

*Rest and recovery were always worth the time spent. There was the temptation to go full speed constantly, but that just led to stretching yourself too thin. In this world there were dozens of things waiting in the wings for that to happen, just to snap you or pierce you through. On the flip side, you didn't want to get used to the easy times, lest you found yourself a pincushion for the hard times eager for a share in your existence.*

We ate the amazing stew. Several helpings, in fact. Just sat and enjoyed the moderate weather, and the time not being under constant threat. I dozed off a few times, always waking to see that Ren was nearby. It comforted me as much as I felt guilty about my current predicament. Was I holding us back? Could I look after her as well if something similar happened to her? I hated to think she may get as injured as me.

"I'm never going to live down almost dying to a horse, am I?" I groaned and sunk into my chair further. Added stealing a more comfortable seat to my to-do list.

"Probably not. But you also almost died from falling out of a tree, so..."

"Touche." It seemed as though I could overcome any odd danger aside from things that would be an anticlimactic way for me to die. No doubt after besting the rest of the Shadows, I would slip off the bridge and drown myself after hitting a rock in the river. That said, I did come into this world with a head injury.

I rubbed my fingertips on the wooden chair arms, feeling the texture. "Where are we?"

There was brief concern on her face, as if my traumatic brain injury may have knocked something loose. "We went north from their camp. Wolf carried you in a sling I had fashioned until we felt we were far enough away."

"Perfect. We can hit a couple Quests on the way back to town. Level up and then make plans for our assault." Things were really coming together now. Knowledge was indeed power.

"How is your recovery?" Her words a damp blanket on my ablaze ambition.

[Health Status]  
[Minor Trauma]

"Down to minor now. That stew is powerful stuff." I gave her a grin, and she rolled her eyes.

Wolf returned to our camp having been out 'patrolling'. He had seemed content enough to sleep and laze most of the day away, quiet and content.

"There's some System-created to the north east." He yawned, now in close proximity to our fire again. "And to the north west there's a house that smells bad."

"How bad?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Like bad magic."

Ren removed her hat to place on her lap and scratched at her hair that was tied up. "Sound like it could be the witch for that Quest?"

I didn't even have my hat on, and hadn't for a while. No wonder my brain felt so exposed - it was definitely that and not the broken skull. "Could be. Was it made of wood?"

"We should probably double check first before we go immolating random buildings, trickster." She tapped at the rim of the wide brim. "If we are careless, then we'll end up falling to the bad side."

She had a point, even if I was reluctant to agree. As much as I trusted Wolf's nose to determine danger, it could easily be something unknown. Still, a fire arrow to the building followed up by an entangling arrow through the window seemed like a decent way to approach a witch. Of course, I didn't really know much about them to say.

Or did I? Some of the books I had read as a child mentioned them. Often just female spellcasters when wizardry was seen as a more masculine title. Some were like hags - demented and cruel, whereas others were closer to druids - potions and nature. If the town board wanted the witch offed, then she was probably closer to the former and quite likely not to be so easily taken down with a little fire.

"Are you embarrassed about the horse thing?"

"Huh?" Her question took me out of the pondering. "Ah. Not really. It's okay to fail sometimes," I grinned. "There were a handful of moments I could have died were things not to work out. Can't plan for everything."

Ren smiled.

It briefly alarmed me, and my heart skipped a bit - probably just due to shock.

"You must have really hurt your head, trickster." Her face softened to a normal neutral expression as her eyes focused on her STAR menus. "There is something I needed your help with, speaking of planning."

We spent the rest of the late afternoon and early evening going over skills, Inventory uses, and Equipment. It was nice to have time to sit and mull over problems rather than be constantly traveling between battles. She was earnest in her attempts to learn, and I tried not to gush out at having someone to share all the details of my tricks and illusions.

Her brow furrowed as she looked at the pack of cards in her hands, the light of the fire illuminating one side of her as the light of day faded away. Working her jaw, she withdrew the top card and held it up. Three of Clubs. "Is this your card?"

I shook my head and smiled. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Ah." She wrinkled her face up. "I think that's because you already have it."

"Oh?"

She looked toward my chest, and my eyes fell to my jacket pocket. I reached a hand in there and felt the shape of a card. Out of the pocket and into the light. Nine of Diamonds. "That *is* my card," I grinned. "Very impressive."

"I learned from the best." She stuck her tongue out and returned the deck.

"You'll have to introduce me to them," I murmured, eyes focused on shuffling through the deck. One of the cards had a slight defect, as expected. No Dazzle icon for me, as I turned it over to reveal it was also a Nine of Diamonds. "Placed the card in my jacket earlier and forced my hand into picking the same one from the deck."

