

*On reflection, as I look back at the different passages of text within my diary... or memoirs? I haven't decided on that. Everything has such a sour slant to it. I let the good days stay as memories, but allowed the bad times to paint these pages as if they were somehow more important. More painful, and more plentiful—sure, but my heart wasn't driven by that. It kept them away from my day-to-day; I supposed. Left me to relish on what good times I truly had amidst the struggles.*

I reappeared under my hat, as I spun away from the inert System-created that had been wearing it. <Demonic Transposition> put the demonic bird I had hidden beneath the purple headwear where I had been standing, and immediately the bird flew into the face of the wizard. Distraction was a powerful tool, not just for a magician, but for anyone looking to keep their brain in their skull for as long as possible.

The new main attraction on stage was Wolf, a grizzly bear who was a brawler beyond comparison. Even with his newly acquired padded waistcoat and bowler hat, there could be no denying he was a fearful sight to behold. Easily towering above any humanoid when on his back feet, the System had decided making him a Player with offensive and defensive abilities was a good idea—turning a powerhouse into a walking whirlwind of destruction.

More importantly, he was also my biggest fan.

Less impressed were the Crimson Shadow members, now somewhat caught off-guard by the large creature blazing towards them, while I had taken a bow and was waiting in the wings. Not idle, however, as a purple card of magical energy blazed in my hand.

The wizard cast a shield that flickered red, and my dove was suddenly immolated from touching it. As he jerked away from the resulting flash, my aim faltered. Swerving through the statuesque villagers, I missed the mark of his neck and instead struck him in the side of the face, slicing open his cheek and severing his tongue. I wasn't about to wait and find out if he could still cast spells, so I moved back through the small forest of passive System-created to get more cover.

With a roar, the giantess had strode towards Wolf, her weapons blazing a deep orange as they went to clash. The crocodile-like man had slipped back and was trying to gain some positional advantage rather than face the large bear head-on.

Cran turned to face me, anger painting his face deeper than the layer of filth he embodied. "What manner of trick is this?" he growled as he moved to hunt me down, weapons moving into his hands.

"This is just the opening performance," I said with a grin, moving further away through the villagers and toward one of the cottages. "For me anyway. This is your final act."

"Bastard!" He jumped forward, stalking me as fury blazed through his eyes. Slashing through the inert System-created with his curved blades, their limp bodies falling to the floor as he killed them without care.

Somewhat callous, even if they weren't 'real' in some sense. I was using them as human shields, of course, so I couldn't exactly take the high ground. The sight of it irked me though, and speaking of which...

I clapped my hands together, and a cloud of thick fog suddenly enveloped me. My [Wand of Fog Cloud] attached to the inside of my sleeve in the specially created holster activating at my command. A purple card left my hand and circled out, illuminating a trail through the dense gray shielding me from his intense search. The aim wasn't really to strike him, even if I had a pretty good idea where he was due to the angered grunting he persisted with.

From my Inventory, a mace popped into the grip of my right hand. Judging based on memory, I lobbed it out into the fog. It did not clatter to the floor, which just made me grin wider. The sound of breaking wood from near the fire was accompanied by the sound of Wolf roaring. The large woman must be quite sturdy to still be holding up against him. Perhaps I should take a peak.

My hands clapped together again and the fog instantly vanished. The ability canceled with a thought but I added the physical actions to make it more of a show. Cran immediately locked eyes with me from a dozen feet away, my magic card having misled him to where I was not. The true trick was when I had dropped my <Pact Demon> card, just as we had been obscured.

The demon struck the man a split second after the fog cleared, the spiked mace crushing into his skull. Cran convulsed as he dropped to the floor and Roger struck him once again to make sure the deed was done. He turned to me as he did so, a wide smile on the body of the slain villager that he was possessing. The eyes replaced with pits of bright purple, while two similarly colored rabbit ears had burst from the top of the puppet's skull.

"Hey, boss! This fucker didn't see me coming, huh? *Dumbshit.*"

I gave him a nod, my focus more on the battlefield in its entirety at this point to engage with him in conversation. The wizard had a hand over his mouth, blood still seeping through his fingers, while his other hand was casting a buff on the tall woman. Keeping her in the fight—if only barely.

The crocodile person lay against a table, their vacant eyes staring up at the sky as three arrows protruded from their body. Shoulder, lungs, heart. My eyes went up to the top of one of the buildings to see her. My protégé and the last to round out our trio. Three point five, if you counted Roger.

The elf was dressed in a blue waistcoat over a white blouse. Her deep blue top hat was wider and shorter than mine, and hid her radiant blonde hair. Even at this distance, I could see the glare of her bright blue eyes scour the village center as she drew another arrow to her bow. While not as proficient in trickery as I was, she made up for it by being able to kill things from a distance, and healing me up when I eventually split my head open on something.

It was worrying how common an occurrence that was.

I empowered a card up and sent it out in an arc, controlling it through the air around the villagers still standing. Before it reached its target, I split it. One magic and one a demon summon. Blood ran down my hand, but I wasn't quite overexerting myself. Yet. The System didn't like me using <Pick a Card+> this way, but a little bloodletting wouldn't dissuade me from persisting.

The purple card struck the renewed magic shield of the wizard, the bright red flickering but not failing. His eyes turned toward me, to see where I was attacking from—and that was my plan. The second card passed behind him as he turned, hitting the nearby table. A Hellhound+ burst out from a magic circle of hellish runes and leaped atop the robed man, bursting through his shield and gnashing at the extended casting arm.

