

Another gap in my journal here. I knew why and liked to pretend it was the looming battle for the bridge. I didn't care to put into writing the actual reason, lest the unfaltering text altered the memories.

As soon as the town came into sight, part of me relaxed. The amber sky as the sun started to depart calmed me, despite the creeping danger of the next day.

"From the book, there's one high-level guy in charge of their defenses. Half-giant or something, full plate, and bad attitude. Rest of the group is a mix of ranged focused, some melee, from what I can gather." I sighed and rubbed at the back of my head.

"Not very fun for us then," Ren agreed.

Wolf grumbled too. "Metal, ugh."

Melee was usually easier for us to deal with. Rooting them in place and doing damage from afar while Wolf chewed everyone up. More arrows and spells meant we would be taking a lot more hits without being able to contest them. Maybe not something to worry ourselves over right now.

I felt like I had walked enough for a lifetime over the last few days and hoped there were carts and possibly horses that didn't want to maim me we could get later on.

We were quiet as we sunk into the perimeter of the town. It was quiet, as it usually was, with the System-created starting to pack up and get ready for the evening themselves. It was odd and the promise of a warm bed was the only thing stopping me from standing around and taking it all in.

Into the tavern and it looked near identical to the other day. A few patrons that Wolf shoved out of the way to settle down beside the fireplace.

"Greetings adventures. How can I help you this evening?"

"One room. En-suite." I gave him the plain details. Anything else was just set dressing he wouldn't care for.

"Of course," he put the key on the counter. Same room as last time. "We have full vacancy tonight. Enjoy your evening."

I gave him the gold as I raised an eyebrow at Ren. A fully empty tavern wasn't concerning in of itself, but it added to the dramatic air. No Players remaining. Well, we didn't know that, but it was the impression we were being presented. "Sleep well, Wolf. Same security measures as before."

He grumbled his acknowledgements.

We headed to the room, locked it behind us. A little shrine of safety. Immediately, I went and sat on the bed. Then, I just flopped backwards onto it and sighed. Heavenly.

"Don't get the bed dirty. I'm going to bathe."

I closed my eyes and smiled, listening to the door close before the taps started up. Next time, I mused, and sat back up. Put the gold coin back away and rubbed at my eye sockets. Time to hand those Quests in while I waited my turn.

“Take as long as you want,” I called to her. “I’m going through my new abilities.”

“*Gladly.*”

The blue boxes appeared, and I got rid of them immediately, not particularly interested in whatever terrible rewards the System wanted to give me. The STAR glowed golden light as all the hand ins were complete. I exhaled, hoping for something overpowered to make the next day easier.

[Level Up - 8]
[Stats Increased]
[New Passive: <All Hands>]
[New Passive: <Top Deck>]
[New Ability: <Demonic Transposition>]

I clucked my tongue and brought the ability up immediately. Swap places with one of my summoned demons. Decently long cooldown, certain restrictions on distance and such, used a lot of mana... hmm. It seems the System was listening, after all. There were plenty of non-combat related scenarios where that would be exceedingly good, especially considering I had a demon that could fly.

All Hands was nice too - for every ally that assists me in gaining a Dazzle debuff icon, a second one would be added. How the System determined ‘assist’ was just another part of the vague way it works. This meant that Ren and Wolf could actually help me out with my tricks, probably my demons too. More icons meant more effective Max. I smiled.

Top Deck allowed my <Pick a Card+> magic attacks to crit at my normal Spell Crit chance - after a bit of swapping through screens, it turned out that it was pretty low. It was at least helpful enough to tell me a critical card would be red in color and do extra damage. Couldn’t really argue with passives like that.

I stood and walked around the room. Covered the window with a thick blanket even though it was heading to nightfall anyway. Put the lantern on medium. Placed my chair by the door with my hat and jacket on it.

Eye of the storm.

The bathroom door opened, and Ren stepped out.

“Good news,” I grinned, pausing in brief surprise as she was already in her nightgown.

“Sorry, we were heading to sleep anyway, and I didn’t want to squeeze into that waistcoat again.” She wrinkled her face up and headed for the bed. “It’s all yours - but what’s the good news?”

“Oh - uh, I can now teleport and when you help me with tricks, it gives me Dazzle icons.”

She got under the covers and yawned. "All my efforts won't go to waste then. I haven't done mine yet. I hope I get some bullshit too."

I smiled and waved her off as I went into the bathroom and shut the door. Taps on, stripped down, and sat in the warm water as quickly as possible as it filled. I grew tired of my own dried blood getting everywhere - it wasn't exactly very becoming of a great showman to look like he had rolled out from a fistfight in a butcher's shop. I scrubbed down fully. All the sweat and grime from the day, my hair matted from being stuck under my hat for hours. Just fresh, clean, and ready to be served up on a platter tomorrow.

How does one even assault a bridge? Taps off, I sunk into the hot water and tried to relax my brow rather than furrow it. Neither part of me was particularly well versed in siege warfare, but the hope was that it'd just be a bunch of goons standing about preventing access and we could just hit them with everything we had in hopes that they buckled before we took any serious damage.

I had a few tricks on the sidelines, but needed to think of more - just in case. Might even lose a little sleep in thinking up potential new plans.

