

This page of my journal is just a crudely drawn picture of a horse with a cross through it, a little angry face with a top hat on the side. That might be me.

I took a gasp of cold air, pain and waves of numbness pulsing through my body. Immediately, I was enveloped in warmth. My ears still rang, but context clues told me this was Ren.

[Health Status]
[Skull - Fractured (Medium) (Healed: 40%)]
[Major Trauma]
[Exhaustion (3)]
[Nerve Damage (Temporary)]

Vertigo hit me, and I leaned into the elf. "Sorry," I slurred, wanting to fully apologize for being forward, but unable to hit more than one word at a time. She righted me and rested me against the warm fur of Wolf.

Whenever my heart was empty, the System found a way to fill it. If my soul reached its breaking point, the System would mend it. When I became nothing more than a bloodied bag of internal parts, the System became the world's best puzzle-completer. There was an underlying suspicion that some Players were meant to be heroes, that the strongest and most capable were favored by the System to carry out a cleansing of those who were weak enough to corrupt the status quo. That or I was just lucky.

My eyes found their purpose, and it looked to be nighttime already. Ren's face was illuminated by the glow of a fire to the side. She looked stressed, worried, and like she had been crying.

Wolf's face circled around beside her, his eyes drab but sparkled with something in seeing me active.

"Max?" the elf asked. "Can you hear me?"

"Loud... and clear," I managed, attempting a nod but almost collapsing back onto her. "Sorry again."

"Just ask if you want to be held, dickbag."

"Please." I sighed and felt my own eyes blur up. No use putting on an act anymore. I didn't think my brain was capable of such ego. She put her arms around me and held me against her chest. I'd never really listened to someone's heartbeat before. Not this closely. It was remarkably humbling and was kind of giving me a headache, too.

"I ate that horse for you, Max," Wolf offered, already providing his furred flank as a comforting recliner seat for my numb body.

"Fuck horses," I murmured. The elf shook slightly, a relieved laugh inaudible but soul crushing in its own way. That they had cared so much for me. Talking horse, though, who'd have guessed that? I probably had my own Dazzle icon between the brain damage and near death.

“You had us so worried.” Ren sniffed and ran her fingers through the back of my hair. “My heals wouldn’t fix you. We couldn’t get you to drink a potion.”

“I tried licking your face,” Wolf added.

“That might have been what did it.” I smiled, feeling content despite the agony starting to flare back down my nerves. “Ah. Try healing me now.”

Ren did, and this time it did work to a degree. I sat back against the bear, relinquishing the generous hug now that I had a bit more of my normal sensibilities. I groaned and sank back into the warm fur.

“Coffee?” she asked.

“You are a literal angel,” I murmured, trying not to let sleep take me away. She stood and her shadow crossed my vision as she went nearer the fire to set up the kettle. “Tell me what happened your end.”

“We ran for a bit, and saw two were chasing, so we laid a trap and killed them.” Wolf’s deep tone vibrated through his body as I listened.

Ren continued. “Did you know Wolf is excellent at climbing trees? It was simply a matter of getting him up one, then when we drew them under it I fired an Earth arrow to distract them with disturbed dirt.”

“Then I dropped down. Squish.” Wolf shook as he chuckled.

That warmed my heart. “I would have liked to have seen that.”

“What did you get up to on the main stage?”

I opened my eyes against their will to a narrowed glare at the elf. Despite the number of emotions that had been wracking her face, her eyes were smiling.

“Pretty simple, actually.” I sighed and looked up at the night sky. How beautiful and perplexing the stars were. “Bunch of bullshit they fell for.”

“Details please, Max,” the bear requested. Of course, they had more of a vested interest now. They were learning.

“Said I’d join them. A little social engineering to play their ego up, and make myself seem worth it. Switched the blood vials. Empty one to look like I had drunk the blood. Treant water one for Hadrian. My Imp struck the wizard in the confusion. The card was hidden behind Wolf as you ran and the spell holding me was dropped. Quickly dropped a dove to block the ranger’s bolt. Sent off Roger’s card and conjured a chair to block a spell. Roger took the wizard. I disarmed the ranger and had a hound chase her down. Then the horse kicked me.”

There was silence for a few moments after. Perhaps it was all too much bullshit to sound believable. It could be that getting mashed in by a horse was a pretty miserable way to go

after all that effort. They had a trick up their sleeve the whole time and I hadn't seen it. It would be more humbling if it wasn't so amusing.

"Wow," Ren eventually said. "I suppose that explains that, then."

I looked to see where she was gesturing, to find that there was a treant bound and gagged at the outskirts of our little camp. Some fury in his eyes. So now we knew what drinking that water did.

"Can he talk?" I asked.

"No, not really." She shook her head and glared at him. "We kept him alive just in case there was a way he could... bring you back."

"Hate to disappoint there, Ren." I smiled. "I survived that through bullshit, too."

The kettle whistled, and I almost sat up straight as a pavlovian response. If only my spine was capable of it.

"Explain," she demanded, holding the preparation of the live-saving liquid hostage.

"My soul merge... it wasn't properly completed before, and I suppose clicking it in place reset my life a little." She seemed reluctantly content enough with this response. "But it was your Oathwarden ability that kept me alive, so the most thanks goes to you."

