

*One of the impressive things about fighting other Players was how slow they seemed to use their abilities. For the longest time, it perplexed me - as if they had some manner of a mental block like Wolf and could only use things innately and didn't have a proper grasp of their class or how to interact with the System. Could it also be that they were inferior classes and had worse ability options? Maybe. It sounded cruel of the System to put others on unequal footing, but even by now I had established that the System - or whoever had built it - just didn't care.*

I didn't even send the cards to him - he was starting to suspect they wouldn't do a lot of damage and he could just empower some ability to skewer me with little damage to himself. So I pulled them toward him and let them vanish, instead I threw one of the blankets over him.

He slashed about wildly, getting it out of his way just as Roger slammed a rock into the side of his helmet.

"Knock, knock!" The demon knocked the knight off his feet and leaped atop him, the puppet-body of the woman I had slain now sporting two purple ears from her skull.

I turned to the last of the group as my pact summon tried his best to be a can opener, just as the fourth member ran my hound through. He gave a look to the carnage, and then back to the camp - weighing up his options. Going to get reinforcements was his decision.

Poor choice.

From my hand I split my cards and sent them through the air. The magic one cut into his lower leg, causing him to stumble. An Imp one struck the ground just behind him. Wagons, I commanded. The escapee didn't get much further as an arrow appeared in his chest, right before a surge of electricity pulsed through the left of the camp.

"Don't take too long," I yelled back at Roger as I ran. The repeated clangs from behind as he plied his rock against the armor were the only response I received.

Another explosion bloomed in pale green light from between the wagons and spiked defenses. I swore under my breath. Despite her arrow coming over from there, I couldn't see where she was. A fireball head off from my Imp to the right side of the camp where the grill fire was still burning away at some wooden crates.

I slid into the camp to see Ren leaning up against one of the wagons, breathing heavily. The left sleeve of her blouse had been charred off and etchings of red ran all the way up her arm. Wolf looked equally as injured. Patches of fur had been burned off, and a limp, robed figure lay bloodied in his mouth.

"Lightning spell," Ren hissed, healing herself with radiant light. "Spellcasters are motherfuckers."

"Mfmff," Wolf agreed, before spitting the corpse to the ground. "Taste weirder, too."

Probably not the right time to remind them I was some form of spellcaster. Whatever classes the other three here were, they didn't have the necessary defenses to stop Wolf crumpling them like cardboard.

"You two get healed up and let's pick the camp clean and move on?" I rubbed at my head. Something wasn't right, but I couldn't think what. Adrenaline was draining away, and I felt unaccomplished, barely a handful of Dazzles in that brief fight.

"Max, you need healing too." Ren scowled at me as the redness on her arm faded away.

I looked down, briefly surprised to see how much of my front was soaked with blood. There was some pain there, but I hadn't really focused on it.

"Use some bandages, and probably next time, don't just stand in front of people attacking you." She rolled her eyes. "Even if it did look badass."

"Careful," I grinned. "Shouldn't encourage me." My eyes turned away from her glare as Roger stumbled over in a suit of dented crimson armor.

"Hey, boss... and witch and big dog, I guess."

"Wolf," the bear corrected, as the elf narrowed her eyes.

"Roger," I nodded. "Thanks for your help. How have you been?"

He awkwardly moved over and leaned on one of the spiked walls, the sharpened wood scraping against his metal side. "Can't complain. It's nice to get away from the wives and kids every so often, though."

"Wives and kids," I repeated, slowly looking back at Ren.

"Yeah," his head shuffled like a nod, purple ears atop the helmet waving. "Seven wives, twenty-three kids. Couple more on the way. The gals always dote on me more after some time in this plane, and the kids love the stories."

My imagination was working overtime, but couldn't keep up. "The stories of you murdering people?"

"In a way." He leaned over and creaked further against the spikes. "They see me as an adventurer. Being summoned by you is an honor."

I bowed, not really knowing how else to process all that information. "Always a pleasure when you assist us, Roger."

"Well I'll be going now. Florentine is cooking today and her caramelized mash is to die for." With that said, his body slunk lax as his energy faded away.

There was a brief moment of awkward silence before I turned back to my Party. "Is it bad I wanted to ask him to bring us some of the mash?"

“Get looting, trickster,” Ren said with a sigh. “This place already gives me enough of a bad vibe.”

Glad that it wasn't just me that felt it, I nodded and began looking around as she healed up the bear. As much as it tempted me to take everything not nailed down, the more I cluttered my Inventory the longer it would take me to cycle to what I wanted - even with the speed I could currently do it.

I whistled. “This wizard was *stacked*. Rare robes with Intelligence and Spell Crit Chance, Accessories are all Int or Elemental Damage. You'll probably want the ring with that on.” I turned and spun it in the air to her, easily caught.

