

*'Griefing' was something I wasn't particularly familiar with when I came to this world. I could understand it when people were assholes, even in malicious ways - but the ways in which Players could exploit the nature of the System to ruin the days of others was surprising to me. I learned later than the method employed at the bandit camp was called a 'Mob train' where a Player would draw all the aggro in an area and then dump it on someone unsuspecting. Why you'd want to do this rather than just kill your victim yourself, I didn't quite understand. The direct route was often quickest.*

"Fuck!" Ren hissed. "We should run. Should *try* to run."

We were about in crossbow range, maybe a handful of seconds before the melee was inevitable. I didn't particularly trust my cardio enough to believe it could take me far enough away to keep me from danger before the bandits got bored. Didn't even know how long they would chase us before giving up. They were an audience primed for my gradually slipping sanity. My legs had already made the decision for me.

"I'm fighting." I drew a card, split it and sent it out into the throng.

"Max." She worked her jaw. "You don't have to."

"Can't let the fans down," I murmured, a smile curling up at the side of my mouth. The biggest show yet needed an air-tight performance. A true test of what I had learned so far.

My cards cut into the forearms of one bandit, disarming him. I twisted them downward in the figure running behind, in the knees and bringing them to the ground. Let them vanish as a twinge of pain ran down my hand, and instead I drew the Imp card, throwing it off to my side.

The vines of Ren's entangle shot burst out amongst the first group almost at our position, causing some of those running too close behind to collide and trip to the ground. Wolf jumped in, slashing down with his weight and crushing them into the dirt.

"Roger, stay by Ren and keep her safe."

"Yes, boss."

Ren glared at us both. "I don't need your-"

I flipped her off, then withdrew my finger and brought up a card in it instead. Not especially something that was like me, but we only had time for killing and staying alive. What remained of my sensibilities had worn thin. I could rise above the mountain of dead bandits, and keep them all safe, and look fucking good doing it.

Wolf would draw the most aggro, so supporting him in staying alive was the most important thing. Ren would be able to deal with that if she was allowed to act unhindered. The bear wouldn't be able to handle them all, of course, and some of the System-created would go for the softer targets. Roger had a clear directive, and I'd have to trust him on that if I was able to focus on my role in this. The Imp would pelt the approaching horde as often as it could. A little firework display as we went painfully into the night.

A burst of amber surrounded the bear, and at first I thought he had been struck by some manner of spell - but it pulsed through him and empowered him. He finally found a skill to activate.

The first fireball illuminated the first bandit targeting me as it flew past into a more distant group. Purple card up. It flew out and split, circling each other as I curved them through the right arm. They stumbled to clutch at the wound and I brought both back, embedding into the back of their head.

In my peripheral, I could see two had run past Wolf to attack the elf. She put an arrow straight into the forehead of one, while Roger jumped on the other. The crack of bone as he struck out with his mace enough of a tell that they were fine.

Another opponent was already by me. Either things were moving faster now or my brain couldn't process the second to second detail. No matter. Attack the weak points. I sidestepped the swing of their hammer, drew a card out into their hand, holding it there until it cut through their thumb and the weapon dropped. Kicked them in the knee and brought my dagger round, the weapon appearing in my hand as they stumbled.

Reached inside my inside jacket pocket and withdrew a crossbow, firing it off to the milling crowd. Spun it around and replaced it with the second crossbow, letting off the bolt immediately - then the weapon turned into shredded paper to drift away to the ground.

The Dazzle icons racked up across dozens of enemies. Some hadn't been paying attention - and they'd pay for that - but *this was it!* A receptive crowd where you could tangibly see how amazed by the performance they were. My overcooked brain felt great. Sure, by now it was just a skull-shaped bowl of custard, but this new revelation put sprinkles atop it.

A grin that almost drew me into laughter painted my face as my card drew ready. Powered it up, despite the reservations from the nerves in my hand. Wide arcs through the air as if I was trying to draw my name, I carved gashes through two handfuls of banditry, letting go of it only when my fingers started to cramp.

The radiant light of Ren's Smite shot pierced through the neck of a bandit. Roger rose from a new corpse, caked in gore. Wolf was a dervish of slaughter, amassing small wounds of his own until a heal came in from Ren. This drew some aggro from the less mortally wounded bandits - until a fireball struck a trio of them, their burning bodies dropping to the floor.

"Hand the Quest in. We're on a roll!" I jumped up and landed on two chairs that I dropped from my Inventory one after the other in quick succession, a foot on each like a miniature stage.

I spun around twin cards like a halo behind my head. If only I had some explosives to send off confetti or-

<Card Fan> came up a split second too late, a bolt sinking into my chest while a second was deflected. I didn't need the System to tell me my lung had been punctured. The first awkward breath from reflex burned, and that was enough. I dropped to the floor as the chairs vanished and bowed to dodge two further projectiles headed my way.

A fireball slammed into my assailants as another came for me in melee range. I stepped backward, withdrawing a blanket from my sleeve to use to obscure my actions. With a swirl I left a chair in my wake to stagger the bandit, giving myself a brief moment to swig a Health Potion. The bolt fell from my chest as my respiratory organ healed up. Didn't do much for my splitting headache still, *asshole System*.

