

I wasn't a demon, at least not in the traditional sense. There was some manner of blurred lines where I certainly had demonic abilities, but I still had a tight grip on my humanity. No growing horns or wings bursting from my back. Not so far, anyway. For the purposes of these memoirs, imagine that I just touched wood. That might not even be a real thing in any world other than my old one. But neither were demons, or at least that's what I told myself.

Spellcasters were bad news. Three of them, as we were stuck in a near open space, were even worse. Still, I was fresh off a day of rest and eager to put on a good show. Other Max was a combatant, and where I had previously drawn my competency and cool head in regards to violence. Now fully formed, it felt even more natural. Born to perform, to live at any cost.

Cards went out, split. Purple one burst along a shield on the insect-witch, while the second flew off behind them. An energy flooded the cavern as Wolf activated an ability. There was a loud hiss, and some darkness filled the area as Ren hit the fire heating the cauldron up with a water arrow, extinguishing it. Pragmatic. I seemed to have made myself the primary target by rushing forward already.

The tall witch had begun casting something, and had to switch to the bear as he launched himself toward her. Blazing light flickered through the darkness as they clashed, but I had to focus ahead.

Behind the cauldron, the older witch had her arms raised, a pulsing orb of black energy starting to form and grow. An arrow impaled her thin arm, but other than growling out loud, the witch didn't even flinch. The card thrown earlier burst out a Hellhound from behind her, the flaming canine drawing some focus away from her spell preparation.

Third witch sent a spell at me. A curse. I suddenly felt very slow and sluggish, now unable to get any closer, as if I were dream-running. In anger, I sent a single imbued card out. The flare of her shield continued as I held it there, keeping it powered. She dropped her follow-up to focus on keeping her shield up, pouring her mana into it. I just poured more of my mana into my card in return.

It glowed bright purple at first, before starting to turn white. The smell of burning filled the air as our two magical energies fought against each other. I didn't even pay attention to anything else going on in the room. Card stayed energized. Card overpowers all. *Card wins.*

As electricity crackled along my arms, I held my right wrist with my left hand. Both soaked with blood. Pain throbbed through my head as the card shone brightly, constantly pushing against the shield. Mana exhaustion hit and the purple arcs around my arms turned crimson. The card breached the flickering shield slowly, slicing into it gently right before her spell failed.

The card was hard to control at such a sudden change of velocities. As soon as it sprung forward, I flicked it straight vertically into the ceiling and let it drop. Muddy earth dropped from the ceiling onto the witch's head as she stared at me impassively. Not very flashy, I'll admit - no wonder she wasn't impressed. Part of me wanted my strength tested to find out my limits. My attack had gone halfway through her before I shot it upwards, slicing through most of her insides and out of her head.

Tired eyes scoured the rest of the room. Probably shouldn't have worn myself down just in the first fight. Three on three was good odds for us, anyway. The crunch of bones from the growling bear was proof enough. Spellcaster weakness was melee. I looked at the older witch, who was promptly headshot with an arrow. More than one weakness, I supposed.

The Hellhound, happy with his contribution with the fight, padded around from behind the cauldron and went over to the elf, who bent over to give him pets.

"It's sweet of you to always have them come to me." She didn't look up at me, but continued to stroke the demonic dog.

"Oh? I don't. Not since the first one, really." I flexed out my fingers, wondering if I had a better way of cleaning my hands rather than marring my suit.

"Really?" She looked up at me now, a raised eyebrow as I looked back at her. "Max, did you know your eyes are glowing purple?"

"No?" I looked around to try to find a mirror or reflective enough surface. "Have they done that before?"

Wolf coughed up and sneezed. "Ugh, they do taste as bad as they smell."

"Only slightly, when you lose control that time outside the dungeon."

I caught her look as I stepped around to try to find something to look at. "I'm not possessed or anything," I raised my bloody hands, "I feel totally normal and calm." Perhaps not the most convincing show, but hopefully enough to not meet the sharp end of her evil-destroying ability.

She rolled her eyes and returned to ruffling the ears of the hound.

"I suggest we loot as find our way out as soon as possible. This place gives me the creeps worse than the Shadow camp." I narrowed my apparently purple eyes at the tables filled with all sorts of things that I could use - or at least clutter up my Inventory with.

"In my world, witches gain power from their cauldrons. It's like the focus for the coven, so that's why I put out the fire." She stood from the hound to approach one of the bodies.

"I figured it was something smart like that, thank you." The occult books that I had read weren't so instructive, and witches not actually real in my world - so her knowledge was appreciated.

She whistled. "Two Power Tokens, some Scrolls and Wands."

"Same here," I noted, "Some Int gear for me. What do you have on your boots at the moment?"

"Just Two Dexterity."

[Fleetboots of the Strider] [+3 DEX, +5% Move Speed]

“Here, have these then.” I grinned.

Wolf threw up part of the witch he had eaten. “Ack. That’s better. My body here also has things, but I keep closing the blue box every time I go to read things.”

“Did you try imagining a sausage?” I raised an eyebrow.

