

*Going into a situation with only half the necessary information was a cue to have the gaps labored with whatever the System deemed the most dire. A glass half full was all well and good until fate used your blood to top it off. Unfortunately, knowledge was scarce at the best of times, limited by time or untenable emotions. Work with what you had, and hope that what you gained was greater than what you lost. Learn the hard way, as long as you actually learned.*

The rest of our journey was done in near silence. Both from the weight of the task ahead, alongside the reflections of our past memories. Growing closer as a Party. Friendships and proper emotional connections that I hadn't had previously in my adult life. Every step up that ladder making the inevitable fall all the more dangerous. How would I even deal with Ren dying if I survived?

I supposed the answer was no different from all the other people who had died in my life. Despite knowing the elf only a short time, she had left a bright mark on my life. Part of me... cared deeply for her. We had become each others coping mechanism. She accepted my flaws, tolerated me when I wavered, and pushed me to be better.

"I regret having to tell you this," she began as she walked beside me. "But I respect you a little more for wearing this kind of outfit constantly. It's not the most comfortable."

"You get used to it." I grinned. "Eventually. Form fitting clothing is more for the appearance than comfort. Short term."

She gave a dull glare out at the woods. "I'll get used to it."

I found it an amusing thing for her to be so stubborn about. Even though her reasoning had some basis that made sense - she wanted us to look like more of a team, and it might help with my performance tricks - it seemed to make her somewhat uncomfortable in more ways than one. I felt on edge, so I opted to rock the boat.

"Good. Confidence is part of making the act seem authentic."

She scowled at me in my peripheral as I looked ahead. "Dickbag. You know I'll never do the fake smile thing."

I nodded and turned to look her in her eyes. "That's fine. I'll never ask you to do anything you don't want to do. This is all your choice."

Wolf sidled up beside us with a huff, a small bowler hat sitting atop his head. Black, with a purple ribbon around it. "This is my choice, too." He looked up at me with his amber eyes, looking more like he wanted us to be quiet than anything.

A wide grin spread across my face. Even Ren looked a little amused.

The expression slowly wore from our faces the further we traveled. Despite my unbridled joy at our shared theme now, those coordinates were getting closer. Some distraction along the way would have been nice, but the System saw the route we led ourselves down and we saw barely a woodland critter.

Wolf stopped, his snout probing the air as he sniffed. "Close. Group of smells, but no Hadrian or horse."

I nodded. The Map said we'd be there soon. The bear seemed to have a good a nose as the elf did eyes. Perfect, as I had good taste.

My jaw worked, already knowing some of the answers to the impending question. "Does our plan change if he isn't there? How should we approach?"

We paused to gather ourselves. Ren removed her hat to rub at her head. "We'll just kill whoever is there, then. So, either we just charge in, try to be stealthy and pick them off from range, or... try to get information from them." She narrowed her eyes at me as if that was certainly my plan out of the three.

"What?" I shrugged. "You were thinking I was about to suggest I go in disguise and try to join them to see if they let up on anything useful?"

Neither of them said anything, but their expressions told me that is exactly what they thought. It would have been such a good plan, too. Maybe when there was less at stake. "I was actually going to say a bit of both should work. If we can attack from range at one angle and they hunker down behind cover - we'll get Wolf to charge in from a different way."

"Sounds good to me," the bear nodded.

"Rather than head straight on, then." Ren unfocused as she looked at her Map. "We'll circle to the East slightly, and then split with Wolf and go toward the North East more?"

"Perfect," I agreed, and we started walking again.

Although they might not be expecting combat, the route straight from the town would be the most likely direction people who appear from and their camp would be designed with that in mind. If they were smart enough or thought it was a threat, anyway. We had experienced nothing but reckless arrogance from their members so far.

It would be nice to know more about their purpose and how the Lady was gathering such forces in so little time... but if she had left the area, then cleansing it of their evil was the second best thing.

And before I could busy myself with any further distractions, we had visual on their camp. A loose gathering of assumed stolen wagons with a perimeter lined with spiked wooden constructions.

"Cheval de frise," Ren muttered, somehow filling in my mental blank for the correct term. The fact that she even put on the accent when saying it did odd things to my internal organs.

We backtracked a little, so that we were out of sight, and left Wolf. The signal was simple - when things went bad, come and join in. He was already licking his lips in anticipation. With the inclusion of the bowler hat, it was somehow more unsettling.

Ren and I circled around. My mouth felt dry and the low murmurs of our targets conversations were just in earshot as we kept ourselves out of line of sight. It was hard to not feel like a bad guy when we were actively stalking out people we intended to murder. I had once thought the System would have certain walls up to prevent this sort of thing, but it turned out to be more brutal and real than the casual video-game-esque experience it had originally waved in front of my eyes.

We stopped at the helpful cover of a small bulge in the ground when a tree sat, a minor hill blocking our visuals as we peered over to observe our prey. I could see at least three figures, maybe four. Awake and alert. Two of them conversing beside a grill. One a little way off on a chair, a mug in her hand.

“Four to six targets, unknown levels or classes. Most defenses are wooden in nature. Two of the wagons offer cover against our position.” Ren reeled off some information so that we were on the same page.

