

*They say to fight fire with fire, but the best method was to smother it. Deprive it of oxygen until the flicker of light died out. That was my dim view of how the Crimson Shadows should be dealt with. Violence was a part of my daily life now, but the cruelty and barbarism they showed toward their fellow Players was beyond me. Beyond acceptable. Beyond my mercy.*

We ran my card in the air well before our feet arrived. I cut the ropes around her wrists and her limp body fell into Ren's arms. The shapeshifter was beaten and bloodied. Unresponsive.

The elf poured some healing into the woman, the glow of radiant light fading and nothing. I cut the ropes around her ankles.

"It's not... *come on, you fuck...*" Ren exhaled and closed her eyes. "She's gone, Max."

She laid the shapeshifter on the floor. Anger burned within me as seeing her impassive face. I kneeled down and put my fingers to her neck. Pointless, but I was a loss at what to do. Her skin was cold to the touch. No heartbeat. Guilt mixed with the rage, she must have been caught in trying to find out information for us. I withdrew my hand and clenched my fist.

"Look at me, Max." Ren was stern in her demand, and I met her eyes. "I feel that too, but the only solution is revenge. We kill them and pay for what they did." Her eyes were watery, but there was the same burning inferno behind them that I felt.

"Agreed." I worked my jaw and raised an eyebrow to Wolf.

He gave a sad nod, already knowing what I was going to ask. In the softer area of mud, he began digging a grave. Shallow for now, but if successful, we would return to put her to rest properly. Maybe all of them, if we had the heart for it. I helped Ren move her and then Wolf covered her over with the churned mud.

"Why are they even doing this?" I clenched my teeth to look down the road at more sacrifices. It was a warning, but why was the Lady so intent on building a ruthless gang to squash out any other possible Player?

"Your eyes are purple again, Max."

I took a deep breath and looked towards Ren. Being that they were my eyes, I couldn't see when they were doing that, but she gave me a nod to let me know they were calming down.

"You can ask them yourself when I tear their arms and legs off," Wolf offered, glaring out down the road.

Not only to provoke fear, the bodies were presented to ignite an emotional response. Our anger and sadness were valid, but we couldn't let that drive our attack. As much as I wanted to pry apart their jaws in search of answers until the cracking of broken bone deafened me, a clouded approach would get us pegged up to one of these crosses.

I rubbed at my eyes and wondered if we could just rewind a little from this impending horror show. No. The show must go on. We had our parts to play. "I'm sick of these assholes. Sick and tired, and angry as fuck." My fingers flexed into fists and back. "So let's go."

We fell into step, back to the road. If they caught Hannah, then they might have some manner of detection magic. It would be fair to assume they would be well prepared to deal with any manner of Player type. They'd never come across a Party like us, though. I let my ego elevate me above their degeneracy. It didn't matter who they were, we would win over them and continue chasing down the Lady in Red.

Ren put her hand on my shoulder, which startled me from my thoughts.

"Win, escape, die. We will do it all as one, not leaving you behind again."

I nodded. There could only be one outcome. I wouldn't allow anything aside from the win. A couple more levels or Power Tokens would have been nice, but the sooner we could remove the festering tumor clogging up the start of this world, the better. New Players might be on the island already, and the least we could do is allow them a normal System to thrive in. They were potential fans, after all. I ground my teeth.

As we passed each dead body on display, it did little of the intended effect. If anything, we grew colder and more hardened to the macabre displays. Barely started to register them. The shapeshifter had been a gut punch because we had a connection and brief relationship with her. Although the rest were Players too, it was easy to disassociate. Think of them as just more System-created, for a suddenly very grimdark area as opposed to most of the forest.

"Hey." Ren wrapped her hand gently around my left forearm. "I wanted you to know... last night wasn't just because we might die today."

"I know." I smiled at her. "Same here." With my right hand, I took her hat off, allowing what remained of the sunlight to illuminate her blonde hair with almost unnatural radiance. I felt tired, even though the day had hardly begun. My eyes looked over her face, taking in her piercing blue eyes, soft features, and glowing hair. She smiled, and I plopped the hat back onto her head.

My luck had been a pretty mixed bag since arriving in this world. On the rare few occasions I would catch her smile, it washed away all the bad. The only things remaining were the scrawls in my journal saying how terrible bandits were. Allowing my heart to be open, knowing it might get broken, made me stronger. Not weaker.

Typical that I'd have such a breakthrough right before dashing myself on the rocks below, but such clarity was often born of hardship. Tell that to the broken figure we were still passing. My internal self rolled his eyes.

I stopped and turned suddenly, my eyes scouring the road behind us. Ren already had an arrow up and readied.

"Hear or see something?"

"No..." I flexed my fingers. "But if I were them, I'd have a scout on the road." Maybe it was paranoia or the dead lining our route, but something definitely felt off. My Illusion Magic sense was tingling, and I had hoped Ren would be able to pick up something I couldn't.

"You're... right..." Her eyes narrowed. "But I'm not sure what. Wolf, can you smell anything?"

"Only death." He sniffed the air again for extra measure, but shook his head.

I blinked my eyes slowly and calmed my breathing. It couldn't be invisibility to last this long, and we weren't close enough to the woods on either side for someone to properly stalk us. What would I do, as a magician?

