

From that day onward, any time that I almost died, I would make a mark on the ace of diamonds card I had acquired from the thieves. Of course, at some point in my journey I had lost it, or it had become damaged beyond recognition. At first, it bothered me that I could no longer tally up the truly lucky days. After a short while I realized the lucky days were the ones I was in no danger, and could just enjoy living. The fewer and further apart they became, the harder I pushed to bring them back.

Ren sighed and rolled her neck. "Pretty disappointing in terms of loot."

[68 Gold]
[Deft Leggings]
[Crossbow (Broken) (2)]

She was correct. Other than gold, and the random assortment of odd items I had been filling my Inventory with, there wasn't anything spectacular in this room. The leggings gave a single point of Agility, which wasn't really necessary for my build, but was better than the default gear I still had on. The other equipment with Stats were even less useful.

Nothing to fit the slots I already had filled. "Lots of Strength gear. Shame we didn't have a warrior or something in the party." I drummed my fingertips on the boxes at the end of the room I had rifled through. Mostly things that even I couldn't see the value in, which was saying a lot.

The elf walked around the room, scowling at everything as if it may reveal another hidden passageway. "I'm not sure what you'll do with half of what you pick up. I'm surprised you didn't take the table."

"It wouldn't let me," I said with a shrug. She was looking away, but I could almost hear her eyes rolling. Empty bottles, a large tarp-like sheet, a jeweler's hammer, a pencil, and a handful of plain marbles. Sure, it was no *Arch-Magi's Slippers* or *Axe of World-Ending*, but some of the most functional of items could bring great form to a show. You never knew when a situation would require a specific, odd item.

"As long as you aren't too focused on tricks to be effective in combat. It sounds like I'm admonishing you, but..." She rubbed her face and turned to me. "Big balls are no good if they're easy to cut off."

My brow furrowed, and I leaned back against the crate. "Is that an elven expression?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. We are speaking... the same language?"

It stood to reason that if portals pulled people from all manner of worlds, it'd have to utilize some kind of translation between Players. "Probably something the System smooths over. You just mean being overconfident is a long step towards a sharp blade."

"Is that a human expression?"

I smiled and shrugged.

[Thieves Killed: 12/16]

“Only four of these useless thieves left.” I yawned. The lack of sleep was starting to catch up. “You’d think they’d have better loot being a whole hideout of them. What have they even been stealing?” Of course, being System-created, they would be stuck here doing whatever routine they were destined to repeat. More of a failure on the System, then.

“*Shitty thieves,*” she muttered as she shook her head at one of the mangled bodies on the floor.

The Hellhound had gone already, and I couldn’t call Roger for a while. While it was nice to assume the rest of the thieves were sitting patiently in the next room, it would be careless to start making assumptions at this stage. Even with my brain wanting to hit the snooze button. For the most part, I was annoyed that we wouldn’t be able to nap anywhere without one eye open. One little assassination attempt and now I was paranoid that death was just waiting for my eyes to close for long enough to make a move. I shook that away and focused on the present task.

“These doors are probably combustible, right?” I hopped down from the raised area, being careful not to slip on the slick blood slowly congealing on the floor.

“I suppose.” She immediately turned to go stand in the furthest corner.

Although I still hadn’t decided if creating a barricade of burning wood between us and the next room was a good idea or not, now that she had made the decision to move out of the way, I felt like I had to do it. You couldn’t create the expectation and then squander it.

I dropped the Imp Summon beside me and gave the plump creature a nod. Part of me wanted to know how the whole summoning thing worked. Were they just created when I cast the skill? I had felt that the wounded Hellhound would be okay on the island when I sent him away - but if there was an actual Hell, did that mean there was a pool of potential demons I was drawing from? What were the chances I could pull the same one twice?

With a shake of my head, I let the thoughts drift away for now. As much as I didn’t like not knowing, I was sure to not like the bandits respawning atop us because I was too busy even more. Lost in my own head, I needed to sharpen my thoughts. Like their swords would be, otherwise—sharp and in my head. I gestured toward the door and the Imp began to form a fireball.

A purple card twisted over my hand, and Ren had drawn an arrow ready. It was not our fault if the System-created had a blind-spot when it came to different rooms. If we could get the jump on them due to this, then that was one less bruise for the next morning.

The fireball zipped across the room, illuminating the dead and debris we had left scattered around, then struck the door. I watched it catch alight and start to burn. Not exactly the explosive result I had expected - so now we just had a door on fire in our way. I narrowed my eyes at it, willing it to collapse.

“I’ll admit to being a bit underwhelmed.” Ren relaxed the tensed bowstring. “It’s not like you to disappoint.”

Her expression was hard to read, but the words prodded the soft part of my brain that needed to perform to be accepted. I smiled. The failsafe option. "Have a little more faith, Ren, for the real trick is—"

The door burst open towards us, wafting heated air and smoke our way. A large figure silhouetted the hallway beyond.

"Enemies!" He growled and gestured to whomever was behind him, his angered face sandwiched between two thick sideburns that put most people's normal head hair to shame.

"*Ta-da*," I muttered, at the sudden appearance of our foe. A little coincidence could be twisted to my credit. Another notification appeared in my vision.

[New Monster: Head Thief <7 E>]

Briefly I wondered if that meant he stole heads, but then again, if given the chance, I'm sure that was part of his intention. The 'E' next to his level must mean Elite - nice to have something written in plain text to let you know you were about to meet the blunt end of a heavy lesson.

