

*Even as I sit here, so far beyond that day, I still remember it clearly. The time I grew tired of blood. Well, maybe not tired - but an uncomfortable acceptance for it became part of my repertoire. You had to be cold to survive. That's why you needed to surround yourself with things that warmed your heart and soul, otherwise you just end up frozen and forgotten.*

I drew heavy breaths as I applied another bandage. Wounds closed back up. My hands kept on bleeding despite the fact I could not see any cuts. Something to do with the mana manipulation, no doubt. While the progress bar on my healing sauntered towards the finish line, I idly threw a card out.

After about fifteen feet, I curved it around to return to me - and I caught it from the air like a boomerang. With a twinge of pain down my arm, I put a pulse of power back into it, renewing its lifespan instead of letting it fade away.

Slowly and painfully, I was gaining better control. The magic deck now sat in my chest pocket of the purple jacket. Now that I could draw the cards without needing to touch it physically, it left one of my hands open.

I had managed to chew through half of the camp so far, and the inert corpses of those I had maimed were a quick ticket to trauma town. Even knowing they weren't truly real, they acted like it. Bled and died the same. I'm assuming, anyway - what knowledge I had of death seemed to be locked away in the back of my brain next to my personal baggage on the subject.

One wagon group, the two at the table, and a pair on patrol were all that remained.

Humming to myself again, I conjured up another Imp card to replace the last who had returned just prior. I had sent him off with a bow of gratitude, and as the new one crawled into existence from the magic circle, he looked in good enough spirits to assist. His tiny nose was a little stubbier and horns a little longer, but he was built the same as his brethren.

Now this was the harder part - the table was relatively close to the wagon, and I had a feeling that I would pull the whole group if I was sloppy. At this stage, I was feeling pretty sloppy. What had started out as a rough ride through some manner of video game world had become gritty and exhausting. Then again, this wasn't supposed to be a one-person job.

I had the feeling that groups - or Parties - were meant to be the default. It only made sense when you had classes with different strengths and weaknesses. Put me behind a knight who could take a beating and this would have been a breeze. Perhaps Ren was just trying to get me killed without the blood being on her hands? I shook these thoughts from my head.

The clock was still running, and I still had time to put in. We had discussed respawning before, and if fresh bandits started to move in to the empty spots, then I'd find myself in a lot of trouble.

Patrol first.

I waited till they were out of the way, putting myself back down closer to the side of the actual camp. From here I could even smell the leathers, the fat used on the tents to

waterproof them, the smell of charcoal briefly in the air... and a lot of body odor. No mystical scent of the heirloom, and the STAR just blindly pointed into the middle of the camp.

The card spun over my hand as I held it aloft, and then by my will it flew towards the two bandits. As if steering it with my hands, I slammed it into the side of the throat of one, pulling it to the side like a blade to open up the arteries and windpipe. I dropped the card as my fingers ached and prepared to draw another - before my Imp let off his fireball.

This one was slightly different than the others, and as I watched it illuminate the path towards the second patrolling man, there was crackling red lightning arcing all over the ball of fire.

It struck the man and burst, the explosion easily double that of a normal attack. The heat escaped into the air with a puff of smoke as the bandit dropped to his knees, his upper torso ablaze with flame.

*"Hey, what's that?"*

*"We're under attack!"*

The Imp looked up at me sheepishly as I scowled at him. "Overachieving is the fast track to ruin," I muttered to him. We started to back away, as the tents were blocking a proper view of the campsite - but it sounded like the table pair had noticed our impromptu firework display.

A card hovered into the air as the two rounded one of the tents and came into view. Both of them wielding crossbows, which seemed remarkably unfair to me. The Imp charged up another attack as my card went out - slightly wide due to my apprehension about the sharp ends of those projectiles.

The purple magic tore into the shoulder of the man on the left, only just disrupting his aim as they both fired. A warm pain radiated across my chest as the bolt struck one of my ribs, skirting around into the softer flesh instead of breaking it. The second bolt was aimed true - and burst into the forehead of my Imp.

As he started to fade into mist, he held a hand up into the air - either for me to help him, or in apology for bringing this on himself. A brief nod of acceptance and finality was all that I could offer him, alongside a beaming smile despite the burning anger within me.

The next card was out already, as one started to reload and the other dropped the ranged weapon to approach me with a sword drawn. My left hand held my right wrist and my hand shook from the pain, in the hopes that it would stop my hand from bursting away from my body. I curved the glowing purple rectangle through the air, cutting at the back of the enemy's ankle, then back across his other calf. As he started to drop to the floor, I moved the sharp magic across him, side to side until it reached his throat, leaving a zig-zag of crimson to soak through his plain linens.