"Makes it less impressive when you explain it," she pouted and leaned back in her chair.

"No, no." I smiled and waved the card at her. "This is very solid. I am impressed."

She raised an eyebrow. "Impressed, but not fooled?"

"Magic is my life's work, and you are never fooled by what I do. We are both too perceptive for such tricks."

Ren shrugged, but took the compliment without wanting to argue about it. "What about you, Wolf?"

"I am easily fooled. Everything Max does blows my mind." The bear rested his chin on his crossed paws as he watched us.

"What about the trick I just did on Max?"

"I saw you place the card when he was asleep, so I understood the deception."

Ren screwed her face up in defeat. I wasn't sure if it was my injury, but she was a bit more relaxed in showing her emotions. Somewhere between the scowls, unrelenting showmanship, and bloody murder, we had become somewhat inseparable. Me almost dying had prompted the part of her scared of losing everything again into perhaps cherishing the time we did have before something really bad happened to one or both of us.

And what of me? I had accepted that it was okay to be a little broken. To have a day off and not be so focused on perfecting my tricks. Failure and being miserable. Took a split skull to finally release the built pressure, but I felt... calmer than I had in years. Happier even despite the hardship. My eyes settled on the grumpy elf. It was hard not to be totally enamored with her. If anything, wanting to carve out a space in this world where she could be happy and safe was worth a dozen kicks to the head.

"What are you thinking about, Max?" Her head was tilted as my eyes had glazed over in thought.

"Nothing," I smiled. "You have any magic wands?"

"I think a couple?" She sat back up and started looking through her Inventory.

I avoided certain thoughts by getting back to work. Ironic given my inner monologue just now, but I didn't have the heart to address certain things yet, even as it swelled. "Wolf could you grab me some... chunks of the treant, please?"

"Okay." He yawned as he stood up and left for the pile of Hadrian-parts.

My eyes spun through my Inventory, as I started planning my next attempted bullshit manoeuvre. The System would end up regretting my existence, I was sure of it.

I spent some time cutting, carving, and attempting to sew parts together out of whatever junk I had managed to accumulate over the adventure so far. It wasn't exactly perfect, and probably wouldn't last more than a few days - but for a prototype it'd do.

"Here, hold your arm out." I gestured for her to show me her right arm, which she did. I frowned in thought. Outside arm would probably be best so that it didn't get in the way of drawing arrows. With a shrug, I placed my contraption on her forearm and began to tie it around her. An awkward, weighty silence sat in the background of the act as she watched me patiently.

"Only slightly less charming than the flowers you gave me," she eventually said, as I finished tying the last knot.

"Don't," I sighed, and sank into my chair. "Another thing I'll never live down."

"You will..." she looked up from the roughly created apparel to me, gathering her composure. "So, what's this thing you've burdened me with?"

"Probably something over-engineered that doesn't work. But you can slot wands into it, and depending on how strict the System is, you should be able to focus and use them from this arm mounted thing."

Her furrowed brow returned, and she gave it a look over. "So if it works, it'll give me some pseudo magical powers, essentially?"

"Essentially," I said as I nodded. "Either that, or I just spent my evening making an ugly bracelet for you that does nothing."

"If it's the latter, then it doesn't need to do anything. I'll keep it as something you spent time and effort making." Her eyes moved from it to me. "Nice and safe in my Inventory where it can't be seen, though."

I waved her off. "Yeah, yeah. Give it a try already." If it didn't work, then I had other ideas, but if it did - then it opened up a whole can of worms for me to dig into. "It should fit Spell Scrolls in too, barely."

"Don't want to waste those on a test though." Her eyes were unfocused as she was looking through her items. "Here's a plain Jolt Wand. Does hardly any damage, but ten charges that replenish every day."

My head nodded slowly, trying not to think of what I could do with that. Ren withdrew it and slowly inserted it in the grooves on the gauntlet. She flexed her fingers back and forth a few times and then leveled her fist towards the fire.

Wolf and I widened our eyes in expectation. Nothing happened, and I began to deflate. Worth a try, but back to the-

A zap of yellow light arced from the wand and out into the fire, briefly causing it to flare up brighter before it simmered down.

"It's not super intuitive," Ren said, focusing on the gauntlet. "But..." She fired a second and then a third soon after, her face a scowl occasionally illuminated by the Jolts fired. She nodded slowly after the third shot dissipated and turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "Not bad, trickster."

"I would bow, but my head might pop open." Instead, I smiled and closed my eyes, looking up at the night sky. The amber light of the fire illuminating the darkness. "Stick around, because the show is just getting started."

"I intend to," she said quietly.

Which I couldn't reply to, as I fell asleep once again.

Or was just about to, anyway, and could pretend that I didn't hear it.