

*Repeat Quests were an interesting oddity. In the traditional sense, a Quest was to achieve an objective, and you were rewarded for completing the task. 'Kill thirty bandits' sometimes had a tangible victim or town guard where you could trace the line between action and motivation. Sometimes the System would just praise you for completing the Quest fully detached from any sort of reasoning. And then you could do it again, and again. If anything, it cemented the fact that the System held no compassion for the beings it created. It would look you in the eye and shake your hand the same whether you had killed the minimum thirty, or had been on a rampage for a week straight and erased thousands. Here's your gold and dopamine, Player.*

The ensnaring arrow lit up the path in front of us as it struck the closest patrol group. Four bandits, in better leather armor and mismatched weaponry than the ones from the small island. The bulkier of them now sported the projectile from his side, as they glanced our way, weapons drawn. Shock spread across their faces as if we had appeared out of nowhere, despite our obvious presence.

My split cards struck those surprised eyes of the one raising a crossbow, blinding him. With their ranged damage neutered, the rampaging bear then closed in under less threat of injury. With heavy feet that thundered across the earth, Wolf roared as he leaped at the group.

One of them tried to block the swipe of a giant paw with a buckler, but the overpowering strength still knocked the bandit to the floor, even if the man wasn't shredded in the process. The ensnare that had been wrapped around his lower legs broke as he slid away from the remaining trio. With panic, he tried to stumble back to his feet until an arrow struck him in the thigh and then my empowered card cut them across his exposed throat.

A bandit still entangled lashed out with a sword, stabbing into Wolf's dark fur. In return, the bear hopped forward with a bite, catching the attacker on the collarbone and neck. The crack of bones followed as he crunched down onto their torso before tossing the bandit away like a rag doll. My <Pact Demon> card flew out to the first one that had been felled, a pain radiating up the center of my head as I controlled it to its destination.

Ren lowered her bow, unable to get a clear shot now that the large form of our third Party member was fully intent on thrashing through the remaining two. A small wave of vertigo made me step forward as I watched Wolf crush one before disemboweling the last. Despite his otherwise pleasant demeanor, once in combat, he was feral and unrelenting—something that put even Roger's enthusiasm to shame.

"Even more effective than I'd hoped," the elf said as she tilted her head. "This might change our plans?"

"How so?" I winced, more due to the cracking headache forming again than our schedule being adjusted. Although...

"This is repeatable. We farm this out as much as possible, sleep nearby. We can get our next level here before moving on."

I nodded. With Wolf, our combat effectiveness jumped a large amount, and we wouldn't struggle as much to get through the Quest. If we could do this three times quicker than

without the bear, then it made sense to make use of the resources. We had somehow stumbled into a reasonably trustworthy tank for our little group, as if the System had thrown us a bone after hearing our grumblings.

“Oh, fuck me!” Roger jogged over to me, his eyes and ears having pierced through the head of the fallen bandit. “You got a much bigger dog now, boss.”

“Bear, called Wolf.” I deflated slightly at how useless that explanation might be to the demon. “He is our new Party member.”

Roger turned to watch as the bear tore the face off of one of the dead bandits and chewed on it. My rabbit-demon whistled. “I fuckin' love *everything* about him.”

“He gets in the way of my arrows.” Ren tapped the end of her bow against the side of her boot. “We’ll have to find a solution to that.”

“If he can circle around targets so that he is at the side of them, and can knock some back from the fray, that should help.” I tilted my head and felt like my brain was about to find the emergency exit door by accident. Almost put my hand to my ear to make sure it wasn't successful, but I didn't fancy getting my hand-blood on my face.

We caught up to the bear, and I tried not to stare at the half eaten corpses. While death and dismemberment hadn't chilled me as much as it should, there was still something uncomfortable about seeing someone's insides on display. They were meant to be private, and I was happy to keep the knowledge of how bodies actually worked a secret. At least the bear was eating well.

“Good job, Wolf.” I gestured a hand to my demon. “This is Roger. He is a temporary friend.”

“Is that how you feel, boss?” The demon stared at me impassively.

