

*With one foot usually halfway in the grave, mud and the grime of adventuring was like a friend. Not one you particularly cared for, or spent much time around if you could help it... but, okay, more of an acquaintance then. Mental note to go back through these introspective musings at a later date and remove the terrible parts. If this text still remains, then either I died before I had the chance, or perhaps I finally learned to love all the minor imperfections in life and accept them for what they were. The former being more likely.*

The couch in the otherwise relatively plain house was reasonably comfortable. At least, compared to the hole in the ground and the weapons of the bandits. Other than the inert fireplace across from me, the table and chairs in the corner, and two doorways leading to other rooms, there wasn't a lot going on in here.

Ren stood at the bottom of the stairs, her arms folded. "I'm going first. I trust you can stay alive for ten minutes by yourself?"

"I'll set a timer," I smiled, before recoiling from her glare. "Oh, want to see a magic trick first?" Although her glare didn't fade, her presence told me that she was at least humoring the idea.

I withdrew a gold coin from my Inventory and held it in my right hand. The brief thoughts of how they ran an economy based solely on them threatened my suspended beliefs, but I harried them away. It was cool to the touch, and just the right size to make it comparable to what I was used to.

Not quite myself, I didn't stand to perform the brief illusion, instead reveling in the comfort of the cushioned seat. I held it up to show her. Placed it between my knuckles and flipped it over and over to the next - before, with a quick flick of my wrist, I revealed my empty palm to her. Something simple to get the ball rolling, enrapture my potential first fan.

"You could have just put it in your Inventory. I'm going to have my bath." She turned and walked up the wooden steps.

I frowned as the coin dropped from the back of my hand, and I held it to feel the texture. Her footsteps could be heard moving above me, followed by the sound of running water. With a sigh, I put the coin back away.

A purple card appeared over my hand and I idly spun it as it hovered a few inches from the air. Perhaps a good time to review my new skills.

The summon one gave all my summons 10% additional health and damage - which, I supposed, was *okay*. It was an upgrade, at least. It was flat. Guaranteed. The sort of thing that contented me. Would have been nice if it increased my damage as well.

Mana Extension gave me a higher capacity for mana storage. This one would be a massive boon, as I seemed to starve myself bloody of the stuff given half the chance. Hopefully, it meant more card tricks without being such a drain.

The Demonic Pact, however, was something else. I had already read it once, and closed it away from my vision - thinking I maybe had read it incorrectly. On second glance, I had not. Why I had considered that my demonic abilities would be limited to bringing about cute little temporary followers, I didn't know.

I could place the Pact on a corpse - and there were plenty of stipulation on what that encapsulated - and my demonic patron would inhabit the body for a short duration. It sounded a bit like possession-based necromancy. What interested me most, past the appalling visuals of the skill, was that it seemed like it would be the same demon every time.

Brain totally overwhelmed, I breathed out my nose, shut down the blue boxes and began throwing my card out - and then brought it back to catch it. Just to see how close I could get to the wooden wall opposite. The running water had stopped, so Ren must be bathing now. An inch or two closer to the wall, and I caught it. A small sliver of blood ran across one of my fingers. I'd put that to rest for now.

Relenting to what the elf had said, I sighed and brought down my tattered top hat. Surprised it even made it this far intact and on my head. I put one hand inside of it and pulled out the Power Token - from my Inventory but for all intents and purpose it looked just as the magic trick would. It was... saddening that it was that simple, yet also small waves of ideas began lapping at my barren shores. While others two-finger tapped to mentally access their STAR, I could touch type and it felt more innate. Intriguing.

I held the odd stone up. It looked almost like a ruby, but more opaque, shaped in a smooth diamond shape, with a thick frame of gold around it. Even holding it in my hand, I could feel the residual... *magic* within it. How odd. I brought up the information screen.

[Power Token]

[Use (1) to Upgrade a Basic skill to Advanced]

[Use (10) to Upgrade an Advanced skill to Expert]

Hmm. I hadn't known that skills could be improved. All of mine seemed to be Basic level currently, and it just made me wonder how rare these were or how much it really improved the skills. Which even would I choose when I had so many?

I must have been pondering for longer than expected, as Ren started down the stairs. Her armor was pristine and undamaged, and she looked clean and radiant. Whatever sweat, grime, and vegetation she had accumulated as of late had been scoured away - I'd have even less of an issue imagining her as a princess in this state.

"All free for you." She returned to crossing her arms across her chest.

"Look what I found - a Power Token." I held it up between my fingers, mostly stalling, as I didn't want to leave the couch.

"You found a... can I have it?" She tilted her head.