With a sigh, I left the warmth of the water. The soft bed was too big a draw, and I yearned for the comfort of a proper sleep. Sleepwear on as the water filtered out. I yawned and rubbed my hair backward. Needed a cut soon enough, a little time roughing it, and it wasn't as sharp as it used to be.

Into the bedroom and the lantern had been lowered to almost nothing. Enough for me to see around my side of the bed, however, and I climbed in eagerly. Completely melting between the cover and mattress.

"Max?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

I turned over, expecting her to have something to bring up about her new ability - or even just ask for me to hold her again for comfort. I hadn't realized she was facing my way in the bed already and I rotated to be face-to-face a lot closer than anticipated. "Ah, of course?"

"Are you worried about tomorrow?" Her voice was soft and her eyes stared into mine, not scowling, but perhaps concerned.

My jaw worked more than my brain did. Always at night time, she came to crack me open and see what emotional response she could get from me. Safety in the dark. Well, I was about to test that theory.

"You want my honest answer?"

She nodded slowly. "Always."

My heart caught in my chest, but I allowed the truth to come out unabated. "The only thing I'm scared of... is losing you."

Her eyes widened slightly and searched my face to see if I was trying to pull a fast one. "You're not bullshitting?"

"No."

"Good, because that's what I'm scared of, too."

I raised my hand and brushed the blonde hair away from her face. Leaned forward to kiss her, and she reciprocated. Wrapped her arms around me as I pulled her closer.

It turned out magic was real.

My eyes flickered open. Daytime, but the sun struggled to get through the blanket covering the window. Briefly, I panicked at not being woken up by the elf, before I turned to see her still beside me in bed, smiling.

"Ren, I-" my words stopped as she put her finger to my lips.

"Today is going to be noisy, trickster. Let's just enjoy a little peace."

I nodded and laid back down. She put her arm around me and rested her head on my chest while I idly rubbed my fingertips on her back. More to live for. More to die for.

It was maybe ten or fifteen minutes that we stayed like this, although it felt like hours. She gave me a pat on the chest and rolled out of bed, throwing the covers to obscure my vision. As they dropped, she stood, fully dressed in her magician's outfit.

"I was about to do the same," I grinned, "but realized I'd probably crack my head open on the bedside table."

She rolled her eyes, but a soft smile stayed on her face. "Too preoccupied with trying to feel me up that you didn't even ask about my new ability."

"Unfair," I threw back the covers and stood, changing into my Cosmetic outfit in the least flashy way possible. "I seem to remember-"

"Ah!" she interrupted, holding her hand up. "New rules. Flirting is acceptable, but no pillow talk during the day."

"Acceptable." I crossed my arms.

"Let's survive today before we go any further, okay?" The smile faded from her face as cold reality cooled the new flames we were trying to stoke. "My new ability is another arrow attack. Like entangling shot, but it... makes targets more susceptible to debuffs."

"Like Dazzle," I said with a nod. "System really knows, huh? About the Party dynamics, I mean."

“Perhaps,” she said with a shrug. “Let’s get Wolf and start making the journey?”

Room was unlocked as I donned my hat and jacket keeping guard, chair back in the Inventory. I also stole the lantern, but forgot the blanket over the window - so it seemed fair at the end of the day. We walked down the stairs to see Wolf waiting for us. The bear stretched out and yawned.

“Ready to meet the day, bud?” I grinned at him.

He looked between me and Ren and raised his eyebrows, his amber eyes twinkling beneath the bowler hat.

I raised a finger and wagged it at him. “Don’t even start. I just want to know your new ability and then I’ll go die of embarrassment.”

“Not before you’ve cooked for me,” Ren sidled in beside me. “You were supposed to yesterday.”

I waved off the System-created barkeep as we exited and headed for the western road. “I did say that, didn’t I? Sorry, my mind was quite preoccupied.”

They both raised their eyebrows at me.

“With the whole battle thing.” I rolled my eyes. “Let’s grab food from a shop, and I’ll cook later if we survive.”

“When we survive,” Wolf corrected. “Positive attitude manifests what you want in this world.”

Somewhat true, I had to relent as I deflated.

Soon enough, we were back on the road eating meat pies. They were adequate - filling enough to keep the nerves from shaking at my stomach. The day had started sunny, but gray clouds were looming from the east and the breeze was carrying them straight toward our path. Typical that gloom would know where some tragedy was about to take place.

We rounded a hill, the cobbled road rough and overgrown in parts. Odd considering it was the main way over the river to the next area. A dark shape loomed into view as the trees slid along the sidelines.

“Is that some kind of sign?” I narrowed my eyes at the cross shape, like a large X, sitting on the side of the road.

“No,” Ren said, her face paling before she ran to get closer.

We followed suit, more of the picture becoming clear as we neared the logs tied together. It didn’t take elven eyesight to see what it was now.

A body.

Tied to the shape by hands and feet, the man was long dead. The elements and nature having worn away at his body already.

“They are monsters.” Ren worked her jaw.

I looked beyond, eyes darting to the road leading toward the bridge. There were more of the crosses, every so often. Some had blurred into the woodland around them, making them harder to spot at the outset, but now that I knew they were there... there were dozens.

Ren stood beside me and narrowed her eyes. Her hand gripped my forearm as she pointed at the next one along.

“Max, that’s Hannah.”