

Once you let go of things, you could feel weightless. There was the temptation to push the rest of whatever was holding you back off a cliff and dust off your hands. Pure freedom. You'd soon find that you needed the baggage to keep you grounded, otherwise your ego could inflate like a balloon and carry you off into the great beyond. Striking the balance that allowed you to walk tall while still having your feet firmly placed on the ground was a lesson learned slowly, through mistakes.

"Max?"

A sharp pain in my leg woke me. My eyes fluttered open to early morning light, and a brief panic that maybe the bear had seen me as an early morning snack. No, I had been lying against him, and yet now I was flat on the floor. My suit was damp, not with blood, but with dew. It was morning and I was alive.

The shadowed figure of the Oathwarden loomed over me. "Morning, trickster. I'm cooking up sausages."

"Mrff," my tongue lagged behind my brain as my mouth was dry. "Uh- sounds perfect."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. There was a dull ache across my head, but it paled in comparison to the pain of the previous day. A light mist permeated the surrounding area, and I made a face at Wolf being missing.

Ren caught my gaze. "We thought you'd wake up when he moved, but you've been dead to the world. Wolf is out in the woods."

My mouth opened to ask what he was doing, but I could probably guess based on context clues. Instead, I stood up and put my feet back in my shoes. Bones clicked along my back as I stretched out, which paired well with a groan. "How did you sleep?"

"Best sleep in a while, if I'm honest." She tilted her head as she shuffled the sausages on the grill. There was a frown there, but it looked as though it was more from constant habit than anything bugging her.

"Lot's of combat," I nodded, "and Wolf makes a great pillow."

She narrowed her eyes and pointed the cooking utensil at me. "And...?"

"And you look radiant this morning." I snatched one of the sausages from the grill and vanished it into my Inventory, withdrawing a plate from behind me and having the cooked meat slide out from my sleeve onto it.

"You... ass, Max. I suppose that is on me for expecting an overnight change." She rolled her eyes and got her own plate ready.

"Hey, I complimented your hair - that's different." I smiled, waiting for her to be annoyed at herself for allowing me to be imperfect.

"It'd be nice if I give it a proper wash again." She sighed and scowled at the grill. "Funny thing is, I always used to be so jealous of my sister. She had such beautiful silver hair that would almost glow in the moonlight."

"Where yours almost glows in the sunlight?"

She nodded and took a bite of the sausage. "And *she* was jealous of that."

"There's a story like that in my world." I looked around us, the slight mist obscuring my vision from peering too far into the woodland. "About the moon and the sun." Wolf must have been gone for a little while. I wondered if he was okay. Surely the smell of cooking meat would draw him back.

"...and you're not going to regale me with the tale, just leave me in suspense?" She withdrew a wooden chair to sit on from her Inventory.

I clucked my tongue and sat down on my own chair. "It may surprise you that I'm not much of a storyteller. The sun was a blazing extrovert and the moon a shy introvert. They swapped places somehow because people could stare at the moon, but not the sun."

Ren slowly nodded. "You were right. You *are* a shitty storyteller."

"I know my weaknesses," I said, and winced as she narrowed her eyes at the statement. "Strong willed elves, being one of them."

"Fuck off," she shook her head. "You'd follow a goat off a cliff if you thought you could enrapture it with one of your tricks."

"A goat wouldn't call me such foul names all the time." I waved my fork in the air in admonishment. "And you're supposed to be a princess."

"A princess wouldn't pull your ass from the fire when you try to fist-fight gangs with no combat experience." She tapped her plate. "Or when you fall out of a tree."

"That tree was very powerful," I murmured to myself as I looked out into the mist to see the large form of Wolf return.

"I'm done shitting," he announced as he lumbered up to the inert campfire.

It was good timing, as I wasn't too sure where the back and forth with the elf was leading to. This was all new ground, and I wasn't sure where to tread. We had ascended a step in our friendship that seemed to be filled with giving each other shit. I took her talk last night in earnest. The number of people I had opened up to about my mother were... well, I wouldn't need my whole hand to count them. Which was convenient, with how violent our adventures were getting—I was liable to lose it at any hour. Maybe due to my own hubris.

"Morning, Wolf. Hungry for more bandits?" I asked.

"I actually found the whole ordeal emotionally draining and I am apprehensive about getting into such a big battle again." He sat and scratched at his stomach. "But also, yes."

I caught the eye of the elf and nodded towards the bear. "It certainly didn't help my mild trauma, so I mirror your feelings of apprehension." Not so much on the wanting to eat the bandits, however, but I wouldn't discount it if my sanity took another dive or two.

"Shit," Ren interjected, "the fight gave you the Mild Trauma status? Has it gone now?" Concern furrowed her brow.

"Yeah, it's gone. And no, I had it before."

"Before? What is wrong with you?" She covered her eyes and sighed. "That means you *need* to rest. Like a proper day off. I'm going to beat your brains in with a rock one of these days."

"That would probably give me mild trauma." I nodded with a smile, as she growled at me. It probably helped loosen my tight lips over my past day. It certainly loosened something up in my head, but the Health Report was actually all clear this morning, so I had survived whatever it had been.

Wolf sniffed the air. "If you kill him, can I eat him?"

She shook her head, and he got the hint. Ren stood and packed away all the items. I'd like to think that there might be some manner of resurrection magic in this world, and that I'd prefer to keep my corpse intact just in case Ren had it in her heart and the capability to bring me back.

I hopped up on the chair and stood tall. With a short spin, the chair vanished, and I dropped to the floor, turning on the spot as my hands were also free of plate and cutlery. Instead, I held a chunk of boar meat, which I flung toward Wolf. He grabbed it from the air, and I grinned at the Dazzle icon over him.

