

*I never got tired of the taste of victory. Whether it was for gold and magical items, or just to sleep a little better the next day. When you saw how much this world could wear you down, you clung to the good times. Finishing a Dungeon was an accomplishment, even if it left you feeling as though you had been pushed through a grinder. Sometimes they weren't as rewarding as doing Quests, but they were contained. You could complete them without worrying about outside interference.*

Throughout the Dungeon, treants hadn't seemed to be too impressed with my magical tricks. I wasn't sure whether it was something to do with their culture, perhaps, or their minds just didn't work the same way. Maybe they could just see through it, like Ren could. Either way, I didn't fancy my chances with dazzling the large one now emerging from the surrounding pools. Which was a shame, as it always felt good to win over a critic.

Wolf slid across the stone, already snarling with a pulse of amber energy flowing over his fur. I dropped an Imp to the floor beside me and started spinning up a purple card. Ren let off a radiant arrow to strike into the Boss. The tree was slow, we shouldn't have trouble keeping at range from it—especially with the bear constantly on it.

The smite shot struck the Monster and the flare of light didn't seem to do much to dissuade him from continuing toward us, closer to dry land. In my peripheral - movement.

"Ren, look out!" I shouted, throwing my card towards her. She dove to the floor as a barbed root lunged for her. I twisted my magical attack and sliced it lengthwise, the appendage shuddering and shrinking away. It was long, reaching from the moat and across the circular platform to grab at her. Undoubtedly to try to drag her toward the foul waters.

The elf was already up into a crouch and leveling an arrow toward me. Well, past me - I hoped, at another vine. I turned as she let it loose, to see the thick vegetative tentacle raise up and be impaled by the shot. From my hand, a card went out to sever the tip and then returned like a boomerang.

Around the room were several more that weren't an immediate threat, but I seemed the best equipped to deal with them. They didn't seem to care for Wolf, but waved in the air as if to signal they were happy to become a problem for us at the back.

"Focus the Boss," I assured her. "I've got the vines."

From beside me, my Imp threw out his fireball, striking the treant elder in his dense canopy and igniting some of the leaves. The Monster seemed a lot less impressed with this show.

Wolf jumped away from the large fist of the Boss, swiping and biting into the outstretched arm. An upswing from the other arm knocked him back slightly as a radiant shield absorbed some of the impact.

While the bear kept the large tree occupied, Ren started filling it with more arrows. I spun a card out around the room, circling the perimeter to zoom in to the closest vine, severing it. I held the card in motion, a slight pain in my hand. Second vine sliced and then I had to let it go. Wiped the blood from my fingers.

The curse was doing more damage; I was certain of it. Could almost feel the exact power I was putting into the cards - even with the minimum amount of effort they were stronger and more durable than normal. I almost didn't want to split them as I could feel my mana draining incredibly quick. Even after throwing a handful out, my hands had bled from the exertion. Drips of crimson splattered against the gray stone beneath me. Currently uninjured, but that didn't stop me from risking doing worse to myself.

Ren hit the Boss with an entangling shot as Wolf backed away so that she could heal him. Although he was holding up well, he had a nasty gash that ran from his shoulder down to his head.

Another fireball illuminated the chamber as it burst on the treant, more flames coursing over their body.

A green light began to orbit around the tree Monster, before a pulse of energy rocked the platform we were standing on. The floor began to glow with pale green runes, and my eyes darted around to see where to escape to. Nowhere. The whole stone circle was awash with the light. Back to the bridge? It would take too long.

Vines burst up around each of us, in almost mimicry of Ren's skill. Except these were barbed. Sharp thorns dug into my right leg as I protected my left with a quickly withdrawn plank of wood. The others were pained, and my Imp faded away at the damage wrought to his small, round body.

Magic card flew out to shred the vines away from the plank so I could step away out of them. Wolf had burst from his, another glow of orange around his body. It looked like Ren had healed him, so that he was prepared to engage the Boss again. The elf seemed to be stuck amongst the vines, blood staining through her leggings.

My right eye twitched, and my heart lurched to see her in pain even if it was minimal. I let another card go, and threaded it between her calves, cutting through half of the vines so that she could use her sword on the rest. I carried the card on through to sever another creeping probe that was coming from the water on her side before letting it vanish. Imp card to the bridge behind us so that he had some high ground.

More vines were on my side as another radiant arrow slammed into the Boss in my peripheral. Fingers twitching, I dealt with the encroaching problems before they became anything more. I could almost feel the heat of the fireball as it went across the chamber, my Imp summons gunning hard for promotion with how well they were taking to this encounter. Effective damage.

The treant roared, plumes of water shooting up like jets around the circular area. With a loud hiss, the flames across his canopy were extinguished. His bark cracked and shed, revealing a darker ash-gray body, and his eyes swiveled to a red hue.

He looked angrier. Even less likely to be Dazzled, I sighed to myself. My wrists and hands ached already. Part of me wished for a chance to use all my tricks again instead of pure casting - although I shouldn't invite malady onto myself. Too late to take it back.

No corpses for Roger, which was a shame. As I watched Wolf gouge a chunk of wood from the tree, part of me felt guilty for not inviting him on this adventure. Maybe I felt guilty that I only drew him to this world to enact violence in my name. Or maybe the fact that he was a demonic entity who only craved violence made me uncomfortable. Or too comfortable, I hadn't decided which.

The treant began sucking in air, even as his new torso became peppered with arrows. He then leaned forward, pointing his half-burned branches towards us. His canopy changed hue slightly, as if the leaves were becoming thicker, or-

"Defend!" I yelled out, right before the burst happened.

As if mimicking a cannon blast, the Boss blew all the leaves out right after they hardened, like scores of throwing stars. A wide cone that covered most of the chamber.

