for ten seconds.]

I prickled with delight. The conditions were fair enough - it would be wild to make my opponent's held weapons invisible, or obscure a runaway wagon as it careered towards my foes. I wondered if it counted things I was holding, or rather could I briefly let go to do the action before grabbing it again.

Not wanting the question to go unanswered so early in the day, I rose from bed onto the floor and switched to my Cosmetic outfit - my suit now perfect and unblemished. Into my hand, my dagger went, and I held it limply.

With a quick flick, I spun it into the air and used <Vanishing Act>. The weapon immediately evaporated from sight. A moment later, a sharp pain scratched across my fingers, drawing blood, before the metal clattered to the wooden floorboards.

Lesson learned - I couldn't see invisible things, nor did I have the option to stow them in my Inventory. After a few more seconds, the dagger reappeared on the floor. "*Et tu, dagger?*" I wouldn't be able to use it on my summoned demons either, so despite it being a potentially powerful aide to my trickery - I'd need to have a good think on the best use cases.

Now that I had bloodied myself, I relented to checking out <Bloodletting>. Nothing overtly sinister. I hummed to myself as my eyes darted across the text. I could expend a maximum of ten percent of my maximum health to use instead of mana if I was fully exerted. More temptation to ruin myself, it seemed. How that translated to actual card damage, I wasn't too sure, and wasn't about to beat myself up about working it out. Despite that being the key point of the passive.

The card that I had used to sever the arm of the man had been empowered by the treant curse - even with using Bloodletting and my full mana reserve, I wouldn't be able to repeat the act at this stage. Hah - *act, stage*. I shook my head and then the rest of my body followed. Limber up to meet the day ahead. Perhaps I should have gone shopping with them.

With a sigh, I left the room and traveled down to the tavern proper. A couple of patrons, all of them dressed in generic villager outfits. None of them turned their gaze to meet me, but I drew a fine line across the room with my glare. I was supposed to be good at Illusion Magic, and if anyone was in disguise or keeping eyes on us, I would hope to know. Nothing tingled at the back of my mind.

"Hope you had a good evening, adventurer. Fine day out."

I raised an eyebrow at the barkeep. "Nobody tried to murder us last night, so it was better than last time." Briefly I considered whether the way my heart had pounded in my chest last night was a coy attempt from Ren to off me, but brushed those thoughts away. Focus on the show, Max.

"Glad to hear it," he took me from the careening thoughts.

With a shrug, I went to the door and waved him off. It was a fine day out. Whatever gloom of the day prior had equally been satiated by the long sleep, and now a soft warmth lit the town. It burned at my eyes, but I couldn't let that ruin the moment. All the hardship seemed so far away once more. As if there was no danger to our lives ever present. I smiled and walked over to the town board.

New Quests that had replaced the ones prior. I wondered if Ren had glanced them over yet, but whilst I was here, I might as well put in the effort to keep the Party on the ball. I had agreed to, of course. Seemed rude to go back to old habits so soon, after she put so much trust in me.

[Wanted: Reggie Drake. Smuggler, Murderer, Tax Evader. Dead or Alive.]

[Cull: Enraged Dire Elks 0/15 (R).]

[Investigate: Suspected Witches Coven.]

I nodded slowly, as if I was getting any useful information out of the requests. Go to place and kill things. These were all challenging, however - so perhaps we should be talking around town to try to get some less terrifying options. Then again, we rose to any challenge leveled our way so far. Knowing the Lady was in the next area made me keen to go a little rougher on the Questing to level faster.

Movement in my peripheral caught my attention, as the unmistakable mass of Wolf drew closer. I turned with a smile, confusion passing over my face to see who he was with.

"Ren?"

Her eyes were alight - smiling, even if her mouth hadn't budged. "What do you think?" She gave me a brief twirl, some awkwardness in her face at the out of character act.

No longer in her usual ranger garb, she had changed into a totally different outfit. A white blouse partially covered by a dark blue waistcoat. Matching slacks that went down to smart boots. Atop her golden hair was a top hat, slightly shorter and wider than mine, with a bright blue ribbon around it.

