

I kept reminding myself every so often that I wasn't a gambler. Or rather, I tried to convince myself that was true. While I liked my tricks to have a certain amount of sureness to them, it seemed that time and time again I would put my life on the line and see how highly fate regarded my continued existence. Perhaps I was just writing these memoirs as a ghost. The fading thoughts of a man lost to the endless sea. Sure felt that way more often than I cared to acknowledge.

Hadrian pulled back on the reins to make his horse stop before me. Gestured for two of his lackeys to pursue my Party. "Trail 'em but don't engage until my signal. They're tougher than they look."

His scowl then turned back to me as he dismounted his steed and strode over to me. He was a large man, a good half a foot over me and muscled like some kind of superhero. A wild mania in his eyes though - he looked unstable. Perhaps that was rich coming from me, currently.

The two companions remaining were an odd pair. A wizard in deep red robes, his face shadowed by a tall peaked hood. A grey beard spilled out from the darkness, and his clothing was painted with eye-shapes all over. The ranger was a female dwarf, heavy crossbow in her thick arms. Short mohawk of bright orange hair, and a smudge of dark war paint across her bright eyes beneath the traditional hand-print.

"Got some huge fuckin' balls on you, eh?" Hadrian moved up to my face, rubbing at his stubbled chin. "Thinkin' acting up the hero will save yer little Party?"

"I was thinking of switching sides anyway." I stared at him impassively. "You seem like you could use the help."

He glared at me, then looked around the camp. "Aye." He slowly nodded. "You're a competent asshole, at least. You the one that killed the scouting party too?"

"Dickbag with the dark metal sword?" I raised an eyebrow.

Hadrian grunted in response and began to slowly walk around me. The dwarven woman went to tie his horse up somewhere, while the wizard stood focusing on the chains holding me in place. How inconvenient.

"Lady is always on the lookout for promising recruits," the man began from beside me. "You should see the new fucker she left in charge of this area. Was meant to be me."

A clear sore spot, but he seemed willing to give up this information. One step more on the ladder for us to climb to get across and find the Lady in Red.

"However..." he continued, moving behind me. "She doesn't like little shits like you and the frigid elf prancing about and killing off parts of the gang."

I had hardly pranced. "You'd rather have a gang of weak fighters, then?"

He stopped behind. Perhaps deciding whether lopping my head off would stop my smart mouth or not. It would - unfortunately. I knew my time here was limited, but there wasn't a way to seal the deal against all three of them. Improvisation, the internal me paled.

"You make a point, smart arse. But do you know what gives us our power, our unity?"

"Blood. From the Lady herself." I heard him exhale behind me. The ranger returned to the position in front of me with her crossbow readied.

Hadrian moved his mouth close behind my ear, the warmth and smell of his body washing over me. "Done me a little favour, in a way. Less competition means more blood for me."

He made it sound like vampirism. They needed the blood to maintain their strength and whatever bond they had with the Lady. I wondered what withdrawal did to them.

"How about a toast then? I looted a couple if you wanted to celebrate your new member joining?" I licked around my teeth. Felt like my brain was overheating. Using up all my bluffs and about to fall down a painful path.

Slowly he continued around me, to the front. I could see the hunger in his eyes. The mania and desire for the sweet juice.

"Show me." He narrowed his eyes.

I made the show of reaching for my side pouch, drawing two of the potions from my Inventory. They knew some things about me, but I was unsure as to what degree they knew I could manipulate my items. Extending my arm slowly, I offered them both to him.

He took them both and held them up in the air, gave them a little shake. Another grunt and he placed them back in my open palm. Halberd placed on his back, he turned to his two companions with his hands open in the air.

"Any objections to this man joining and we celebrate with our extra rations?" The only response was heads shaken in the negative. I assumed they just wanted the extra blood rather than to welcome me with open arms.

Hadrian turned back to me and snatched back up a vial. "To the Lady, then."

"To the Lady," I confirmed, popping the cork and lifting it to my lips.

He stared me down as he did the same action to make sure I wasn't bluffing. His brow furrowed as he downed the contents, as I removed the empty bottle from my lips. Barely a trick at all, I probably could have done this with normal sleight of hand if given a bit more time.

The man took a step back from me, confusion on his face. He raised the remnants of his drink, the odd greenish hue of the water reflecting in his widening eyes. Anger flashed over his face as he turned back to me, right before a fireball flew past and struck the mage,

freeing me from his spell. My Imp had almost ran out of time, the card having followed with the bear as the pair escaped.

Hadrian looked panicked as one handed clutched at his throat, his eyes looking around wildly for his halberd that he thought was stowed behind him but now appeared invisible. Funny how that didn't count as 'equipped'. He started coughing as the ranger stepped forward and let a bolt off toward me.