<Card Fan> protected me from the initial blast, only a few sharp leaves making it through to shred at my suit. Ren stood, bloody lines across her skin fading away as one hand held an emptying Health Potion, her other hand held out toward Wolf - her healing spell keeping the point blank bear on his feet.

Even with that, long tracks of his fur had been scoured off, but was now regrowing back. Wolf had even leaped closer to the Boss immediately after the attack, and clattered through the thinner branches, snapping them as he bit into the main body of the treant. His claws tried to find purchase and dug through the eye sockets of the tree.

With some minor struggle, the Boss faltered and fell to the ground. The bear tore a large chunk from him and went to town on crushing and rending as much of the remaining body as he could.

I stretched out my bloody fingers. "Ah, well, that wasn't too bad for our first dungeon boss, right?" My Imp sat down and played with his little pitchfork, awaiting his time to go. I let him vanish with a wave and dismissal.

Ren was breathing heavily and didn't look too pleased, but she nodded her agreement.

"Next one needs to be made of meat," Wolf sat glumly and began licking at his paws.

[Dungeon Complete]  
[Reward Received]  
[360 Gold]  
[Manastone (2)]  
[Antidote (1)]  
[Cloak of the Forest]

Ren grumbled as she looked at the body of the fallen tree. "Two Tokens, after all that."

"Anything else?" I wrinkled up my face in hoping that was not the only spoils.

She clucked her tongue. "Agility hat, Strength boots, a staff with Wisdom and Luck, and then gold and the usual stuff."

"Pass, then." Who needed Wisdom, when I had a cool *trickster* dagger?

A little pain and suffering for some medium reward. I'd still count it as a win. I equipped the cloak, which hung over my left shoulder and covered that arm. Exceptionally useful for obscuring that hand when bringing things out of nothing, I was enamored immediately. It even gave a small amount of Dexterity.

[Cloak of the Forest] [+2 Dex]

The Antidote removed curses, and I watched as Ren and Wolf both drank one, the latter struggling a little until the elf helped. Slightly unsure why, I feigned curing it with an empty bottle as she turned back. Manastones appeared to be something to put in gear sockets, but I was yet to have anything of the sort. Still, I could swoosh the cape around and it added a certain flare that seemed to tire Ren's patience.

Just as I was finished flourishing it around, our gazes were drawn away as a portal opened up across the foot of the bridge back into the Dungeon. Similar in appearance from the one we had first entered by.

"And they just let us out like that. No need to backtrack?" I pulled a face and gestured toward it. Almost seemed too kind.

Ren sighed and stretched out her back. "Perhaps the System likes us after all."

Would be one of a few that did. I smiled to myself as I took in the scenery, now that it was calmer. The curse was annoying and felt like it was tugging at the edges of my patience, at the sensible me weary for a good sleep. But there was something beautiful about the place. Perhaps it was just wildly different from what I used to. The bright lights of the stage, ruddy tones of Hell, the plain brickwork of my dressing rooms, and bland hotel rooms. Hmm. Something wasn't right there, and my brain danced around the misunderstanding.

"Ready to go, trickster?"

Her voice took me out from probing further. "Sure. You ready, Wolf?" He nodded in response.

We gathered our wits and strength and made toward the portal.

"You know, I was thinking we should head to the town already - get some actual rest?"

Light shimmered as I stepped back out into the light rainfall and cool air of the day. I turned to walk backward as my eyesight adjusted, to continue talking as Ren walked through behind me.

"Yeah? You could do with a bath," she said, some softness around her eyes.

Then they immediately sharpened.

Warm pain flooded my back as I was struck by something, and I spun to face four figures of shadow before us. The lowering bow one of them held painted the picture clear as day that

my panicked muscles hadn't processed yet. Was my lung pierced? I held my breath and tried to focus.

Wolf burst out from between us, knocking me to the side before stumbling and dropping to the floor, unmoving. A spellcaster in the opposing group held a shape in his hands, some manner of enchantment or channeled spell. Not dead, but out for the count.

A clatter sounded on the stone behind me as Ren dropped her bow, and I turned my head to see a fifth member had grappled her from behind. The burly man with a short goatee held a knife up to her throat.

*"Well, well, well..."*

My glare turned back to the group as a figure stepped forward. Each of them wore dark clothing and had a red hand-print on their face. Crimson Shadow. My insides burned just at the sight of them. I was beyond exhausted now, the fire within me stoking something red-hot and eager for violence.

The ragged man, who looked like he had dropped his sanity down a well long ago and bathed himself in the suffering of others, continued toward us. Black hair and beard, slick with oil, and a wild look in cold eyes. A dangerous look, someone who killed even more freely than us. "Looks like Hadrian was right. You did survive the bandits."

"What do you want?" I seethed. My heartbeat thundered in my chest. It was both a general question as well as pointed one to his current plans. My left hand beneath my cloak was tensed as if I could squeeze the life out of him from here. He was some sort of fighter, and they had a ranger, two spellcasters, and the one with Ren was probably a thief type. Not great odds. I wasn't a gambling man...

"It's always difficult to decide whether to kill the guy or girl first." He tutted and withdrew a shortsword made from a dark obsidian metal. "I can see that look in your eyes, though. You'll fight harder if you think you've got a chance... and luckily for you, my sword is itching for a little combat."

We couldn't have foreseen this. Not without living in constant paranoia that the enemy was around any corner. I clenched my jaw.

Still, I felt foolish to have been caught off guard. It could have been over so easily, our corpses a testament to our complacency. Still could be the end. Normally, I wasn't an angry person. But currently I was furious, shaking with rage. Something inside of me burned and fought for an escape. My incensed eyes turned back towards Ren and the man restraining her.

*I trust you*, she mouthed.