Wolf swiped and struck the woman, breaking whatever enchantment was keeping her up. A wide gash of crimson spread across her torso from his claws, and she stumbled backward. Her weapon blurred as she readied a counter, then an arrow pierced through her shoulder. Arm now weakened and falling limp, the giant bear crashed atop her and wrapped his jaws around her head. Crunch, like a watermelon.

Mentally, I told the hound to keep the wizard alive. Walking over, I dusted off the dried blood from my head. Down to two vials of the Lady's blood, but we hadn't found another use for them aside from taunting the Crimson Shadow. Good thing they only had an effect when drunk, not just used as face paint, otherwise that would have been a short-lived mistake.

Ren dropped down from the house and walked over to join me while Wolf continued to chew through the corpse of the fallen woman. Her scowl was the default look her face usually held, but there was an additional hint of annoyance to it. I had become somewhat proficient in gauging her actual mood, but waited for the coming admonishment to be sure.

"You saved the only one unable to talk?" She stood and crossed her arms across her chest.

I raised my eyebrow at the remnants of the gang holding the village hostage. "In fairness, I haven't personally killed anyone."

She rolled her eyes, but knew I was right.

Technically, anyway. Cran would have been the best to save for questioning, and I had summoned Roger to take care of him. Wizard was second best, and I had done a number on his mouth. Perhaps it wasn't too bad that we couldn't heal him?

"Hey, Boss?" Roger awkwardly stumbled his puppet body over to me. "Glad you're still kickin' after the trouble in that deathtrap. I knew you'd fuck up that metal shitcan."

"Hardly broke a sweat," I lied. Broke plenty of things in Jokkar and it was only luck and my persistent practice with my craft that got me the small opportunity to win.

He handed over his weapon. "You can have the mace back. It's fuckin' fun, but I'm eager to expand my... repertoire."

"Of course," I nodded and furrowed my brow. "What were you thinking?"

“Let me have a think, yeah? Looks like you got the rest of these fucks already, so I’ll go for now? Barbs promised me a foot massage and we both know where that kinda shit leads.” He turned toward Ren and gave the elf a half-wink with the awkwardly controlled body.

“Thanks... Roger.” I gave him a brief bow and the purple energy blew away in an unfelt breeze, the inert body dropping back to the floor. Letting the breath out of my nose slowly, I allowed most of that conversation to sink out of my head.

Turning back to the problem at hand, Ren also seemed eager I focus on the maimed man currently being pinned by the upgraded canine rather than address anything my demon had said. “Good boy,” I gestured for him to drop the wizard, and he did so. He panted at me, his tongue lolling out from a blood-soaked mouth, before he trotted over to the elf for pets.

I stepped over to the man. He wasn’t in very good shape, and although I wasn’t a fan of torture, I also had no mercy for those who killed other Players under the name of the Lady. The three heads decorating the warning sign outside the village were enough for me to condemn them to death... but then again, that wasn’t exactly the magician side of me making that decision.

Two different versions of me had somehow wandered into the portal taking us to this world at the same time. The first, a workaholic magician tired of the grind but unable to stop craving the adoration and praise. The second, a Demon Hunter from a world where Hell was a literal thing. He was also a magician, which is where the System blended the two realities to make my current Class. We had become fully merged after I suffered a near-fatal blow from a... well, best not dwell on those sorts of things.

The point I was trying to get at was he was a lot more used to death and brought the callous attitude to the mix. While I certainly had a lot of... care for those around me, I thought as my eyes drifted back to the elf, my enemies saw none of it. The wizard being no exception.

Other than the split mouth and tongue, the Hellhound+ had shredded most of his right arm and some of his leg, his robes dark and soaked with blood. I crouched down beside him.

“Don’t even think about trying to cast a spell. Your fate depends on how far your common sense can take you.” In truth, he might be able to get something out before I could react. He was somewhat outnumbered, however, and unless he planned on coring my head, I would probably survive whatever attempt he made—especially with Ren’s Oathwarden abilities tuned to keeping me on my feet.

“Is it even worth saving him?” Ren stood behind me now, her arms still crossed. “Does he have any answers that will be useful to us?”

Internally, I grinned. I was ninety percent sure she had got the ball rolling on the good-cop, bad-cop act. Although, usually I preferred to be the bad cop, as it was endearing to see the Oathwarden have to play nice when it was so opposite to the constant scowl she gave the world. Most of the world.

“He looked like the smartest of the bunch. He probably would share information, right?” I raised my eyebrows toward him and gave the slightest of nods.

He gurgled and stared at me with a pained expression across panicked eyes.

“See? Useless. Put a knife on him and let’s get going.” Ren shuffled her feet in the dirt to sell the idea.

I shrugged and removed my [Knife of the Trickster].

Wolf came over, putting his gore covered muzzle close to the panicked wizard and sniffing at him with his nose. “Can I have him if you’re done?”

In hearing the bear talk, the Shadow squirmed in shock, apparently at his limits of how wide-eyed and out of his element he could be. Wolf was smart for a bear, but other than being my new assistant-in-training, his desires were simple and mostly involved filling his stomach.

“Well...” I pulled a face and wiggled the blade in my hand. “If he isn’t going to give any answers...”

The man removed his shaking hands from his split mouth and tried to mime a shape with his fingers. Some manner of rectangle. He looked pale, like he was close to passing out from shock, if not blood loss.

“Hmm, the book?” I brought up my Inventory in the side of my vision. “Answers are in the book?”

He nodded eagerly, bloodied hands going back to cover his shorn mouth.

“Oh,” I said, giving Wolf the nod before grinning at the spellcaster. “I suppose we don’t need you then, huh?”