The fresh dove rose from the floor to be immediately impaled from the shot, taking enough force out of the projectile for me to deflect it with the dark sword, which I drew into a flourish. As the wizard recovered he leveled a spell toward me, a ball of cold blue energy that blew apart the wooden chair I kicked toward them.

<Finale>

Lights crackled in the air behind me as I rose both hands into the air, sparklers streaming amber lights from around where I stood. They were stunned. I had pulled it off.

Roger came leaping from off-stage to brain the wizard with a rock, knocking the man to the floor. Purple card cut the cable of the crossbow and severed some fingers. Lighting arced from my body. Invincible. Immutable. Infamous.

As the dwarf recovered, she saw her inert weapon and didn't fancy her chances trying to withdraw a second out in the open. She dove to the floor and rolled as my follow-up scored a line against the ground.

Hadrian dropped to his knees, clutching at his throat. I could have ended him there. Didn't want to. He deserved to suffer, all of them did. Alarm bells rang inside my head. Locked doors inside my core buckled and cracked open. Get rid of the ranger and take my time with the man. Crossbow in hand the bolt blew up dirt by her feet, while my card cut grass passing her, before I drew it back into her side. She was fast. Hellhound card went out, he could chase her.

I turned back to the choking man, my eyes burning with energy. Perhaps I could get some questions-

"Nice try, motherfucker."

My head barely managed to turn in time, as I received the metal horseshoe of one outstretched leg straight to my dome.

There wasn't many other thoughts after that. Muffled sounds, odd sensations, and barely any vision. Finally my time to shuffle from this strange world into whatever was beyond. Even if nothingness was the answer... it had been a reasonable last show. I could even vaguely hear the crowd calling my name. Or at least, someone was.

A large sharp, warm fur, went across my dim vision. Some sounds of violence. Two orbs of purple went down before my face before being pushed away. Warmth and my head was lifted slightly. Warmth again, and softness. Some of my senses started to filter back.

“...it’s not working...Max...”

Preaching to the choir. Many things were not working for me now. Grey slacks. I closed my eyes as my brain was about to combust. Couldn’t have that.

As if hearing my inner monologue, it started to rain. Although, it was only a handful of drops, located on my face. Warm drops.

“Fuckfuckfuck!”

“Is he going to...?”

“Boss?”

I wanted to assure the shadows I wasn’t dead, but my mouth wouldn’t work. Perhaps it would be better if I just slept for a while instead.

Darkness.

And then, there I was. Standing in a pitch dark room, ankle deep in water illuminated with a shimmering purple light. Not the worst play to go after death, I supposed. Only, I wasn’t alone.

Across from me, was me. Another Max with his hands in his pockets and a grim smile.

“Looks like you got us into a little pickle, Max.” He pouted and sighed.

“Did I die? Did we die?” My mouth felt sore even in this space.

“It’s touch and go. Apparently you have a habit of dropping our brains out all over the place.” The other Max rolled his eyes. “Only Ren’s Oathwarden ability is keeping us from becoming worm food right now.”

“So why am I here, with you?” I looked around in hopes of seeing some manner of clue or landmark. Other than having wet feet I was none the wiser.

“Here’s the thing Max,” he began to slowly walk toward me. “The System said it merged our souls, but we both had such force of personality that was incomplete.” He gestured to show himself off, a clear separation of two people.

“Who were you before this?”

The other me smiled. “Short answer is a warlock, demonology focus. Long answer has your brain leaking out as we talk backstory.”

“Fine. What’s your suggestion.” My patience was wearing as thin as my skull. He had cards up his sleeve and for once I hadn’t caught the thread of the explanation.

“We merge fully. I don’t know enough for sure, but it might jumpstart the System into thinking you’re alive again.”

“Aw, shame. And we’ve only just met.” Not that I wanted to have a series of talks with myself, but the System could have really done something with this and dragged it out further.

“You’ll still be you, but you’ll also be me. And I’ll be you, and blah blah. You were the stronger soul for some reason, so you’ll inherit all my memories and life experience. Or it’s the other way around but there’s no way of really knowing.”

“We’ll be Max.”

He nodded, and walked up to me, hand extended to be shook.

One of the books that my grandparents had in their collection had a section on demons. It had said they often left it to the last possible moment, when you were most desperate, to offer you a deal. Something you couldn’t refuse. This could be a demon masquerading as my other soul, but at this stage it made no differences. I had to let him in to survive, no matter what the long term cost.

My own hand extended, and I took his.

We shook, and it was done.

[Soul Merge Attempt...]

[Pending... Pending...]

[Partial Merge Detected. Correcting.]

[Complete