

Things felt good when you were on a roll. And roll we did. In a different time where the Crimson Shadow wasn't a constant threat, we would have easily run circles around everything in the first area and sucked every mote of good loot from any Quest offered. Our time there was shorter than necessary, and we would fall into the habit of scraping by with the bare minimum power needed. Bad habits died hard.

I sunk into the thick grass, itching as it tried to prod me into the nostril. Ren slunk up beside me and we peered over the ridge. A small encampment, some wooden structures, including a basic shack. Dozen or so people idling around. One of them looked less generic and more like the mugshot on the wanted poster.

"Reckon we could just pop him from here and be done with it?" I murmured.

"If he stopped twitching around, looks like he's on something."

He was rather... energetic, to say the least. As if he had forgotten where he left five things around the camp and switched which one he wanted to go find every three seconds. Erratic and unpredictable.

"I bet I could kill him in one hit from here." My eyes narrowed.

"Oh yeah, what do you bet?"

"If I do I then you owe me..." I turned my head to her to see that she laying a lot closer than I realized. "...something."

"Deal," she whispered. "If you balls it up, then you owe me... *something*."

I looked away from her blue eyes and back to the target, letting the building steam flow out of my ears. Couldn't have just said something simple, could I? With a deep breath, I cooled myself and focused. Pushed myself up a little, so I wasn't so buried in the grass, and let a card appear in my hand.

Held it, the mana pooling from me and empowering it, and it grew brighter. Hit the exhaustion and my health started to drop, blood running down my hand and down my sleeve - which was rather unpleasant. A quick glance at Ren showed she had a dim view of my casual attitude about harming myself for more power.

I hit my limit, the card pure white and crackling with pale electricity. Exhaling through my nose, I took aim and let it fly. The man moved.. I turned the trajectory, my hand shaking at trying to control the amount of power as it flew further away. It was just about there, and he turned again. The card narrowly missed lopping off an ear as it went past towards the floor.

Ren exhaled and pushed herself up to see better, perhaps more in surprise than celebrating her win.

But it wasn't over.

"*What the-*" his voice came out from below.

Fingers clenched into my palms and pain radiating through my head, I brought it back like a boomerang. A struggle with how much power was soaked into it, like a lead weight on the end of the fishing line. As he looked down at the slim line of white light, it appeared from the back of his head and vanished into nothing.

I dropped back down into the grass with a gasp before holding my breath as I let the pain wash away. Probably shouldn't push myself so hard just yet, but I wanted to see how well my new headband worked. I rolled onto my back and exhaled, finally. No shouts or sounds of pursuit, so I counted that as a win.

Ren loomed over me. Her face, way too close, was shadowed against the day lit canopy above. "Looks like I owe you something, trickster."

"Have mercy," I groaned and waved her away, before clarifying. "That's not *the thing*, just a normal request."

She snorted and moved away to stand, while I took a few seconds to compose myself. My brain just need to refresh and reboot since my blood was all the way... across my hands. With a sigh, I sat up and brought out a linen sheet to wipe them on. Not the most hygienic, but it beat using my suit. I stood and walked over to her, where she was watching Wolf roll around in the dry dirt on his back.

"Fascinating how his hat stays on," she noted.

The gears in my head were still spinning without the teeth engaging, so I didn't have anything to say to add to the conversation. Nothing that didn't taste like a foot, at least. Other than crushing me with awkwardness, Ren seemed to be in a better mood this afternoon. Two Quests down and a couple of Power Tokens each, that should put a smile on anyone's face.

I enjoyed the moment for what it was. The humor in her eyes watched the bear wriggle around and get all dusty. A little snapshot for the future when times were difficult. This seemed like one of those cliché moments where I could turn and open my emotional hatch. Shower Ren with everything going on within me. But I didn't. Not yet. There were things still guarded that I was... scared of the Crimson Shadows taking away. When they were gone, I could breathe easy.

"What are you thinking about, Max?"

Thoughts popped like bubbles, and I watched the bear right himself and shake off the dust from his fur like a dog out of a bath. I raised an eyebrow at the elf. "Nothing."

"Bullshitter." She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Let's go kill some Elks?"

They weren't too far away, and before I knew it, we were doing exactly that. It felt too strange trying to Dazzle the wild beasts, so we played it straight. Wolf mauled them, while Ren and I did damage from range. No need for Roger or other demons. Once we got into a routine, the first Quest was completed and we handed it in to repeat it.

[80 Gold]
[Regeneration Potion]

Slow healing over five minutes. Could be useful.

“Hey Max,” Ren stretched out her back as we took a breather. “If I asked you a direct question, you’d ask honestly, right?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “It might depend on what you asked.”

