

Although, as a magician, I was used to things being not as they seem. This world had a way of bringing about surprises that I could never have imagined. Deception and sleight of hand could only do so much when people had literal invisibility, the ability to conjure firestorms, or genuine telepathy. Had the System not granted me the Class that it did, I may have found myself overwhelmed and minute in the grand scheme of things. A Unique class meant I could feign who I really was - as skill well honed over most of my adult life.

My mouth ran dry as I stared out at the figures moving about just beyond the blocking foliage. How I managed to get myself into this situation, I had no idea. Well, that wasn't quite true - I had been present for all the events that had led to this moment. The surreal-ness of it had just caught up to me in this moment.

Stalking through the bushes towards a group of supposed bandits - who looked like real people, but apparently were a close and limited approximation at best. To steal back some family artefact or heirloom, so that I could... level up and gain more power.

More uncomfortable was the thought that I might be able to try some of my magic on them. Old magic, that is. How receptive would they be? I apparently had some bonus to being deceptive, but would the System-created humans be receptive to my attempts to charm or just stick me with a sword as soon as I showed my face?

The latter seemed more likely at this juncture. Certainly if I wanted to test my capabilities, then something slightly lower stakes, such as the old man at the little farm, would be the more sensible option. I had to start small and build my audience up again. It bruised my ego in a way I didn't think possible - as if part of me was convinced going for the bigger haul of wowing all the bandits at once would be the better option.

I took a deep breath to cool my nerves. Clearly I was letting things get to my head if I was just going to stand here like a statue and ruminate over things neither here nor there. Ren was probably watching me from a distance and scowling at my inaction. Or for any other reason.

Just to make sure I wasn't full rooted to the spot, I made a few steps closer to my quarry - and slightly to the right. If I could flank one edge of the camp, then perhaps I'd have less chance of bringing terrible danger upon my neck. Gradually, as I got closer, more of the situation became visually evident to me. I circled further to the right, where a slight incline gave rise to some higher ground that bordered one edge of the campground.

Overselling my ability to move stealthily out in the open in a sparkling purple suit, I slithered on my front up onto this ledge, and crawled myself towards an opening in the vegetative cover. One light green branch shuffled slightly out of my face - and then there it was.

Three wagons and dark wood had been arranged in this clearing in the woods as a loose border to the camp proper. Two dozen tents sat around the wagon and further afield from the stone bordered campfire directly in the middle. Several half-log benches were strewn around the inert fire and over by a makeshift table where they supposedly ate. Indeed, two bandits seemed to be sitting there in idle conversation.

Each wagon had a group of three bandits each, the fire had a group of four, and then there were three groups of two who seemed to be making patrols. Nineteen total, unless there were some in the tents. Best to operate under the assumption that there was and avoid them.

From here, it looked as though if I stood up and waved my hands, I could easily be seen by everyone here. Ren had said I needed to learn about aggro and threat, and the boars had been pretty indifferent after the initial attack on their brethren. But where the piglets had run, these bandits would come for me.

The three at the wagon would be closest to me as long as I waited for one of the patrols to move away. Fighting three bandits at once seemed like a bit of a step up from solo wildlife... but it was just something I had to get on with and learn. I had the feeling Ren was putting me through a bit of a trial of fire, but if I couldn't deal with some basic thugs, then how was I going to help chew through actual Players?

If things got too hairy, I'd have to run, and I had the imbued leaf, along with some bandages to keep me alive. Still, there was the thought of staring death right in the eye that had my psyche recoiling. Part of me was used to it, although I wasn't sure why. There was more going on in the background than I truly understood.

I lifted the deck and withdrew the Imp card. Gradually I got up into a crouch and moved back as far as I could while still keeping a line of sight on all three enemies. If I didn't know any better, they passed as normal humans. Grubby looking, a mix of worn leathers and sun-scorched skin. Rough around the edges, but life was full of all sorts.

<Summon Demon: Imp> brought out a pudgy little caster beside me, and I tipped my hat toward him. Slightly different than my first one. I pointed my finger out towards my first intended target, a broader bandit among the three with a dusty-brown bandana covering his hair.

The Imp nodded and started preparing a fireball. My eyes darted back to the camp - thankfully, the patrol was away from our targets.

[New Monster: Bandit <2>]

A purple card hovered into my hand without me needing to touch the deck. It spun slowly as I waited for the right opportunity. Part of Bandana's routine involved chuckling at some murmured joke. I imagined it was something completely unrelated to rough banditry - like something about baby chicks. Not that it made my next action any easier.