“Eliminate threats first. Focus ranged and casters.” My response was shrewd, but I understood the basics. Destroying the cover first gave us an advantage, but taking out a key target or two before they could act left a lot of danger in the dirt rather than leveled at us. Despite my predilection for getting into the thick of danger, pelting from a distance sounded preferable.

She nodded and withdrew an arrow. She whispered a word in elven that the System didn't care to translate, but with the swirl of blue around the projectile, I assumed it was 'water'.

I threw an Imp card out to our right further, to have him appear hidden amongst some trees. Mentally, I told him to target wagons once Ren had fired. His little arm waving in response told me he understood. Then I drew a magic card and split it in two. At this distance, I wouldn't be able to pick out necks or other soft spots, so dealing damage would have to do.

Ren aimed and then let loose the magical arrow. I could see her intent - hit one by the grill in anticipation that the water might splash onto the hot metal and cause steam to rise up, obscuring their vision. If only I had something to appear from the cloud, that would have been perfect.

Instead, a flash of light blue rolled over the camp as her arrow struck a previously invisible barrier, domed over it.

“Fuck!” she hissed and dropped to the floor beside me.

“*Enemies!*” a voice growled out.

“*Who's out there? Show yourselves and we might allow you mercy.*”

“*Looks like it came from the north east,*” a third voice offered.

The sounds of spells and buffs being cast and weapons being drawn were soon accompanied by boots on dirt.

*“Don’t wander too far from camp. Three of you guard Gustov so the barrier stays up. You three come with me.”*

Eight in total, then. The spellcaster defending the camp was the biggest issue and the one probably hardest to reach currently. Wolf hadn’t jumped the gun, which was great. I just had to think a little harder. Imp vanished, and I brought out the last glass bottle of oil.

Footsteps grew closer, and one of the opponents was humming with energy. No more jeers or offers of mercy; they were tense. Somehow, I remained calm. Ren’s jaw was clenched, and an arrow was clutched at the ready, but she was waiting it out. These people weren’t likely to be caught in trying to duel me for their ego. Killed on sight. Crossbow into my right hand, left holding a card I was empowering. Ren waited for the signal.

*“Fuck! Fire!”* a voiced yelled back from the camp.

Good. They had left the grill out in their hurry, and my demonic dove had delivered the oil without being spotted. The magical dome only blocked actual attacks - that was good information.

*“We’re being played for fools here,”* a nearby voice growled. *“They must be nearer the West.”* There was a pause, as if they were surveying the area one last time, before they staggered off further to the right.

With their backs turned, this was our best chance.

I leaped to my feet to peer over the hill and let my card off, pulling the trigger of the crossbow. Ren followed suit almost as my shadow, the green and gold entangling shot arcing through the air just behind my shots.

A knight in crimson armor turned to block my bolt with a flare of red, my card passing beyond him to strike a robed figure across the face. The entangling shot rooted the wounded spellcaster and slim man in leathers, but didn’t affect the knight or a woman in a padded gambeson.

She was faster than the knight, a blur of red around her feet as she rushed toward us. The hand-print of crimson across her angered face a contrast to her short blonde hair. Her held weapon - an axe - burst into flame as she prepared to strike at me.

Her footing stumbled as she tripped over thin air, falling to the floor and sliding down the slight incline toward us as the wooden chair appeared back into view. My Hellhound leaped from behind me and immediately tore at her throat.

Heavy plated footsteps thundered right after, a radiant arrow causing him to have to lift his shield up to block the damage. Full helm, but this one only had a mess of small circles rather than a handy eye-slot. The symbol of the hand-print was on his shield in deep black. I didn’t really have much to deal with heavy armor, so I just stood in place.

The roar of Wolf came from our side. Those four in the campground were about to have a very bad day. We needed to get in and support him.

"Stop," I told the knight.

He reached for me and swung his sword. With a flash of radiant light, it cut through my suit and into my skin - straight from my left shoulder to chest.

"Stop. I mean you no harm," I repeated, with a friendly smile.

He hesitated. Ren fired off an arrow, and he didn't have the reaction time to block it. It wasn't aimed for him, however, but for the injured spellcaster - who now also had an arrow through his head.

I threw up a blanket and went to dive away, but the knight shot out a beam of blue light that struck me and drew me closer to him like a fishing line. My feet caught on the ground and I stumbled backwards, right as his sword came down to meet me.

Card Fan blocked the slash, but I felt pain across my back. An elven word whispered across my ears before the sound of shattering glass hit the plated figure. I turned away to face him, seeing some of his metallic armor melting away. Acid. Some manner of fantasy stuff, as I didn't think it worked so effectively in my world.

Magic card out, and he raised his shield to block it. I stopped it before it struck and circled it around him. Humming to myself, I let it orbit him before splitting it. He was briefly dumbstruck, trying to avoid the attack or anticipate when I'd circle them in.

"Go help Wolf," I told Ren. "I've got it here."

She nodded and was off. No doubt in her mind that I believe what I said. The other combatant was out of the entangle now and was being harried by the Hellhound.

"You've been great," I grinned widely. "But now it's time for you to go."