The Dazzle icons were still stacked up, although much of my potential audience was being chewed up by the bear. As the bandit caught up and swung for me, I caught the weapon with the blanket and wrapped it around, pinning his arm from making any further attacks. Left me with no hands to use magic, however.

An arrow struck him in the side of the head and he slumped over as I whisked back the fabric and his sword into my Inventory.

"Quit showboating," Ren growled. She had a few small wounds of her own, but most of the blood didn't look to be hers.

I shrugged. This was just how I worked, although... I think there was a wedge of mania trying to pry my head apart. A recklessness that I should know better to avoid. If the chest-shot had struck me in the heart or head, it might have been a different story. The Imp gave me a wave to signal his departure, and I nodded my thanks. Time for a new assistant to take the stage.

Numbers were thinning, but I seemed to have drawn the attention of two more bandits. The man dressed in bright purple, wavering like he was drunk, and seemingly mostly attacking with household items probably seemed like a safer bet to engage than the giant form of the thrashing bear.

Into my hand, a poker chip. With a flick, I flung it high into the air over the approaching opponents. It didn't distract them, which was fine. I was beyond simple tricks. Stepping back, I threw a card out, too high to hit them. It struck the poker chip instead, and a magic rune circle appeared in the air above the first bandit - a Hellhound immediately bursting out and landing atop of them.

The Dazzle counter went up by one on the next bandit, unsure if they should stop to help their System-created ally or just run straight toward me. They chose the latter. I held my hand out, my card immediately splitting and zipping off in a staggered manner. As soon as the first bit into the opponent, I brought it back and sent the other. Only doing light damage, but as they stumbled closer, the intervals became shorter until they had to stop to take cover, their face cut to ribbons.

Both cards vanished, and I flicked the running blood from my hand, strode up to them and jammed the stolen sword into their back between their ribs. The hound finished off the other, tearing their throat out - and I sent him over to assist Roger. The demon had a limp left arm and a couple of bolts in his current body, but was still swinging away with the mace, like he was just having a fun day at the park.

Ren looked actually annoyed. I'd be sure to apologize for my part in this as soon as we-

I hit the ground. It wasn't intentional, but an aftereffect of whatever had just hit me. Adrenaline didn't care where or how bad, there was pain somewhere but I was more disorientated than anything. I turned to my back to see a figure above me about to bring down a two-handed axe. To split me in half, like a... oh, no time for that.

The appearance of a wooden chair took the brunt of the swing, the blade wedged almost completely through. He growled in pain as an arrow struck him in the side, and as he tried to dislodge his weapon, I spun up an empowered card like a miniature circular saw. His axe came free, and he stumbled back from the ruined furniture. Then I flicked my card towards him. Ran it up his leg and into his groin. Held it until my hand twitched it away and a second arrow struck him in the side of the skull.

I pushed the remains of the chair away from me, the broken wood no longer having a home in my Inventory. As I rose to my feet, vertigo told me to stay down. But, I wouldn't. Sounds came across echoed and distant, probably an aftereffect of something. It was hard to put my thoughts together. The sun was setting and the last of the bandits were being mopped up, I knew that much. Couldn't decide if I was cold or warm.

Most of my energy went into focusing on breathing, and I was sure I had it down to perfection. The oxygen went in, circled around my blood. I breathed out the rest in hopes of more. My body loved it. It kept me going.

"Boss? *Boss*, you okay?"

I turned my head slowly in case it fell off. It was hard to say that my pact demon looked concerned, as his face, hiding behind the corpse of another, looked more terrifying than any other emotion. Still, he was asking.

"I'm fine," I smiled, with way too much blood coming out of my mouth alongside those few words to make it seem genuine.

A hand placed on my back, and I felt a warmth radiating throughout me. Expecting some sharp words to be plunged between my shoulder blades, I was shocked and maybe disappointed to hear the soft voice behind me instead.

"Let's not do that again."

She moved away, and I shivered from her absence, as if she had taken my body heat along with her. Wolf came over. He was panting heavily, the whole front half of his body completely soaked through with blood and gore. He said nothing at first, a thousand-yard stare in his amber eyes, before finally he looked up at me.

"That was *actually* traumatic."

Roger scratched his back with his mace. "You get used to it." He then held out the weapon for me to take into my Inventory. "I'd like to use that again next time, boss."

I nodded as he faded away, leaving the empty body to slump to the floor.

"It's not usually that... intense," my apology to the bear tugging at my insides, feeling like we may have dragged him into something more than he bargained for.

He slowly nodded at me. "I don't like to rush my meals. I will have a stomach upset tomorrow."

"Hmm." I blinked my eyes slowly, trying to not take in the carnage or acknowledge any of my injuries. "That went from bad to worse pretty quickly. Nice of the Lady to send someone to help us power level."

Wolf pawed at his nose before shaking his head, spattering the area in droplets of crimson. "Ren said something about knowing the horse-meat man."

"Oh?" I turned around, my eyebrow raised, to see where she had wandered off to.