“No, not like that, I-“ I exhaled and rubbed my forehead. A grumpy elf was one thing, but the manic demon and talking bear made me wonder if hitting my head adjusted some dial that made my life weirder. Not a theory I was keen to do some testing on.

“Looks like dead meat still.” Wolf sneezed out a brief spray of gore and then shook his head.

Ren kneeled down beside him and put her hand against his wounded foreleg. “How hurt did you get? Do you have any skills to absorb damage or regenerate health?”

“At first I was angry because the meat was spiky, but then I felt better.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That doesn't really answer my questions, Wolf.”

“So... no meat reward?”

I sighed and turned away. “You can eat your fill of the bodies once Ren is done looting them. I'll get ready for the next group.” My head was pounding and the oddball antics felt like someone was pulling a bloodied zipper down my forehead. Normally adverse to looting

when in a good mood, the prospect now made me want to empty my stomach out. Possibly my eyes and anything else that could be contributing to the pain in my skull, too.

Roger padded up to me as I strode away from the carnage. "You alright, boss?"

[Health Status]

[Mild Trauma]

"Doc says clean bill, so I'm peachy," I gave him a grin, which probably came out as more of a grimace.

"I know some of those words," he said with a nod. "Just point me in the direction of what needs murderin'."

I flicked through my Inventory, but it wouldn't even allow me to apply a bandage. This world couldn't be so advanced and yet have no way of painkilling? My eyes closed for a moment so I could refocus. No need to worry, a little headache never killed anyone. We were doing a lot worse to the bandits - if I just pushed through it we could get this over and done with and I'd probably feel better. I'd feel *fine*. Not something worth complaining about.

A Hellhound popped up beside me, and I gave it a brief pet on the head. The second of the wide arc patrol groups was now coming around to our position. Another four bandits. Being able to fight from ranged again was nice, and having Wolf deal with all the problems made my life easier. No need to pull odd tricks from my sleeve just to survive.

Partly, I missed that. Maybe at present it was more of a blessing due to my brain being only partially functioning. I felt tired and my core being ached, despite the nap having energized me. Falling from the tree clearly knocked something loose that would take a little longer to recover from. I shook it from my head and held up my hand. "Oh, Roger. Can I give you a weapon?"

"Sure, boss." He shrugged, fully content to run in and attempt to beat the bandits to death with his fists.

I wasn't sure how his level or power scaled, and as capable as he had been, we were nearing the point where running in blindly would get him banished from my control near instantly. "It's not much, but if you like it, I'll keep it safe for you." And if he didn't, I'd find something different. He deserved some comfort while he was doing my bidding.

From within my Inventory I withdrew a mace. Uncommon, with an enchantment that gave two Constitution. Dark metal, leather wrapped handle, and the bulbous head had tiny silver spikes. It wasn't the best that I had found, but it felt like it fit his nature.

"Fuck! Boss, that's gorgeous!" He took it and gave the air a few test swings. He was still awkward and sloppy with his movements, but I couldn't blame him when it wasn't his body. There was enough force in his swings that he'd do damage no matter how amateur the strikes - as long as he hit.

"Keep up the good work and I'll see what else I can get you." I gave him a smile despite my brain burning up. For a violent psychopath, he was at least loyal and friendly enough. Every

show needed someone to grind away at the unpleasant jobs, and his enthusiasm was almost catching. "But for now..."

I raised my hand up, drawing a card and filling it with mana. It glowed brightly and for a moment; I was enthralled by the light. Roger and the Hellhound tensed up, ready to sprint toward the approaching patrol. But... I almost didn't want to let it go. Was there a limit on how powerful I could make it? Certainly. Had I reached it yet?

My arm shook slightly, and my fingers twitched. Why couldn't I let go? My hand was illuminated in pale purple light. A beauty that warmed me as my eyes rose back up to the bandits. Or it could just be the tracks of blood forming in my tensed hand. Right before it became untenable, I gave in.

It was gone. The light scoring the air as it traveled and my demons sprang forth. I saw the brief surprise on the face of the crossbow bandit as the glow of my magic attack reached them. Their brains exited the back of their skull with a wet pop through the thin slit I gouged straight through their head, and I let the card vanish.