With a flick, I dispensed the card across and into the forehead of the crossbow bandit, cracking and embedding into his skull just as he had done to my demon. I scowled as the blood soaked through my jacket as it ran from my hand. I wouldn't be able to do much more of this without causing myself actual ruin.

I sighed as the two bodies sunk to the floor and my card dissipated. Now that my hands were slowly running out of use, I made the discovery that I could manipulate the STAR mentally with my willpower too. *Now* we were talking - briefly all manner of application circled through my mind, all the tricks I could do by accessing my Inventory in secret. In this instance, I actually went through the Health tab.

[Right Hand - No recent injury]

[Left Hand - No recent Injury]

That didn't seem right, on account of the amount of blood I was currently losing from the two. Unless the blood was all in my head? Some byproduct of using demonic magic? I would have to ask Ren next time I saw her. If I saw her again. Despite my trust of the elf, part of me did wonder if she had just dropped me off at bandit daycare so that she could go and do adult stuff. Like murder.

Only three bandits left? I felt slightly silly for having to go through the whole came to get what I came for - but none of them I had looted had the heirloom, and when I had the high ground, I saw no obvious looking treasure chests. I guess now it was time to head into the camp proper to search around.

I skirted between two of the tents, towards the central campfire, peering around to make sure I hadn't missed any groups. The wagon group stood just off to the side in idle conversation. From my deck I conjured the Summon Imp card, but was confused when it was monochrome - as though it was inert or spent. Perhaps I could only do so many in a certain time span.

Well, <Summon Demon: Hellhound> it was then. The card burned away as a magic circle spun near my feet and the demonic canine rose from the beyond. I gave him a pet on the head, and he nuzzled into it.

Standing once more, I shook the pooled blood from my arm and withdrew a purple card. The Hellhound crouched low, ready to leap off into a sprint at my behest. There was some slight hesitation within me as I didn't want him to get injured like the Imp, but I knew I couldn't stop him from eagerly doing his duty. I would just have to do my best.

I empowered my card, focusing my mana on this single one - and was contented to see it glow brighter. Instead of this one spinning through the air, I pushed it flat, a trail of bright energy scoring the air behind it as it went at almost twice the speed. Just as it was about to collide with one of the bandits, I pointed to fingers upwards, and it corrected course. Now briefly going directly up before entering the underside of the man's chin.

While attacking the neck was getting pretty old, it seemed like the quickest way of encouraging the bandits to shuffle off this mortal plane. Even if it didn't kill them outright, they'd still grasp at the wounds or struggle with the blood or breathing. Once they started wearing neck armor, then I'd be a little more inventive.

The Hellhound sprinted off to one of the others, mostly just keeping them at bay with growls and bowing away. If they went to hit the hound, he would move away. If they started to come for me, my demon friend would start to nip at them. It was surprisingly effective and allowed

me to whip round another card to slay one and humble the other enough to where the hound could bring him down and have a snack to eat.

I stumbled over to the bodies with a groan and looked through all the loot.

Still no heirloom. I looked down at the STAR, which just pointed me toward the campfire. With a sigh, I just closed my eyes. So tired, despite it still being barely afternoon, early afternoon at worst. As I opened my eyes again, something caught my attention.

Just past the inert campfire, nestled against some of the tents in a position that would have been blocked from the ridge above - was a chest.

Or at least some kind of wooden locker. Wearily, I approached it, allowing my hound to do whatever he liked. With iron struts and a lacquered wooden finish, it almost looked too pristine for a bandit encampment - but perhaps it was stolen too. Bending over, I tried to grasp at the latch.

[Locked]

Ah. Typical, now where was I going to find a- the growling of my hound distracted my thoughts.

I turned at the sound of footsteps. Large furred boots, way too much skin exposed aside from a loincloth and bearskin cloak. A large two-handed axe, which was already on the upswing towards me.

[New Monster: Bandit Leader <3>]

Before I fully realized it, I was tumbling across the floor. I didn't need the System to tell me that I had broken ribs, and that the soft wet parts my hands were clutched against were probably meant to be in my body.

"Trying to steal from me, eh? Nobody steals from me."

The following crunch and whine told me my pup did no better against the axe. With pained determination, I brought forth the healing leaf and crushed it, a pulse of radiant light washing over me and healing over my wounds. No time to bandage while he was still alive, so this would have to do.

[Health Critical - 35%]

The leader flicked my blood from his axe as he stepped toward me, my own legs seemingly unable to offer the same support.