She feigned a brief curtsy, before pouring herself a coffee too. She came over and handed me a mug, ensuring that I was able to hold it, before sitting close to me. "It's my job to keep your dumb ass alive. I should've been there."

"You're here now." I smiled at her. "Although I have something to admit. I've been holding out on you."

She narrowed her eyes at me, having to lean slightly away to not be right in my face.

I raised up my free hand, two Sweet Cakes in my palm.

"There are a lot of curse words I could call you, Max. But instead, I will graciously accept your gift."

"Kept them for our darkest hour. At least you could have looted them from my body had I died. You'd have *two* then."

She glared at me, mouth already half full of the cake. "I'd punch you if you weren't holding scaling liquid."

If only our enemies were so considerate. But then they wouldn't really be enemies, I supposed. We sat in silence as we drank coffee and ate the cakes. Took me a little longer, but I savored it more than usual. Pain decreasing, but I felt spent. Too many head injuries in such a short period. And now a really mixed Max?

"You thought you lost me, huh?" I stared at the fire as it waved and crackled at the wood.

“Yeah.”

I wished I could say something romantic or cliché about how my last thoughts were of her, or even of the Party. But they weren't. I had considered the show and how I had performed. A broken man chasing something adjacent to what mattered but not hitting anything that really built to something greater.

“Max?” The remnants of my coffee sloshed about as she leaned against me, head against my shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“We won't part ways after killing the dumb vampire lady, right?”

“No. I'm here as long as you want me.” I placed my mug away and withdrew a blanket to pull around us both.

“Good.”

Too traumatized and exhausted to feel awkward about the situation. I accepted it for what it was. The truth was, I hadn't thought too hard about what came after defeating the Lady in Red. This didn't seem like the sort of world where we could just buy a cottage and settle down into a normal life. Always power to gain, some danger ahead of us to fight. If she wanted to invite tragedy by us growing closer, then that just meant we just needed to get stronger.

She turned over, away from me to get more comfortable. Wolf was already asleep, snoring every so often.

My tired eyes stared at the treant Hadrian. Cold malice sinking through me, even against the warmth of care around me. I pictured myself standing without waking the others. Dragging the bastard deeper into the woods, hands clenched around his thicker branches above the impassive face. Throw him against a tree in the pale light of the moon. Withdraw the hammer and nails from my Inventory.

Hmm. Best stop there, lest I get too excited. My brush with death and physical trauma had left me a little unhinged - a dim view of those who opposed me. Certainly it wasn't the part of me who was... now me.

I dug about in the fresh earth of the memories once buried. The other me used to hunt demons in hell on his world. That joined a few dots together. He was also a magician and had a pact demon who was a white rabbit. It had been so easy for the System to mash the two things together. I had even read books on demonology and the occult during my life, some of the edges were easy to smudge together.

What did that really mean for me now? Any tangible benefits to the proper merging of my who being? The System hadn't sprung up to tell me I had any new abilities or powers. I had used a portal to escape from certain death against pigmen demons, wounded - which explained the healing done by the System at the start. Maybe the immediate head injury was

what caused the merge to be offset. I chased far too many errant thoughts deep into the darkness of night.

“Max?”

I opened my eyes. Daylight that burned at my retinas. I groaned as I looked up at the elf. “One day, I’ll wake up without you prodding at me.”

She rolled her eyes. “I doubt it. You’d sleep all day if allowed.”

“He did lose half of his brains,” Wolf came to my defense, turning his head. He looked like he had been awake a while, but had stayed put to aid my rest.

I held up my arm. “In my defense...” My brow furrowed, and I lowered my arm back down.

Ren tilted her head and sighed. “Come on, Max. I can’t be soft all day and night. What’s your health status?”

[Health Status]
[Medium Trauma]

Medium trauma. Reminded me of the time that Reggie thought we needed a psychic as our opener. My skull seemed to be in one piece, even if bruised and sore still.

“It says I’ve contracted horse-ism. I have three days before I turn into a centaur.”

Wolf gasped. Ren worked her jaw, not wanting to budge an inch until I gave her a proper answer.

“Minor trauma,” I shrugged. “What’s new?” I clenched my hands into fists. “Actually... no. It’s Medium.”

“Fuck, Max. Thank you for being honest.”

I could have lied and even wanted to. Be *fine*. Pretend to be *fine*. We were slowly peeling off the layers around each of our damaged cores; the sunlight burned away and cleansed. I smiled at her as I grunted and stretched up to my feet, only wavering slightly as I was lightheaded.

“If I pretended and got myself into trouble, you’d break me in half.”

“It’s not that.” She frowned and shook the tongs at me as her grill started to cook some meat. “You just need to make a choice about how close you want this partnership to go. Lies will cool my drive, make us less effective.”

I nodded. Understandable. She would give it her all if I gave it mine. Got to learn how each other fought so we could enact plans without needing to speak. It made sense for survival. Reading into it any further was not something for a day where a growing headache threatened to pulse my mashed brains out of my ears.

The kettle was already boiling, the question not needing to be asked. Wolf stretched out and yawned, licking his muzzle in anticipation of the cooked meats.

I turned my gaze over to the bound treant.

“Make sure to keep the embers of the campfire going,” I said with a grin.