I wiped the blood running from my nose with the back of my shaking forearm. Either I had achieved a new flavor, or I had just tasted the hint of greater power.

Ren fired off an arrow from just behind me, as the thundering paws of Wolf vibrated through my boots and he charged past.

For a moment, I just stood there and watched. My fingers tapped my side as if trying to remind me to draw another card. The bear barreled through the group, knocking them to the floor or out of the way, and then positioned himself to the left. Out of the way of our ranged attacks - and although this would normally leave an opening for enemies to come at myself or Ren, my demons distracted and prevented any from leaving the range of the powerful beast.

"Roger probably wouldn't mind if you accidentally shot him." I worked my jaw, watching the three in the melee pound and tear the remaining bandits into mush.

"Would you?" She stepped up beside me.

"If you shot me, or Roger?" The marble inside my head rolled around the track slowly.

Ren gave me a look over, her brow furrowed. "You're supposed to be taking it easier now we have Wolf, not pushing yourself harder."

"I'm f--"

"You're *fine*, I get it. We have a lot of bandits to get through. If you're spent on the second pack, then you may as well leave the Party now and save us the headache."

Before I had the chance to respond, she had stormed off. Not that I was even sure what I was going to say. It was just a headache, and whatever 'mild trauma' was. *Mild* wouldn't stop me from doing anything. I just needed to pep myself up a little and not ruin the show. The Quest. *Whatever*.

We took the next two patrols down with little issue. Roger switched corpses with each, which slightly confused Wolf and made him less inclined to gorge on the bodies of the dead. I let Ren do the looting, and so far nothing exciting had dropped. I tempered my ability and didn't go over the top again. Every time I pushed a little too far, my nose would bleed - which felt a lot worse than when my hand usually did. My headache didn't get any better, but trying to play safe kept it from getting worse. I found some balance.

"Watchtowers might aggro too much of the camp." She held her hand over her eyes to stare at the closest one.

"Ignore them and stay out of range until we've cleared some of the camp?" We were in parallel to the gates now and could see clearly inside.

Maybe three dozen tents in total. Perhaps a dozen more than we couldn't see. No, that couldn't be right - unless they stacked the bandits three to a tent. There were at least five groups of between three and five enemies just in the area we could see by the gate.

"I'd rather pull three groups than seven," she agreed.

I couldn't draw much comparison to what this was like. A game where the prize was violent combat. We were just playing for how potentially deadly it could be. "The stage is all yours." I gave her a bow and stepped back away from her narrowed eyes.

Roger was leaning against Wolf and trying to wipe the blood off his mace on the leather trousers of the body he was in. Or maybe trying to paint them. It was hard to tell, given that it wasn't very effective either way. The bear himself had eaten his fill of bandit, but had a sharpness to him still. Fighting for the fight, I was glad to see it.

Ren exhaled and drew an arrow, getting ready to aim it for the closest group through the gate. Bowstring held back. She paused and slowly released the tension. Her eyes went to me. "Can you hear that?"

I had a slight hum in my ears for the last hour, so I shook my head slowly. Wolf sniffed at the ground and tried to flatten his ear to the dried dirt.

"Vibration," he grunted. "Something approaches."

We looked back at the bandit camp. It was gradual now, but I could... almost sense it in the air. Looming danger. The gathered figures inside the walls turned to see something further within. Ren and I exchanged a glance and readied our weapons.

And then a figure burst out through the wall of bandits - someone on horseback. Black hair flowed behind his head. On his wild face was a bloodied hand print. His armor was a dark ebony and crimson mix, contrasting with the light brown horse he rode on.

Behind him, the entire campground full of bandits chased, waving their weapons and firing crossbows that didn't hit. He was riding straight for us.

"Lady in Red sends her regards!" he yelled, a wide grin across his face.

Red drew her arrow and fired - just as the man and his mount vanished in a blue of blue light. Teleportation?

Dozens of pairs of eyes now switched to us as the ire of the entire bandit camp focused our way.