

*The beauty of the System was the flexibility it allowed. Even excluding the powers it gave us, the application of some of the options made us almost superheroes. Almost. For when faced with strength and the ability to punch down, many chose to be more of a villain. Although, perhaps not that dramatic - after slaughtering hundreds it was hard for even the most benevolent of us all to not become numb and apathetic. And I was certainly not benevolent.*

The card beamed across the gap, splitting at the last second to gouge both sides of the person's neck. I held them with a twist to hopefully go through the windpipe, and let them vanish. My bleeding hand I wiped on the grass idly as we both stared and awaited the outcome.

They clutched at their throat, turned as if confused or trying to raise an alarm, and then dropped to the floor out of view. I raised an eyebrow at Ren and she nodded.

I threw a second card - an Imp one. Partly worried that I wouldn't have the range or skill to land it where I wanted. With a little pain through my hand, I was pleased to have it land just on the edge of the watchtower wall. The Imp rose up from a circle and wobbled a little to find itself on a precipice, before giving me a little wave.

*Start fireballing the houses,* I thought toward him. I even tried gesturing with my head and eyes, for the little that I could move.

Regardless of which manner of communication he understood, a ball of fire began forming in his hands.

"Get ready," Ren muttered, "maintain positional advantage until they force us out."

"Understood." This was what all the training and tough love had been for. Putting me through the wringer so that I didn't falter when I stepped onto the main stage and all eyes were upon me. There was slightly more on the line than a few bad reviews.

The first ball of fire careened down from the tower and struck the wooden roof of a hut, catching it alight.

Silent tension thickened the air between us. A second fireball went out and struck one of the larger buildings. The door flung open and two figures stepped out, their raised voices catching the attention of three more that had been wandering over the back before.

An alarm sounded, and they pointed up at the watchtower as my Imp gathered a third attack, sending it over their heads to another building.

"Now," Ren said, jumping to her feet.

The two main stars of the show hadn't made an appearance, but now there were six figures all standing together, having an argument. A mixture of leather and metal armors, some robes or lighter linens. Shouldn't bunch up - rookie move.

With a flash of spiraling green and gold, her ensnaring arrow arced down upon them - and they saw us, but it was too late. The recipient of her arrow stumbled back into them, crimson soaking through his beige top, just before my card landed in his neck. Vines grew up around

them, pinning them in place. Their yells grew louder, and they started drawing weapons. Two bows and a staff raising to our location on the hill.

I summoned Roger from the fallen one, a difficult task from this distance - but a bit of bloodied hands now was better than a bloodied neck later. Their first volley against us faltered, as with horror across their faces, their fallen comrade stood back up. Eyes ejecting so the hollow pits of purple light could shine through, skull cracking so the ears may extend out. Immediately, my demon withdrew the wand on the belt of his new puppet and began using it as a dagger.

Ren dropped another arrow into the group, and the Imp struck another shack aflame.

A card spun over my hand as I paused, a noise distracting me from taking my next strike. Ren heard it too, and we turned around.

From within the forest, a large green figure burst out of the treeline towards us. With a large hammer in each hand, he roared in delight on getting the jump on us. His face was a mess of scars between yellow tusks and yellower eyes. "Grak knew you were sneakin' about!"

Ren drew an arrow - but he was quick. A red energy flickered around his body, some ability giving him power. He swung both hammers down at us as she let off her arrow. I raised a shield of cards in front of us just in time.

They shattered and the force still push us back... over the edge.

A brief slideshow of pain, brown dirt, gray rock, and then I was on the sandy road. Blood dripped onto the ground in front of me. *Naughty*, I hadn't allowed it. I broke the stick on my belt that had a held heal within it. My legs no longer felt numb, and I dropped a Hellhound card as I stood.

Vision still shaky, I raised my eyes to see Ren laying prone on the floor. Blood running from her mouth, and a leg looking like it forgot proper anatomy. She healed it with a grunt, and I stumbled over to offer my hand.

"Bad luck with that leg, huh?" I smiled as I helped her up, her eyes immediately shooting up.

"Move!"

We leaped apart, rolling across the ground as the orc slammed down onto his feet in the middle of us. How he managed to crack the ground but not shatter his legs was a trick I'd probably not find out the answer to.

"Aw, Grak wanted to crush little friends."

I stood back to my feet with a wobble, my hound standing in front of me and growling. Ren was not so eager to stand around monologuing and savoring the moment - as soon as she was back to her feet, a radiant arrow pulsed into her bow and she fired it from the short distance.

The arrow burned out and was deflected mere inches from the large orc by a shield of crimson magic.

“*Now, now - who is this come to spoil our fun?*” A smooth female voice came from behind me, but I was hesitant to look away from the hulking barbarian in front.

“Lady in Red, I assume.” My hands were lowered, but a card spun in my right one. I tried to calm my nerves. Performing for a small crowd was always more stressful.

“Correct. Are you looking for gainful employment, bard?”

I winced. A change of outfit was definitely necessary. A figure stumbled back to back with me, and somehow I could tell it was Roger.