I rolled my tongue across my teeth. Clearly, they had some rarity then. Still, it wouldn't go amiss to crawl further into her good books for now. "Sure." I flicked it across the room and she caught it.

She held it up to the light to observe it and walked over to the couch. She chucked it back in my lap. "Dickbag."

"What?" My mouth was unable to formulate a full sentence past that.

“We’ll have to beat that people-pleasing attitude out of you.” She sat down on the couch next to me. “You’ll get us killed otherwise.”

I popped the token back into my Inventory for now, still taken aback from the very accurate point blank skewer straight into my psyche. Plus, she called me a *dickbag*, which didn’t feel much like an elven princess thing to do. Based on my very limited knowledge of both of those things.

Before she could dig deeper into my inner workings, I decided now was a good time to get washed up - so I stood.

“Inventory, Other Options, Repair Cosmetics. You’ll want to do it in private usually, unless you are an exhibitionist.” She glared at me. “Which, I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“I’m a showman, but that doesn’t mean...” I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. She was riling me up on purpose. It was sometimes hard to discern the banter when she looked as though she wanted to bend both my elbows back the wrong way. Getting my suit fixed up sounded great, though. “Thanks, Ren.” I gave a brief bow out of habit and went for the stairs.

“Hey, Max...”

I turned my head to see her scowl had softened.

“Could you summon a Hellhound down here?”

“Of course,” I smiled and brought the card into the air. I kept it hovering in front of me for a second, my brow furrowed. Instead of summoning close to me, I focused on keeping the card empowered - and threw it down beside the couch.

I continued up the stairs as I mentally commanded the pup to keep the elf company. He wouldn’t last long, but perhaps if I kept the bathroom door cracked I could fling a card all the way down the stairs and... did that count as people pleasing? She would probably be content enough with the time she had. Were life itself that simple.

The bathroom was small, and the air was pleasantly warm from whatever residual steam had come from the Ren’s bath. The tub itself simple, a circle of wood with a tap at one end. With the door closed behind me, I twisted the tap on a hummed to myself. My showtune. I went through the menus to select the repair option, and my clothes vanished, aside from my underwear.

I took these off the old-fashioned way and sat in the filling tub. Already it was warm, the perfect temperature, in fact. The little progress bar in the air told me I had five minutes before my suit would be done - and I’d assume straight back on to my bathing form. As much as I would like to spend hours in the comforting water, I relented to washing myself.

Bruised in places, and some soft scars still healing - but no real damage despite what I had endured. Medical miracles, it would just be my mental capacity that would suffer under the constant turmoil of battle. Washed, and still with some time to kill, I went through my Inventory and opened up the Rare Chance Box.

[Robe of Caster][+2 INT +10% Mana Regeneration]

Straight on the little box where some basic clothing had been sitting. I wasn't really much for robes, but if I didn't need to show it, then I could live with wearing whatever beneath my suit. My brain needn't concern itself with how that worked.

With a sigh, I exited the warmth. Stood for a moment in the room just steaming from the damp heat. Ren had been right. We did have the time for this. It was only a sadness that it couldn't go on for longer. But I was now only a level behind her, and catching up would let us get her revenge and move on from the island. Was taking up her burden people-pleasing?

My clothes popped back into existence upon my body - thankfully, I was dry enough to not make it an uncomfortable experience. Pristine and perfect, just as Ren was. Her armor and outfit, I meant. To the small mirror at the side of the room, I gave myself the side-eye. Now that the bath was behind me, the drab future started to darken my spirit. Death and bloodshed - and apparently my demon patron possessing those that I slay. Briefly, I wondered if the old man was looking for permanent tenants.

I popped out a purple card as I walked toward the door, flipping and twirling it just above my hand. The more time I spent getting used to them, the more things I'd be able to do. It was like any normal deck of cards, in that regard. Learn the texture, the shape, and the way they slide and cut against each other. Muscle memory needed forming. It was different now with actual magical power involved, but some of the core components were the same.

Down the stairs I came into the main room, where Ren was looking rather forlorn, and staring at the floorboards.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I asked, flipping a gold coin into the air and having it vanish as it disappeared into my Inventory.

"I had a dog once." Her blunt reply edged with enough story to paint a clear enough picture.

"Anytime you want, just let me know." I looked out of the side window, the quiet woods shifting slightly in the breeze. I didn't want to see her glare at me for that offer, but even more so, I didn't want to see anything but a glare.

"Let's get going, trickster." Some of the usual venom was missing from her tone. "We have a bunch of goblins to slay."

I nodded, already halfway through my skill list, ready to pick which ability to upgrade. "Where to next, then?"