“What kind of answer is that?” She frowned and crossed her arms.

“Alright, alright. I would be honest with you.”

“Then... I have a question for you.” She shuffled her feet on the floor.

My right eye twitched. “Okay, go for it.”

“Do you have any Sweet Cakes left?”

I worked my jaw and stared at her impassively. This is why it depended on what she asked. We held eye contact.

“Max... why aren’t you answering? You’re holding out on me, aren’t you? Dickbag!” She strode toward me.

“I never said I had any!” I started to back away.

“You aren’t denying it! I can’t wait till the next time you almost die to have another.”

I stopped and pulled a face, and she stood a couple of feet away to glare at me. Wolf was almost audibly rolling his eyes from a little distance away, and I saw his point of view on how this looked.

“Okay,” I raised up my hands. “I have one left. I was waiting until I had two to share. But since you’re so insistent...” It popped up into my hand and I moved it toward her.

She took it without hesitation, snapped it in half and pressed part of it back into my palm. “You make things too complicated when the answer is right in front of you.” The elf stared at me as she practically inhaled the pastry.

“Guilty,” I managed, with a tied-up tongue. Her intensity today had been more disarming than usual, and I wasn’t sure if that was my fragile mind just being more malleable or... I stopped, realizing we had been staring at each other while my brain tried to hastily put matching shapes together. “Elks!” I said, unceremoniously shoving the cake into my mouth and walking away.

I approached Wolf and shook my hand at him as I exhaled. “I know. You don’t need to say anything.”

“She was smiling.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “I don’t understand your rituals, but it’s easier to be happier before you’re dead, rather than after.”

My mouth opened, but he turned around to get ready to charge the next monster. The greatest tragedy was the other Max being just as much of a dweeb around the opposite sex as I was. Focus on the enemy before us, then gather the pieces. If there was actually something between us, I could deal with it then.

“Are you ready, Max?” Ren called, arrow up to her bow as her default scowl was back.

“*Almost*,” I grinned slightly maniacally.

[Quest Complete]

Same reward as before. I yawned and stretched out. Some of the meat was even good enough to stow away to cook later on, which was nice. My hands ached, but I kept things under control and hadn't exerted myself.

“Must be our lucky day,” Ren whistled as she looted through the last group. “Two more Tokens.”

I nodded and sat down on my conjured chair. Exhaustion seemed to hit me harder, even though the System said I was fine. “Give one to Wolf, save another for Hannah?”

“Shapeshifter can go without. I doubt she has a lot of information with the bridge being the last bastion of the shitbags.” She flicked one through the air toward me. “You and Wolf can have.”

I didn't move, the Power Token just vanishing once it got into my perimeter. “You sure?”

“Do I make mistakes?” She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. Narrowed them further as my mouth opened.

It closed without objection. While I didn't want to start getting greedy and getting all the power myself, I also didn't want to argue with her. Back to looking at upgrade options, then.

Finale upgrade lowered the number of icon stacks for the greater effects, whereas Vanishing Act would allow me to hide two objects at once. There was also Mana Extension - having a greater mana pool meant more strength for my cards. Well, last time I went for the useful combat skill - so this time it was time for the pizzazz.

[Finale+] [Decreases the Dazzle thresholds for certain effects.]

Somewhat vague, but I imagined it would just stun things for longer or let me do it with fewer icons in play. Let's see if I could get it going before I died.

“What did you pick, Wolf?” I glanced toward the bear who had been laying down and licking his fur clean.

“Some sort of Magic Absorption,” he yawned, yapping his maw. “So many words annoy me.”

“And you, trickster?” Ren raised an eyebrow.

“Finale. If there's a group we have to break, the area stun seemed useful.”

She nodded. "Let's get moving to the town. We should get there by dusk if we don't get distracted."

I groaned and got back to my feet, waving my cloak over the chair as it went into my Inventory. There we go, getting some of it back. My eyes closed, and I focused on my breathing. Not enough practice recently. With a smile I turned to the waiting elf and held a gold coin up.

"Call it for who gets the bath first?"

"I wasn't born yesterday, Max. You can just change it to what you want."

I ignored her and flicked it into the air.

"Heads," she said with a sigh.

Caught it. Onto the back of my hand for the reveal. Heads.

Ren rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure what that was meant to prove, but I'll take it. Let's head out."

I smiled as she walked away, Wolf following alongside her. I didn't often do a setup to be called back later on, but it was there to draw on if the situation ever arose.

Too caught up in living, I almost forgot what I was best at. I followed slowly behind them as we walked south, drawing and switching between things in my Inventory to prepare.

Our harshest critics lay in wait for the curtain to open.