

*I can almost taste the blood as the sounds vibrated through my skull. Even now, the first time I had... it had always been something that could happen. The moment I stepped through the portal my fate had been decided. The death, the blood, the suffering I would both enact and overcome. Would I change any of it? No.*

“Excessive,” Ren noted.

“The real tricky part is getting the two pieces back together again.” I dropped the gore-soaked weapon to the floor. The single word repeated in my head, echoing around. There was some nuance to the whole thing that was more of an ironic joke that would be a lot less funny if I explained it to her. Not that this was currently very amusing. “Sorry.”

“I know what you are and can do. These are no friends of ours.” Her bright eyes turned to me and her hand raised to fill me with radiant warmth, a needed heal that only felt uncomfortable due to her insinuation that I was a demon. Well, I was reading through a few lines there - perhaps a little self realization.

I nodded. “Let’s find Wolf.”

Roger had found a new home in the red-haired ranger, and I flung him his mace as we went back through the ruined rooms. It didn’t take long to find the large bear a couple of rooms down, which must now be back up against the gatehouse wall, if I were to guess.

Wolf had a number of arrows in his right shoulder and flank, and a gash that ran over his eye. His little bowler hat was also mostly cinders. Worse could be said for the remains of the warrior he was currently chewing on, the scraping and cracking of armor echoing around the room. Another figure, a female spellcaster, lay dead slumped against the opposite wall - mostly disemboweled.

Ren ran over and healed him as I tried to focus. My hands were sore already, I needed to pause and let my mana regenerate fully, otherwise I’d be running on empty for the rest of the fight. I hovered over the option to fix my outfit. While I would no longer feel any embarrassment to be in my underwear, I doubted we had five minutes where I could get away with being so vulnerable. I wanted to look my best for the big piece at the end, but perhaps just crossing the finish line would be the better outcome.

“How you holding up?” Ren came over to me, concern across her brow.

The heat and smoke were getting to me, my senses numbing to it. “I feel like I am in Hell.”

“Is that why you’re smiling?” She raised an eyebrow.

I hadn’t even realized I had been smiling this whole time. Something that was potentially worrying. Maybe dissociation from the violence. “Are my eyes purple?”

“A little, yeah. They get more intense when... things are more intense.”

“Just in combat, right?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, dickbag. Now, what’s our next move?”

We had probably killed most people in this section of the fort, along with a good amount of those defending the gatehouse. All sections were on fire, and liable to collapse eventually. Being outside would be beneficial, but might put us in danger of the rest of the Shadows.

“How many have you three killed?” I asked, rubbing at my eye sockets. Briefly clocking that I, a humble magician, was going on a killing spree through a fantasy gang hideout. Humble magician, and demon hunter, apparently.

“These two, red-hair, three outside... oh, there was one other. Seven?”

“Nine for me then.” I clucked my tongue. “Another ten or so to go.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Not that it’s a competition, but nine is impressive.”

“I had help from Roger and my demons, of course.” Plenty of luck and exploiting how brainless a lot of the gang was, too. “Perhaps we can just go through the walls and into the other side? They’ll be expecting us to use doorbs.”

“*Doorbs?*” She tilted her head.

“Doors. Sorry, this smoke is making me woozy.”

She nodded, but looked concerned. Wolf dropped his aghast meal and backed up, ready to go through the wall. Red light pulsed around him as he charged and blew through the wood into open space. He slid across cobblestone and waited for us.

The middle of the gatehouse, caged bars blocking the road to the left and the bridge to our right. From beyond, the sound of the running river was almost calming. But only almost. It wasn’t the most well-defended fort. If you reinforced a wagon, you could probably blow through the large metal gate by process of shifting them from their wooden hinges - or however they were attached. If we were a little more selfish, Wolf could have just run us straight through and over the bridge and they’d either have to chase us down or let us go.

A thought that was cut short as the bear repeated the process and blew a hole into the next building. The figure inside trampled in surprise before Wolf crunched down onto their skull. With how powerful he was, I didn’t doubt we could slowly take on a whole city of bad guys, just going room to room without them having the opportunity to do much.

We entered in behind him. The smoke was thicker here, the heat more oppressive. Perhaps not the best idea to enter the more damaged side of the fort. We did need to clear out all the Crimson Shadows, and had some manner of advantage in restricting range.

The door on the right side burst open and a man leaped out, a spell prepared in his hands. He took an arrow to the leg and immediately stumbled down straight into the bear. Wolf glared at the man and he recoiled just as my card slit across his throat. Head crushed straight after by a massive paw.

“See, does that count as mine or your?” Wolf raised an eyebrow with a grin.

I gave him a bow. “All yours, my friend.”

Ren nudged me as she walked past. “Been looting?”