He shook his head and then furrowed his brow in concentration. Bizarrely cute, if not for the blood covering his face and bowler hat. After a moment, elation struck his face and he smile, tongue hanging out. “I got the two Tokens, but I’m not looking at the rest.”

“Good enough, bud. Nice effort.” I gave him a pat along his flank, mostly as an excuse to wipe my hands off.

[Headband of Woe] [Magic Damage increases by 5% per 5% Mana spent.]

I blinked slowly. Surely not? This seemed too much. Even the colour of the border...

“Everything okay, Max?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, as I stood and turned to face her. “Just found my first Legendary item, is all.”

She returned my gaze impassively. “Is it a bow?”

“No.”

“Will it stop your hands from bleeding?”

“Maybe the opposite.”

She sighed and threw her arms up in resignation. “I give up with you. If you’re done stealing everything, let’s find our way out?”

I watched her pace about, looking for a switch or magical device to flip us back up to the surface. There were certainly no obvious doors or stairs out of here. “Are you just disappointed we didn’t get to do any magic?”

She crossed her arms. “Am I becoming that easy to read?”

“Sometimes overpowering enemies the normal way is just safer. If you can put a threat down from a distance, then that’s less of a headache.” I smiled and leaned against a table. “That said, I am also disappointed.”

“Good, I’d hate to think we’d swapped prerogatives.”

Wolf sniffed and looked up at me. “I thought you said you weren’t-“

“That’s not what that means,” I interrupted, waving him away. “This cavern sure is stuffy, huh? Let’s find the switch.”

It took some awkward prodding around, and some interesting revelations that made it look like they might eat people, before we eventually found the spell artefact that swapped us back to the surface. Thanks to my apparent magical training, I was able to understand and activate it, otherwise we might have had to live down there forever.

“Fresh air!” Ren breathed deeply as we stood in the clearing once more, amongst the grass and beneath a clouded sky.

I grimaced towards the building. The witches were System-created, so might respawn at some point. Should we destroy the house? Was there even a point? Futility pressed down on my sore brain and I attempted to shrug it off. Quest was done. That’s all that mattered right now.

“Did you get any lightning-based spell scrolls?” I stretched my neck out as I gestured for us to leave the area.

“Yeah, one. Arc+.” She withdrew it and handed it over.

“Thank you. Keep any others, use them for devising tricks.”

She narrowed her eyes, but nodded. I practised putting it into my Inventory and then into my hand a few times before putting it away. Scrolls were something I should look into more. There was a slight delay to activating them that made it obvious I was doing so, but not everything had to be an act of deception.

Oh, how I’d changed.

Ren sent me across some Map information, which I brought up as we walked.

“Assassinate the target, do the Elk repeatable twice, and then head back to town to return Quests and level up?”

The route looked fine. We were still quite north and heading to the west. Bridge was far west straight from the town, along the road, so we weren’t in any danger there. “Sounds perfect. I know it said ‘dead or alive’ but I think the less time spent there means getting through the Elks quicker.”

“Agreed. If the timing is right, we might be able to get a night in at the tavern before heading to the bridge.”

One last night of some comfort before our imminent demise. Almost sounded too good to be true, and my brain was hesitant to even play out the actions in my head. I looked at Ren to find she had been gazing at me, her blue eyes piercing through my distracted skull. A shared room seemed like a given, and if I were honest with myself, then I-

“Oh!” Wolf pushed in between us, breaking whatever conversation was going unspoken. “I worked out how to use the Tokens!”

“Ay, great job. That’s super helpful, actually.” I raised an eyebrow in thought. “I suppose I should decide on mine too.”

With so many abilities and passives, it would take forever to eventually upgrade them all, so I'd need to make a shortlist. I wasn't able to upgrade my keystone <Demonic Magician> - it appeared to be something innate for the Class that increased in power automatically.

I had already upgraded my most useful passives with Sleight of Hand and Mana Manipulation. Perhaps it was time for something else. Vanishing Act, Finale, Card Fan, Demonic Pact, Summon Demon - all still at base level. Tough choices.

After some humming to myself, and almost tripping over a tree root, I made the decision.

[Summon Demon+] [Demons are more powerful and last longer.]
[Card Fan+] [Card Fan is larger and can absorb more damage.]

I used both of these skills all the time - and while they weren't as flashy or trick-adjacent as the others; they increased the base efficiency of how I worked. Unable to let my curiosity go unsated, I dropped a Hellhound+ card to the floor.

A slightly larger summoning circle of crimson runes, and then the hound himself appeared. Slightly taller, and much more muscular. His wide head turned to me as his body lapped with dark red flames. His tongue stuck out as he panted at me as a greeting.

"You're a handsome chap, huh?" I kneeled down to give him a rubdown. "No heavy lifting for you, my friend, but tell all the others I'm proud of them and can't wait to see them again."

He huffed in my ear, a half-bark of acknowledgement, before I let him fade away back to Hell. I looked up to Ren, who had her face screwed up into a pout.

"Sorry," I said with a grin. "I'll share next time."