Wolf watched her walk off to the corpses back in the woods before turning to me. “You've both exchanged rings now.”

“Huh?” My brain froze for a second. “Oh. No, that's not...”

“You share the same sleeping quarters and dress the same.” His amber eyes bore into me.

For some reason, my brain felt like mud. “I think you are reading too much into it, Wolf.” Technically speaking, we had all share sleeping arrangements at some point - and he too now wore a hat denoting his place in our troupe. No need to grasp for anything further.

He stretched out and look idly over to the woods where the elf had gone. “The details do not concern me. I only wish to ask that you do not leave me behind wherever the path leads.”

I kneeled down on one knee to look him in the eyes. “You have my word, Wolf. Whatever happens, you are part of this team.”

With a grunt, he nodded. “I'm glad I didn't eat you before.”

“Me too.” I stood back to my feet and grinned. My eyes moved around the campground, looking for the most prime sources of loot. A journal lay sprawled on the floor, pages gently moving about in the slight breeze.

I relented to checking it out, despite time being a precious resource. Information was perhaps more valuable than the new robes I sported. The pages flicked across in front of my eyes as I leaned against a crate. Thankfully, this hadn't ended up in the currently burning side of the camp.

My brow furrowed. Nice of them to document things. Recruitment attempts. The process of how all this had been brought forth. Dead wizard and the red knight appeared to be in charge of...

As Ren approached, I turned around and kicked over the crate I had been leaning against. The clatter of glass was accompanied by the lid popping off, dozens of bottles pouring out into a pile on the ground. Most empty, but some full.

“What are those?” the elf asked with her own furrowed brow in full effect.

“Blood.”

Ren kneeled down to inspect one, not willing to touch it with her hands. I joined her by the side of the crate. She flared her nostrils and shook her head. “I suppose the two questions are whose, and why?”

I met her questioning gaze with nothing but a blank expression.

“*Fuck,*” she whispered. “She’s a blood mage or vampire or something?”

All I could do was nod slowly. The information was still trying to worm its way through my brain, and I’d need some quiet time to properly root through the journal properly to get an accurate grasp. A rough formation of the bigger picture took shape, and I squinted to make it out.

Whatever her Level Five skill had been must have granted her this ability. Using her blood, she had somehow offered them power or an end goal that was too good for them to pass up. Either way, it had enabled her to gather up or kill the majority of Players in this area.

Ren sighed and stood again. “At least that gives a little more exposition to what we’re up against. Seems you’re not the only one bullshitting the System.” She moved past me, placing her hand briefly on my shoulder as she moved over to Wolf. “Let’s get moving. I hate the smell of burning.”

I wondered if she had found anything useful on the other figures. Something to go over somewhere safer. “Just have a couple more boxes to check and then we’re good.” My Inventory now had three new full glass bottles in it, as I turned and stood.

“I doubt there’s anything worthwhile.” She gave Wolf a pat on the head. “There’s some new gear for you. That’ll be great.”

Shame they weren’t filled with unused Power Tokens. I was still sore that the Dungeon only gave us two. Ren was probably right though. We had achieved our goal here and there was no sense getting greedy by trying to scour every last container for scraps of loot. If there was a treasure chest, maybe - but the boxes not on fire didn’t look like they’d be filled with anything important or valuable.

“Alright, you’ve won me over with your sound reasoning.” I walked over to join them. “Where should we head to next?”

“I was thinking north,” she replied. “Wait for the area to cool off and see if we can hit a couple Quests until we have more information on where we should strike next.”

Sound reasoning. We were fast becoming the biggest thorn in the side of Crimson Shadow. They were not likely to give us this kind of chance again to act so unopposed.

My mouth opened and closed to signal my agreement, but no words came out. Even as their eyes widened, a numbing pain flooded down my neck. As a radiant heal pulsed through me, the bloodied arrow fell from my neck.

From the woods, Hadrian, mounted atop his horse and followed by four others. As I went to move, ethereal chains appeared around me, keeping me in place. Their archer fired a skill into the air, their arrow bursting into two dozen more, ready to pepper the area.

If we took shelter from the spray, their melee fighters would be upon us before we recovered. Number advantage was theirs. Strength too risky for us to attempt to overcome.

“Both of you run, now.” My eyes blazed with anger, and they didn’t hesitate.

Arrows began clattering around the camp, and I crossed my arms. None of them struck me, more from luck than anything else - but the effect of my indifference had an effect on the approaching five.

“Let them go and I’ll join the Crimson Shadow.” I leveled a stern gaze at the mounted man. Either he would buy it, or I was about to lose my head.

He grinned as his halberd glinted in the sunlight.