The card flew out, arcing through the air and slicing into his throat. My fingers twitched as I held it there and pushed it into the wound for a brief extra second before it faded away. Bandana clutched at his throat as blood ran between his fingers. As he turned to face my direction, his eyes wide - he was struck by the thrown fireball of the Imp.

The other two turned and started after me, anger in their eyes as the afflicted one fell to the floor. A second card was already forming in my hand and I aimed it for the closer enemy. His

weapon dropped to the ground as my card sliced into his forearm. I didn't hold this one longer as I needed to cast a third with the next bandit now baring down on me.

Fire shot from my Imp and struck the third bandit in the legs, scorched flesh and melted linens, causing him to stumble and drop to his knees in the air. I sent the card out to the second bandit and spun towards the third, withdrawing the knife and stabbing into his throat as he collapsed.

I jumped back in brief shock at my own actions, and my eyes darted towards the second bandit - the card had pierced through his shirt and straight into his heart.

The Imp did a joyous little dance as the bodies collapsed to the floor. I looked at the bloodied dagger. Surely sleight-of-hand skill didn't really translate over to melee combat? Other Max smiled. Which was possibly the worst sentence I had ever thought up. *Why tell myself that?*

Air escaped my nose as I exhaled and took to looting the two closest bodies. The third by the wagon would have to wait.

[30 Gold]
[Armor Chance Box (1)]
[Ration Box (1)]

Now, did the Quest say the heirloom was on one of the people here - or is there a chest or place it had been stowed away that I should be looking for? That was part of Ren's test. Could I complete the Quest without getting myself into trouble - or could I handle myself and clear the camp with no issue? Either option had merit, and based on that combat - the latter one might work out. More loot and chances for [Sweet Cakes].

The patrol had now returned and my eye twitched as they approached the dead body by the wagon.

"Hey, Hank here is dead."

"Let's search around."

They had reacted to finding it, which was one of my questions ticked off. Now, with weapons drawn, they were making an exaggerated effort to scour all the surroundings for any clue as to who had done the foul deed.

My first card gashed along the closest bandit's head, severing off half of his ear. His rush toward me was stalled as a fireball burst on his chest, burning through his shirt. The second was much quicker, and I barely got a card out before he was near me. A spurt of crimson followed the purple dash of magic as it missed his neck and struck along his collarbone.

I stepped away from his flat-footed swing of a sword, gripping the dagger tight in my right hand as I willed a card up from the deck in my left. Metal rang out as I deflected his follow-up with my shorter blade, although the warm stinging pain along my arm told me I didn't come out fully unscathed. With his next attack already in motion, I flung the card in panic - striking him in the mouth.

Blood and broken teeth sprayed across me as the man recoiled away, grabbing at the shredded skin and gums. I stepped towards him and stabbed downward into his eye socket. The weight of him collapsing was surprising and caught me off guard - right before I was struck by something hard in my left upper arm.

I rolled to the floor, my deck bouncing twice on the soft earth. My arm was numb throughout - but not broken. As I went to stumble to my feet with bleary eyes, the shadow of the mace-wielding bandit loomed over me, his weapon raised above his head. I knew this trick. He wanted to make my brains appear all over the floor.

As he went for the downward swing, he swore out - the Imp's fireball striking him on the back of one leg. I willed a card from the discarded deck through the air - gashing the back of his other knee and twirling into my left hand. I leaped atop him, knocking him to the floor. He tried to stop my dagger with his hand and received an impalement for his efforts. While his attention was focused on that, I jammed the held card into the underside of his jaw, cutting both my own hand as well as his throat open before it vanished.

Dagger out of his hand. Into his neck. Twice. Three times. I just didn't want to hear that gurgling sound anymore.

I took two deep breaths. *The show was still going on.* Put a smile on, Max. *Finish the job.*

With a groan, I stood to my feet. I could move my left arm now, but the upper half was numb and complained with bruised agony when moved. My right forearm had a gash down it which continued to drip blood. I felt pretty miserable, but that was neither a physical malady, nor able to be healed by any of my items.

I stretched out my neck and spat some blood on the floor. Stepped toward my deck and retrieved it. Despite the roughhousing it had received the past few days, it still looked flawless. From my Inventory I brought out a Bandage and gave myself a little heal.

Without realizing it, as I watched the progress bar slowly increase, I started humming a little tune to myself.

My old show's intro song.