

*The bigger they are, the harder they fell. That's what they say, anyway. The problem for me was that my ego had gotten pretty big. I was under no illusion that my time was coming, and indeed there had been some close calls. You would think I'd be more humble after being nearly bested by gravity, or a horse. The trouble was, I had gotten away with it. Time healed all wounds, as if the System was keen on showing all the different types I could amass yet still hold myself together in one piece.*

Jokkar chuckled, a deep rumbling thing that did little to improve my own mood. "Stun usually makes it easy to smash people into paste. I'll have to kill you normally before your friends wake up."

He was in thick plated armor, and even the joints look like they were padded with something. Other than the shadowed areas where his eyes were, and thin vertical slits where his mouth would be, he was totally covered in metal. Not great for me. Before I knew it, my feet were taking me toward him. Self preservation was out of the window. I wanted to keep his focus away from the others.

I slid across the cobbled road as his mace swung over my head, the gust of displaced air taking my hat off. A pair of cards scraped across his arm, but did very little. As he went for a backhand follow-up, I threw a conjured bag at him. Blue shield flare around him as he jumped back. The bag fell to the floor, and an onion rolled out from the opening.

As his eyes turned back to me, my crossbow bolt was already in the air, denting the metal near his eyes. His arm went up and blocked the second. While he was distracted, I ran around him. He had strength, but his movement speed was terrible. I rolled past his leg and he shoved the end of his mace downward, cracking the stone road.

Another wild swing around and Card Fan+ took the brunt, the force still sending me falling to the floor. I turned over on my back and fired off the last crossbow. It found his eye, and he growled out in pain. Crossbow away, I went to move as he raised up his hand, and there was a swell of power beneath me.

The road burst upwards, taking me with it as it rose to meet his downward swinging mace. I had just used Card Fan+ so I-

It collided with me, and for a brief moment, I felt dead. The warmth of the Healing Charm broke at the same time as most of my bones, and the worst of it healed right after. My body slunk from the raised stone onto the floor.

"Nice try," he spat on the floor and saw the rope tied around one leg, now visible. "For taking my eye, you can watch me kill your Party first."

He turned away and started walking towards Ren.

"No," I seethed, pain wracking my body.

His plated feet stopped, and he looked over his shoulder. "So stubborn. Do you not know when you have lost?"

"It ends, when I say... that the show is over." I wavered as I stood to my feet. Beneath my cape my left hand worked through a Bandage. Just a few more seconds of time.

"Oh, a show is what you want?" He turned back to the prone elf and raised his mace into the air.

A blur of a dark shape, and then I was in the air in front of his face. From my hand, I threw a handful of nails into his face. As I hit the ground, pain flaring up my legs, I held out my hands and cast Arc+ from the Spell Scroll. Lightning pulsed from my hands, sharp blue electricity arcing across from his body to the conductive nails and back to him again. He staggered back, clutching at his face and convulsing.

"Bastard, y-you'll pay for this." He dropped his mace to the floor as he absorbed the last of the magical damage. As he went to pick it up, it vanished into my Inventory.

"Looks like that's mine now," I grinned from beside him, my eyes glowing purple.

He turned and punched me, Card Fan+ causing me to slide across the road, up against the embankment. I coughed up a little blood as he ran toward me, anger blazing in his one good eye. I grinned and crossed my arms. Blanket suddenly hung over me as he launched his next punch as I dropped and rolled forward between his legs.

As he tried to turn, he got caught on a couple of chairs that I left in the way. Too heavy to fall, he crushed his way through them. When he gained his footing, I was juggling three blood vials again.

"That won't work on me, mewling shit. I get that stuff by the jug load."

"Huh? No, this is just to distract you."

He glared to the side just too late as a fireball from my Imp+ struck him on the side of the head. The red paint cracked and flaked away from the armor as he winced away. From near the woods, the Imp+ was starting up a second attack already. There was no way he could go out there to kill the demon while still trying to kill me.

"Tell me the Lady's plans and I won't kill you." I spoke calmly, despite the energy pulsing through me.

"You're not getting a word out of me, shitstain. She'll be sitting in the palace long before I'm done torturing you. My regeneration will heal these wounds, no problem."

That was enough for me. Minimum threshold for everything reached.

"Any last words?" Any humor gone from my face. I felt cold now, almost wanted to shiver. Needed to keep him busy.

"Fuck your tricks."

Amusing, in its own way. I probably couldn't have thought of anything more poignant if in the same situation, really. The cobbled road was littered with small indents of all the times during

the fight where I had attempted to get this one... and as fresh blood ran from my wounds, I wondered if it would be enough.