"You have that tailored to fit? It looks like it fits you perfectly." I was as amazed as I was confused. It was always a struggle to get my suits to match my figure, which is why I always stayed so lean. Ren had a lot more going on in that department and yet it looked like it was designed with her in mind.

"System shenanigans," she said as she rolled her eyes. "However, I couldn't deal with the dress shoes."

“Honestly, I’m... at a loss for words.” I was trying to take it all in while also not trying to stare too much. “Just very confused at why.”

Her eyes softened. “Let’s take a walk down to the coast. The breeze is nice.”

I nodded, shooting a look at Wolf as she walked beside me. He looked like he was off in his own world, perhaps trying to work his STAR.

“I had a think about what you said last night,” she began as we walked down the street toward the beach. “About my ranger outfit.”

My head was nodding still, agreeing with the words but unsure where this was leading to. It had mostly been an off-the-cuff observation, not meant to jostle some change in her outlook on life.

“My heritage... my family... it all means a lot to me. Always will. But they’re gone now and I’ve been trying to cling to them in hopes they don’t fade away.” She sighed and looked out toward the sea now that we were getting closer. “This morning I realized that to get stronger, I needed to learn to let go of some of that.”

“Then, what’s with... this?” I gestured to her outfit. Our feet hit the sand, and we kept on going until our full 180 degree vision was open sea and horizon. Wolf had sat back at the edge of the road, not too keen on getting sandy paws.

We stopped, and she turned to face me, crossing her arms across her chest. “The only other outfits were slutty nurse and some kind of dinosaur.”

I opened my mouth, but the light in her eyes gave me pause. Instead, I settled for a tired smile and allowed her to explain.

“I realize it’s pretty weird to mimic your style, but the truth is, I want to *learn*. I want to bullshit like you can.” Her eyes tried to read my face, searching for something. “We’re meeting half way, right?”

My hands rubbed at my temples. “I don’t know if... I don’t know what I am yet. Whether I’m even safe to be around.” I turned from her to look out at the gentle waves that extended to the horizon. Admitting that to myself was exhausting. What if the violent me took over from the pleasant me, and I was no better than the scum working for the Lady?

With a sigh, I sat down on a conjured chair; the legs sinking slightly into the sand. “I feel like I’m on a destructive course that will only be filled with hardship and loss.”

She stepped up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders, which did more to make me tense up rather than relax. “When I met you, Max, I told myself not to care about you. Everything I cared about was taken away from me. I didn’t want that to keep happening. Yesterday you, Wolf, and I could have died.”

“Very true.” Especially if I had made any mistake.

“So I don’t want to live without *living* if death could take us at any time.”

I saw her reasoning. The shadows might be safer, but what use was allowing our enemies to keep us miserable, and where they wanted us? We might burn out twice as fast, being twice as bright, but it will be a life better lived. We'd still have enemies either way. I was mostly trying to avoid the subtext that she cared for me. Then again, I couldn't deny I cared for her—and Wolf—after yesterday.

Perhaps she was right. “Alright, I relent to your reasoning. But why dressed up as my *assis-ah!*” Her fingers pinched into my shoulders.

“We don't use that word. You're not just acting your assigned Class, you are bullshitting beyond what the System should allow. I want in on that - we need every advantage as we grow in power.”

My jaw worked as I stared at the waves wetting the sand at the edge of the shore. I felt unequipped and unqualified to do this. A danger to the group if I truly did turn into a demon and lost control. Could I be responsible for our abilities going forward? I didn't feel enough to hoist up my own ego that I had falsely inflated all these years.

Ren leaned down beside my ear, the brim of her hat pressing against mine. “Max. Just think about how great a show you could pull off with a protégé.”

I shivered. For a variety of reasons. Perhaps she was right, though. She might not have the capability to manipulate her Inventory - but with two of us, or even with Wolf too - the possibilities grew exponentially. Ideas bubbled up within me.

The elf backed away from me, and I stood from my chair to face her. Her arms crossed again, but those brilliant blue eyes had a life to them that radiated beyond her impassive expression.

I smiled, and as the chair vanished, I stepped up into thin air. Seemingly hovering in mid-air, I flourished my cape and gave her a bow.

“Welcome to the first day of becoming *insufferable*,” I grinned widely.