My eyes went to the backs of the two crosses we had just passed. One was a good twenty feet away on the left, the other closer to sixty on the right. Slowly, I turned my head to the other two and raised a finger up to my lips. They nodded in return.

From the inside of my jacket, a dove. Into the air I sent it off to the closer wooden beamed cross. Into my hand, I flipped my dagger. So tired.

As soon as the dove flew up between the bottom of the structure, I hit <Demonic Transposition>. A blur of light and I had taken its place. I swung my dagger into the thigh of the body held in position.

"Ow, you fuck-"

Only it wasn't held in position, and wasn't dead. They brought down their fist at me as I dropped to the floor. My card came up in my left hand and sharpened, slicing through their fingers as they punched me. Took a lot of force from the hit but sprayed me with their blood. They went to move, and an arrow pierced through the thick beam into the back of their thigh.

He growled in pain, unable to move.

"Hello," I smiled widely as my dove flew over and sat atop my hat. "I have a few questions and seem to have lost my moral compass."

He was covered in fake grime and dried blood. A round and wrinkled face grimacing in pain. A leather cap barely holding in a messy mop of hair. His eyes were an odd yellow color, which I assumed meant he wasn't human - but the rest of him was otherwise as expected. Dirty clothes to fit in and not looked like part of the Crimson Shadow.

"I'll not tell you fuckin' shites anything!" He spat and growled.

"You killed one of our friends. There are at least five things I can think of that would have you *praying* for us to kill you." I ran my tongue across my teeth, trying to maintain composure. Letting off steam on the first bad guy to fall into our laps might feel good in the short term, but we had to remember not to lose sight of who we were.

I raised an eyebrow to Ren, hoping she would play good cop and not just encourage me. A beautiful accomplice almost sounded nicer than being heroic. Thankfully, she got the hint.

"I'd listen to him. I was only able to stop him killed Hadrian because he cooperated."

"Lies," the man continued to growl his admonishment. "Hadrian hasn't been heard from in days."

Ren walked around in front of the cross and folded her arms across her chest. "I told him to run, gave him some vials of blood to keep him safe as long as he stayed out of our way."

"Hey, Wolf," I interrupted. "Come here, bud." I waited for the bear to come up beside me. "You said you were after some legs, right? You think you could take one without killing him?"

"Yeah," the bear said as he licked his lips. "He might bleed out slowly, though."

"I'm in no hurry." I tilted my head and stared at the scout impassively.

"Empty threats won't scare me, heroic fucks! Once Jokkar hears about this, he'll--"

"Please!" Ren begged, her eyes wide. "He isn't bluffing. You don't know him like I do."

That almost got me to break character. Although, I wasn't sure how much of it was character now, and how much was the real me wanting to extract some pain on someone possibly partially responsible for the ache in my heart.

"Get fucked, elven whore!" he writhed and tried to move away from the arrow holding him loosely to the raised wooden structure.

"Wolf," I gestured. Not just because he insulted Ren, of course. Partially.

The bear moved up to him, sniffing at the grass first before lapping up the severed fingers to chew them down. He looked up at the scout with amber eyes. "Appetizers, yum." He licked his lips.

Ren shot me a glance. It wasn't to dissuade me from letting the bear have a snack, but I understood what she was getting at. Some grievous bodily harm would put any subsequent information extracted into question. I nodded back at her, but I couldn't call off the bear without looking weak.

"What about if we gave you some of the Lady's blood?" She grimaced. "We just need some information and we'll let you go."

The man was wavering a little now that Wolf was sniffing around his lower leg. "H-how many do you have?"

"Three," I answered. "But it'd have to be good information for more than one."

He licked his lips, weighing up his options. As Wolf opened his mouth wide, the scout lifted his bloodied leg away gingerly.

"Alright, alright. Call the fuckin' bear off. What do you want to know?"

"Wolf." The bear sighed and sat down, disappointed. "What's at the bridge? How many people? What do you plan to do after we let you go?"

This was a little trick, to end with the phrase about letting him go, let that sit in his mind. All he had to do was get rid of the pesky prior questions. It worked way too easily.

“They’ve built up a shanty town - more of a fort really. Maybe twenty odd there now. I suppose... I’ll run away and try to live a good life?” His facial expression gave away how likely that was.

A fort with more people than we had expected. I rubbed my chin in thought.

Ren added her own questions. “That’s so helpful! I bet they have magical wards or protections too, right?”

“The main building has an anti-attack dome, and the road itself has traps.” He grinned nervously.

I withdrew two bottles of blood into my hand, pretending they came from a pouch. “Assuming you haven’t lied, then that’s enough for two.”

Greed illuminated his eyes. “No lies, I promise! Jokkar even has weakness to elemental damage - but I don’t know which.”

“Ah, eager for that third. Well... I hate to disappoint, then.” I raised my hand up, and the bottled changed to a crossbow. Bolt to his neck. He convulsed, trying to clutch at it, but his motor functions were already failing. Leaning forward, he dropped from the cross onto the grass.

“A mercy, really,” Ren complained, giving his body a kick.

“Method to the madness, sorry.” I gave her a glum smile and withdrew a large linen sheet from my Inventory.