Arrow out and card not far behind, the large man flared up in a brief sphere of gray; the attacks doing no damage to him. He stumbled forward, raising a thick cudgel in one hand and a long knife in the other. Behind him, at least three other thieves were readying weapons.

The Imp's fireball did strike him, and his leg burst into flame. It was quickly extinguished but left his clothing smoldering around the burn on his flesh. Ren quick-drew another arrow that was again blocked by his gray shield as it zipped across the room.

Hmm. It was a neat trick, but I had worked it out already. Unless I was wrong and my brains were about to decorate the back wall, it was simple. He was too close for repeated failed attempts, so it was time to see if this Intelligence stat was correctly named or not.

The elf started to draw her sword as I whipped my hand around and threw a poker chip at him, anger flaring in my eyes.

Gray shield.

Then, my imbued card struck him through the side of the neck. An imperfect strike as he moved away from it at the last second - but he dropped his knife to hold the wound with a thick hand. One weapon down was better than-

<Card Fan> came up as he swiped at me, my damage doing little to stop his charge. The shield shattered and sent me back against the wall - air once again knocked from my lungs. I wasn't a fan of that. The Imp scabbled out of the way as Ren fired her entangling arrow into the other room, rooting the rest of the thieves in place so they couldn't assist their boss.

As the leader stepped toward me, I threw my hat at him. The gray shield flickered around him as he knocked it out of the way - the second of the two cards I threw along behind it biting into his chest.

Every third hit would go through his shield.

I rolled to the floor as his cudgel slammed into the rock wall where my head had been. As I stumbled back to my feet, I watched him pause and shift uneasily across the marbles I had dropped along the way.

“Duck.”

I did without hesitation, as a flare of radiant light bloomed behind me. The Elite looked pretty confident as his shield of gray started to wash over him. It flickered twice, as my split cards hit right before the arrow imbued with smite shot struck him through the mouth and out of the back of his neck.

A blaze of orange flashed from within the next room as my Imp sent a fireball into the restrained thieves, setting them alight and charring their exposed skin. It was over. A quick pair of cards and an arrow or two, and they were dead with nowhere to escape to. The smell of burning was heavy on my lungs, and I looked forward to getting some fresh air.

I leaned over to grab my discarded top hat and then rested my hands on my knees. Closed my eyes for a moment, and allowed the exhaustion to take hold as the adrenaline and heat of battle wore off.

“Good job, trickster.” Ren gave me a pat on the back. “I wouldn’t have been able to get past the shield alone.”

“Teamwork makes the dream work,” I murmured, smiling but not looking up at her.

“If your dreams are like this...” she trailed off, little more else needing to be said. How far we had come from killing cute slimes and boars. Combat now felt gritty and high stakes, as if the System couldn’t decide how to pace or theme the areas.

“Right now, the dream is a soft bed and safety.” I stood and stretched my bruised back out before taking a moment to bandage my minor injuries, practicing my one-handed approach. “Maybe a round of applause?”

“I can agree on the first two. After seeing how terrible combat is and how eager you are to hop into an early grave, we’d best temper our expectations.”

I exhaled and flexed the fingers of my free hand. “We’ll be fine. The system tried a bit too hard here, but we’re leaving with barely a scratch.”

She looked rather unimpressed beneath her scowl, but she turned to continue to loot the other bodies.

[Quest Complete: Return to Town for Reward]

Exhaustion wanted to take the reins back now that everything was over, the show was over but we’d be moving on soon enough. No chance of slumping over in one of these rooms and decompressing for the rest of the day. We wouldn’t even be back in town for a couple of

days, which was a shame... but at least it gave us something to look forward to if we survived that long.

I looted the leader, expecting nothing worthy of our efforts.

[85 Gold]
[Unfinished Letter]
[Power Token (2)]
[Knife of the Trickster]
[Sausages (3)]

Other than the blue border around the dagger, and the shining Tokens, everything else was unimportant. I stowed away the food and letter for letter, and I left behind other less important things.

"I found a Rare dagger." I grinned. "You're going to love it." I sure did. It gave a two Int and one Dex boost.

She raised an eyebrow and stood from the body she was investigating. "Oh? How so?"

"It's called 'Knife of the Trickster'." My smile widened.

"Match made in heaven." She rolled her eyes. "Nothing much on these aside from gold, unless you need more random junk?"

"No, not right now." Although, I could do with picking up all those marbles again. "I have a Power Token for you, however."

"Shit, really? Next one is yours, though?" She stepped back over the corpses and over to me.

"Found two." I grinned and withdrew one to hand over to her. "I wonder if we are meant to have upgraded a handful of skills before attempting more dangerous Quests like these."

"Thank you." She shrugged. "Probably, we skipped most of the town Quests to do the challenge board."

"Challenge board? I thought that these were just normal Quests?"

Ren actually paused and crossed her arms, her normal permanent scowl almost breaking. "Max, please. You want to haul around bolts of linen for village-folk and herd sheep for five gold and a loose handshake? We are doing the hard-mode Questline. Don't you read anything?"

"I try to interface with the System as little as possible."

Her eyes narrowed further. "You literally... you know what? Never mind. *Token*, please."

As she reached over to take it from my clasped fingers, I clicked them together and instead it became a card - the Ace of Diamonds. "Is this your card?" I grinned.

Her eyes slowly went from the card to my own. "If I chose to kill you in your sleep, I wouldn't make any creaking noises to wake you."

"Good." I grinned, clicking my fingers again to change it back to the token. "At least I'd still get some good rest, then."

I turned from the elf as my STAR menus spun up. Spoiled for choice, I tried to decide what ability to upgrade.