“Ah, not much. I figured we could circle back to it if we lived.” I scratched the back of my head and smiled. “Picked up a couple of crossbows, though.”

“They work well with your Dexterity, and that you can swap through them quickly.” She nodded.

“I just have to remember to reload them.” In saying that, I hadn’t so far today. Three loaded ones, the rest were unloaded. Prep work was important, but I had been rather distracted lately.

I peered through the next room, card in hand. Everything had an amber hue to it, with the flames licking at the rooms above us. A few tables and chairs, but nothing—or rather nobody—untoward in sight. Then again, invisibility was a thing. I threw a conjured plank of wood into the room, and a figure appeared as a crossbow bolt fired from the end of the room by the next doorway.

“Shit!” the person hissed as the impaled plank cluttered to the floor.

“Mine!” Roger pushed past me and ran awkwardly after them, mace in his hand. I let my card vanish. Although I had a good sense for it, I was still partially likely to knock him in the back of the head with it rather than the opponent.

“When we get out of here,” Ren removed her hat to wipe her forehead, “we need to design more comfortable outfits.”

As much as I liked our ensemble, perhaps if this was going to be a full-time thing, we could make some adjustments. “And Wolf could do with a little bowtie,” I added.

“Fuck off. Respectfully.” He shook his head as he tried to wipe his muzzle on his thick arms. “But some armor would be nice.”

I grinned. We had started painting a picture of success already, even while things were still in progress. Ambitious? Maybe. We had cleared through the majority of the fort already. The Crimson Shadow lay in ruins, saved for wherever Jokkar was hiding. The building itself was being burned away. Even if we were to fail now, we had set them back by a huge margin in this starting area.

But... would there be any other Parties that would come along and do the same as we had? Eventually, perhaps. It was the nature of adventurers to rise up against evil, of course. By that time, the Lady may have achieved whatever mad plans she was trying to put in motion - and that could prove detrimental to any who stood opposed to her. We needed to find more information out.

After surviving the day, of course.

Roger came back into the room, now in the body of the figure he had chased out into the next. Their masked head was dented inwards, but the purple ears that had burst from their skull probably didn’t improve that situation.

“What a fun day.” He stepped over and rubbed the viscera from his spiked mace across his clothing. “Oh, I wanted to apologize.” He turned to Ren and gave her a bow. “I treated you unfairly before because I only recently realized you are an actual person.”

“That’s...” Ren furrowed her brow. “How did you not?”

“Just like... the way that you are.” He waved his free hand up and down toward her. “I just didn’t believe something could be like... that. But now that boss-“

I raised my hand. “That is too many threads of discussion I do not want to get into, especially not in our current situation.” I gave an exasperated shrug toward the elf and she rolled her eyes in response.

My brow furrowed as a vibration shook through the wooden floor. Was the building starting to collapse already? We’d need to get out as soon-

The wall beside us exploded, showering us with splinters and wooden shards. A huge figure stepped into the room, easily ten feet tall and completely covered in thick plated armor painted bright red. Atop the helmet, a white hand-print decorated the forehead, blazing eyes peering out of darkened recesses.

“You dare question the Lady?”

Immediately, he swung a large mace around, pure force surrounding it. The next few seconds were a slideshow. He struck us all. My Card Fan+ hardly had time to appear before being erased. The walls exploded. We were sent tumbling across the hard cobbled road. Light rain began pelting me.

I blinked. Still alive, but in a lot of agony. The echos of a stun fading from me as I pushed myself up. Broken ribs pained my breathing. My eyes darted around as realization brought panic to the forefront of my brain.

Wolf off to my left. His breathing was heavy and tongue lolled out his mouth as he laid with eyes closed. Maybe just the effects of the stun. To my right, the corpse Roger had been in was empty. Killed in action. I couldn’t bring him back for a while.

I craned my neck back to see Ren. She lay still, blood matting her blonde hair and running down her face. The slight breeze took her hat, and it rolled across the road toward the embankment.

Fear and anger. The pulse of purple electricity through my body.

Jokkar stepped out of the ruined building and onto the road. His plated boots ground against the stone floor as he struck a martial pose.

“Look at how easily those who stand against Her fall.” His booming voice filling the open space, only the light pattering of rain and the crackle of burning wood the other sounds to oppose him. He spun the cylindrical mace around in his hands. It was studded at the end. Pearl-like teeth. It had the slight mar of crimson across it. Ren’s blood.

I slowly rose to my feet, which seemed to amuse him.

“You dare stand? Stronger than you look. Max Stun usually puts most down for longer.”

The interlocking parts of the anger and power within me found their purpose. Pain and adrenaline flooded through me in waves as the crackling energy pulsing around my body grew wilder and more intense.

“*Max Stun?*” I grinned, blood running from my mouth. “Don’t mind if I do.”