He launched himself toward me, and from underneath my cape, I withdrew a card.

Not purple, and not even white. Bright red, crackling with energy. It was beautiful, in a way, to my tired mind so bored with blood and flame. Something radiant - hellish in some ways, perfect for my demonic side. Even time seemed to slow as I performed my final trick.

The card was out, a trail of crimson illuminating the path as it cut through the air. Turned it vertically, then at a slight slant, even as blood dripped from both my hands. Exhaled as it made the last adjustment before...

It passed through one of the thin mouth-slits in the helmet. Red light briefly illuminated the insides of the metal before flesh and bone burst out of the eye-holes.

His body stumbled to the floor, and a second fireball hit it.

<Finale>

Amongst the gloom and light rain of the battlefield, show light illuminated me. The sounds of applause and cheers overrode the burning fort. Small fireworks bloomed color into the air and I was almost sure some bouquets were thrown at my feet.

As his life and Dazzle icons faded away, so too did the warm glow of appreciation. I popped the cork of the second Rejuvenation potion and stumbled over to the prone elf.

Her eyes flickered open slowly as I kneeled beside her. With my bloodied hand, I pushed the hair from her face. "Sorry," I murmured, painting streaks of red across her cheek, "that made it worse."

"Max?" Her brow furrowed, and she struggled to push herself up. "Shit! Qw. Dislocated leg. You okay?" There was nothing stopping her eyes from trying to read me and the situation around us. "You did it?"

I handed her a Health Potion and sat beside her to proper her up.

"I guess. To all three questions." I didn't feel the elation of success. Even the finale showering me with brief adoration hadn't brought me the dopamine it used to.

She took the potion and grunted as her leg popped back into place. Wolf got up to his feet shakily, noticed us and padded over, still light-headed.

"Sorry, I think I napped through the battle."

"You're good, bud." Warmth flooded me as Ren healed me, before doing a second one onto the bear.

He sat beside us and we watched the fort aflame. A section collapsed, sending embers up into the sky. Ren leaned her head against me.

"You look like shit. Was it a tough fight?"

"Nah," I lied, "I've fought tougher horses."

She exhaled through her nose. "I suppose he wasn't the talkative type?"

I looked over at the bear, who was just idly licking around his maw as he stared off at the burning building. Then I leaned my aching face against the blonde hair of the elf.

"He might have just been posturing, but he mentioned something about the Lady taking the palace."

"There's a palace?" Ren sat up away from me. "Oh, where's my hat?"

I pointed over to a muddy area near the woods where it had gotten caught on a branch. "Here." From my aching hand, a Hellhound+ went out, and the large canine grabbed the hat softly between its mouth and brought it back. Ren gave the demonic dog a hug in thanks, and I let him hang about with us until his time was up.

"We should head back to town." It seemed obvious, but we had been sitting out in the light rain for a good twenty minutes. Rushing headlong into the next area in our state was just asking to get knocked into the river by a trap - or we'd find there's another fort on the other side.

Some rest and relaxation allowed our enemy to get a couple of steps ahead, but better than us putting more feet in an early grave. Then we wouldn't be able to help or save anyone.

"Alright," she sighed, as I helped her to her feet. "Let's go."

Despite the journey along the road being arduous enough on the way to the fort, it was even worse on the return. Drab showings of the corpses on display were not facing toward us, but moving past the blank sides didn't make it feel like a victory parade.

Even the rain picked up the breeze in our faces to harry our return. We hobbled, winced. I helped Ren walk some of the way, Wolf helped us both when we needed to stop and rest. It had taken a lot out of us. Even with all the healing we had, our bodies were just aching and sore. If the System had something hidden away that dealt with all the minor traumas, I'd be spending half my gold on stocking up.

Entering the town once more, it felt the same as usual. As if our actions hadn't even moved the needle. While it was nice to think there would be handshakes and celebrations for the adventurers who thwarted evil, the System-created didn't know and didn't care. We had fixed the area for future Players, maybe, but there was no fame and fortune granted to us for our self-imposed heroics.

The barkeep didn't pay too much notice of how bloodied and beaten we looked. Gave us the key for our usual room. Nobody else in the tavern, save for the mindless patrons that Wolf nudged out of the way a little more forcefully than usual.

Ascending the stairs felt like agony, and as Ren locked the door, I sunk to the floor, back against the bed.

“Flip for the first bath?” I asked, a tired smile across my face.

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, go for it.”

A coin in my hand, I flipped it in the air for her to call it.

“Heads.”

Caught it, flipped it onto the back of my hand. I slid my hand back to reveal two coins, one heads and one tails.

“*Trickster*,” she said with a smile as she gestured for me to follow.