My eyebrow raised toward Ren, but it looked as though she was waiting for me to look at her, to roll her eyes.

"You are relentless." She shook her head again.

"I'll get you with one of my tricks eventually." I crossed my arms. Maybe it was more than her cynicism that made her such a killjoy. Her elven eyesight might be too good - paired with her knowledge of how the System and Inventory worked... I'd have to go for something really out of the box.

"Flattered as always, trickster. Perhaps use your skills for more than trying to impress me." She crossed her arms too, and we stared at each other with narrowed eyes.

I knew a challenge when I saw one. She didn't think that I could do it. It had to be inevitable. There must be a point where I could catch her off guard or her disbelief would have to be suspended, even for a moment.

Wolf looked between us. "Is this some kind of mating ritual?"

"No!" we both said in unison.

Rubbing the eyes with the back of her forearm, the elf gave me a renewed glare. "You didn't care to loot much, you want your share now?"

"Keep the gold for now, but did you find any gear I could use?" We hadn't had a needed money so far in the world, aside from the pittance for the room at the tavern. I'm sure she wouldn't withhold funds if there was anything important we needed when it came to it.

"You don't have anything on bracers, right? I have some with one Int. Also... about three belts you could use?"

"Pretty sure I can only wear one at a time." I grinned as she rolled her eyes. "What stats?"

"I'll just give you them all, and you can sort it." She took each out one at a time into her hand, and I was intrigued at how long it took compared to if I had done the same action.

[Lucky Belt] [+2 Luck]
[Cat's Belt] [+1 Agi, +1 Dex]
[Choice Belt] [+1 Luck, +1 Int]
[Smooth Bracers] [+1 Int]

I wrinkled up my face in having to choose. My current belt gave +5% mana, which was potentially useful, although without the numbers behind it I couldn't say for sure. Still, Intelligence increased the damage of my cards, and I could certainly use more Luck so that I would stop cracking my head open on things... so I went with the [Choice Belt]. Most of the rest of the loot must have been mundane or not the right stats for me. I trusted her judgement.

The two belts I didn't care to equip, I held up in one hand. In the other, I took my hat down and inserted them. Turned my hat upside down and gave the top a tap—and a thick rope slid out of it onto the grass.

"Looks familiar," Wolf said, although a Dazzle icon did appear above him.

Ren sighed. "Let's just go kill some bandits and level up?"

I nodded and gestured for her to lead the way. Hat back on and rope already scooped away. We should be able to get away with killing the patrols and maybe a couple of other small groups. Then level six, and we'd make our way to completing the Monster Hunt Quest. Probably get into trouble along the way, no doubt. It was quite the distance, and I doubted the way ahead would be devoid of anything other than our objectives.

"I still feel bad about putting us in danger. I may have been a bit too wrapped up in..."

"Showing off while your brain leaked out of your ears? Two brain injuries in one day isn't healthy, trickster."

I rubbed the side of my head, which felt perfectly intact and normal. "Two?"

"The guy with the big axe. You must have been pretty out of it." She tilted her head. "My heal must have allowed you to recover before some sense was knocked into you."

“Shame.” I furrowed my brow. The injury must have been worse than I remembered. There was the shock and numb feeling, but adrenaline pasted over the gaps of what had been done to me. Nothing I hadn’t survived, though.

I turned to our bear companion as we rounded the hill and the bandit camp came into view. “How was your first day as an adventurer, Wolf?”

“I ate more than I should have and made two friends that will drag me into more senseless murder for the pursuit of something beyond my understanding.”

“So... good then?” I grimaced and raised my eyebrows.

“Our paths align, and I am content.”

That was good enough for me. He had already proven his worth and had done most of the heavy lifting in the fight last night. There was still some manner of weirdness at having a talking bear following us around that my brain was trying not to have to process. I may have died during my escape from the tree, and this was the waning memories of a mind struggling to accept defeat. That, and the more cordial openness with Ren, painted this day in an odd light.

“This Hadrian, then. Kill on sight?” I change tact to something a lot more sane. Murder.

“Yeah. Especially now.” Ren fired her entangling arrow off at the closest patrol group as they rounded their route.

My card was already out and close behind her attack so that I could take out the one with the crossbow. “Good.” Wolf thundered past us towards the enemy at an angle to not block our view. “Because he tried to kill us and is allied with our target. Not because he was a jerk toward you.”

“Of course.”

After having survived through half the bandit camp the previous evening, taking out the smaller packs was a breeze in comparison. No need for theatrics, or pushing myself too far with Mana Manipulation. It was almost relaxing, if you could ignore the whole violence of it. I let Roger have a rest, and only used the occasional Imp to soften up the packs before Wolf tore them to shreds.

I tilted my head to the elf as she let off another shot. “You don’t run out of arrows, correct?”

She nodded, but didn’t take her gaze away from the battle. “Replenishing Quiver, the arrows vanish after a while, though. So no long-term shenanigans.”

Some short terms one's might be possible though... although I didn’t care much for having to wear a long quiver on my back just for the occasional trick. Maybe there was a crossbow equivalent that could fit on my belt, the smaller bolts might-

“That’s it, trickster. Quest complete, revel in your level up.”

That went much quicker than I had anticipated. Perhaps not having my skull splitting in half slowly made things seem more mundane. I moved away from my pondering and looked up to see the bear returning over to us, his fur matted with blood. Ren stared off into the horizon as she worked with her System messages.

[Quest Complete: 30/30 Bandits Killed]

As soon as I had accepted it, my STAR illuminated gold. With the weight of anticipating what new skills the System could labor me with, I brought up the information to become level six, slowly nodding to myself as I read the descriptions.