“She looks even uglier than the elf,” he hissed through a mouth he wasn’t used to. “Being a giant is fun, but I’m pretty ruined. Have three more bodies to transfer to.”

“Thanks, Roger. Doing great.” Why I was whispering to my demon during this standoff, I wasn’t sure.

Ren fired another arrow at the orc, which again was blocked.

“I guess not then...” the Lady continued, unconvinced by my silence. “Grak, show them out of this world.”

The orc tensed up and licked his lips. “Grak going to enjoy this. Will break man first... *again*.”

“Can you hear me when I command things in my head?” I muttered to Roger, flexing my hands.

“Yes, boss.”

Then he knew what to do. So did I, which was - not die. I didn’t fancy my chances against the figure a good two feet taller and three times as wide as me. From my side, I drew my new dagger into my hand.

“Good news, Grak. You’ll be the first to die by my [Dagger of Luck].” I grinned and flipped it around. It only gave +1 Luck, whatever that did, but I needed all the help I could get.

He chuckled briefly. “Funny words for a pancake!” The orc leaped forward, amber energy flaring up his body. He was fast.

Hellhound darted with a growl. Roger moved away, screaming as he went. Ren drew back her shot fury in her eyes. My card left my hand, a calm amount of acceptance across my face.

The hammers hit me, unopposed. Upper left arm, broken. Right shoulder dislocated. I hit the ground like a sack of potatoes and rolled, skimming my head on the sand-swept stone. My ears rang, but I still heard the sound clearly.

“No!” a female voice screamed out.

Not Ren's though. Different. I twisted my head around on a complaining neck to see the orc standing confused, an arrow lodged in the back of his neck. He pawed at it briefly before a second hit right next to it.

A flash of blue illuminated his face and the surrounding objects my fading vision could see.

Third arrow - then a fourth struck the back of the barbarian. His arms were slung low now, as if his energy was being drained. An awkward plodding came over to me and my vision was filled by the face of a corpse with purple eyes.

"Ugly bitch vanished, boss. You okay?"

He stood back up straight, allowing me to see the elf run up and stab the dying orc over and over. I closed my eyes so I could pretend not to see her tears. My Hellhound came over and licked my face to make sure I didn't fall asleep.

"Good... job, guys." I managed to murmur out.

They had telegraphed their scheme too easily. The Lady put some manner of shield over the orc so that he couldn't be hit. He thought himself invincible and overconfident. Ren was hellbent on putting an arrow through his thick skull, so I had to work around that - take away the shield.

On my mark, both the hound and Roger had run straight for her. I had the demon scream so that I could approximate her location and send my card her way. Forced the error. Overwhelmed by sudden threats, she had to save her own life.

A gamble on my part. I couldn't aim the card as well as bring up the card fan. If I had been struck in the head, I would be dead. If I had been way off the mark on how her abilities worked, I would be dead. For being averse to chance, I had taken a big gamble.

Still, though. Some tricks you can only pull off once. It wasn't good magic, but made for a good story.

A burst of radiant energy flowed through me. Comforting and warming. I opened my eyes to see the whining hound paw at me.

"Max?"

I exhaled. The side of my face against the ground seemed to be wet with what I hoped was my own blood. "Yeah, Ren?"

She didn't reply. Which was partly concerning, but perhaps it wasn't right to address a sort-of-princess while laying a broken body on the floor. Arms aching, but mostly functional, I managed to push myself to my feet with a groan.

The elf stood before me, a furrowed brow as usual, but a face spent of emotion. Eyes red and tear tracks down her face, she had managed to compose herself almost to her normal state.

“Thank you.”

I smiled and held my arms open, unsure what really to do with myself. Shocked that she actually came in for the hug. It was brief and awkward, but I managed to hold my own emotions in check.

“Easy,” I said as she stepped back and observed the carnage we had wrought.

“Just don’t do dumb shit again. You’re not *actually* expendable.” She sighed and rubbed at her face.

Behind her, the orc began to move and stood up straight again. Tension flooded through us, before the barbarian’s eyes popped out and ears burst from his head.

“Woah, this fucker is ripped!” Roger flexed the arms.

“That’s half the job done, at least.” Ren shook her head and lowered her bow.

“Half?” I narrowed my aching eyes across the village. Being tied down with a rampaging demon that could swap bodies had quickly overwhelmed the gathered people, no matter what Class or Level they had been.

“Lady teleported to the mainland.” She gave me a glum expression, almost too tired to keep her brow lowered.

I clucked my tongue. “You want to level up and go hunt her down, then?”

“Most sensible thing you’ve ever said.” She nodded and a bit of life returned to her eyes.

“One thing first, though.” I gave her a stern expression and raised a finger.

I brought down my blood-soaked top hat and twirled it around. Reaching a hand inside, I withdrew two sweet cakes and held them out.

“You are the *worst*.” Ren shook her head with a sigh.

She grabbed the cake, and a smile almost graced the very edges of her mouth.