

*Sometimes I tried to look back and find the point where my real world illusion mixed with the magical abilities I now had. I had treated the deck of cards just like any other, fiddling, moving them around, and trying to extend my capabilities any chance I had. It was perhaps one of the things that smoothed over the jolt of joining the System. Something similar, but slightly off. The answer I could never pinpoint. As soon as I had recovered from my head injury and sent the first card off - it was a natural part of me.*

The cards span off into the room through the slim gap in the wood, and I split them out of view towards the seated bandits.

“Ow, the fuck?”

“Who was that?”

Ren exhaled from behind me. “Didn’t kill them?”

Footsteps thudded towards the door, and I shook my head. It wasn’t just the near-blind attack that dampened my first blow, but they also hadn’t been as fragile as the bandits we had fought on the island.

“Hold this and duck,” the elf pushed her sword into my hand as I threw down the Hellhound card to summon a demon before the door.

With a hefty kick, the door burst open - the first thief, a slender man with tied back brown hair and a nasty-looking slice across his face. The arrow to the eye socket did little to improve his appearance - and even as he dropped, blocking the way of the second thief, I threw out the rabbit card to allow Roger to inhabit him.

Ren awkwardly drew a second arrow in the confined space, this one bursting into a radiant glow as she aimed her Smite Strike.

The first thief regained his footing as purple ears burst from his skull, leaping at the more portly second enemy and knocking them to the floor.

“I’m a giant againnnn,” the demonic growled, trying to choke out the prone figure.

The Hellhound ran into the room as the other occupants readied their weapons toward us, the radiant arrow arcing over him to slam into the chest of a thief near the back.

“Go now,” she quickly slung the bow and took back her sword.

I stood back up and threw out a purple card, splitting in the air over Roger and embedding into the raised arm of a thief trying to cudgel the demon off his comrade.

Another two cards struck the same man, but he didn’t drop. My right eye twitched at the System pop-up.

[New Monster: Thief <7>]

Ah, that might be why. I hadn't checked the level of the Quests as we accepted them, assuming that Ren would have bought it up if it was going to be any issue. It wouldn't be, I was sure... just a little more of a slog that I had hoped.

"At last, a worthy audience," I boomed, slightly distracting those not currently being throttled to death. My hat dropped from my head and I reached inside to withdraw a sword twice as long as the hat was deep. I then flipped the hat back up onto my head perfectly - that one was a hard coded skill from months of practice.

The sword felt awkward to wield - but with some effort I swung it around in a wide arc at the thief with a cudgel. He raised his weapon in an attempt to block - and then my sword vanished and instead one highly powered card zipped from my grip, below his raised weapon and into his throat.

"He's dead, Roger." I sighed and put Card Fan up by reflex to block a crossbow bolt.

The Hellhound whined and withdrew as he became outnumbered, sporting a gash down his right flank. Ren leaped over the dead body as my pact demon stood to his feet, her sword glowing a light blue as she swung it through the air.

My eyes blinked as I could see a little hovering box depicting Dazzle stacks by each of the remaining two thieves - no... there should be three? My eyes darted around the room as a card spun in my hand. Ren had engaged the crossbow thief, and the hound was harrying the other to keep it from gaining the advantage against the elf. There was a doorway out of here, but...

I spun the card out and split it, causing them both to circle around me with a slowly increasing diameter. My hand started to bleed, but then- there.

One of them struck something in mid-air to my left and a muscled man appeared into view again. My fist flashed out, and I punched him in the chest. Which did nothing.

He chuckled. "Weak!"

I threw out another punch, hitting him ineffectively. His grin widened, and he raised his weapon. My next punch he had all the confidence in the world that he wouldn't need to block. At the last moment, my dagger appeared in my hand, stabbing straight into his lungs. He stumbled backward and swung for me, my Card Fan shimmering out from the blow, the force sending me stumbling backward.

Roger and the Hellhound had taken the other thief down, the demon continuing the strike the inert figure with something heavy as Ren withdrew her sword from the guts of the last. She kicked the female thief to the floor and finished her off by slitting the throat of the wounded System-created.

Not too shabby. Being able to see the Dazzle stacks just incentivized me to go for racking those up. It was probably a fool's errand to chase down more dopamine in the process of murder, but my mind had already bolted from the stable and hungrily rooted around for ideas amongst the fertile ground.

Ren furrowed her brow further and wiped her sword off on the dead body. "You're really looting all that junk?"

The thieves had been gambling, and the table had an assortment of interesting little things. Poker chips, small trays, and even some dice. By far the most important thing was a pack of loose cards. "Yeah, trust me. Oh, I'll have that crossbow too, if you don't want it?"

"Sure." She shrugged, retrieving it from the floor for me.

I flipped one of the poker chips into the air. Once it spun back into my hand, I flipped it again - only now it was a golden coin. As the coin touched my hand, a purple card repeated the same process.

"You're... exceptionally quick at switching through Inventory items." Ren tilted her head as she handed over the weapon.

"Mmm, it's just remembering where everything is, mostly. Like sleight of hand, but for my brain."

"So just thinking quickly, then." She rolled her eyes.

Roger stood up from the body and dropped the rock he had been carrying. "Being a giant is powerful," he hissed.

"You're normal size, it was the goblins that were..." his form dissolved into mist as he transferred to a body he hadn't beat to a pulp. "Never mind."

"I know he is a demon, but you shouldn't let him maim bodies."

I opened my mouth to disagree, but she had a point. It wasn't as though he was a child, but I was still responsible for how he interacted with the world. He stood up in the body of the crossbow-thief, his ears bursting from her skull.

"Roger, don't play with dead bodies. Kill the target and then move on." I wasn't used to being stern, but being bound by a pact should at least carry some of the weight of my request.

"Right, boss." He looked down at the mashed head of the dead thief, but didn't have anything further to say.

"This one has boots with mana bonus on them, and a Power Token." Ren kicked one of the bodies.

"Flat bonus or percentage? What are you using the token on?"

"Flat. My heal." She looked as though she was already on the way to doing it.

"Pass. Good choice. I'm sure I'll need pulling from the fire often enough." I gave her a grin, which she dismissed.

"It's best if we both stay alive. Increased heal percentage and I can have two charms."

I nodded and looked around the room. There wasn't much else in here aside from some spare furniture that looked like it had been used to store dust exclusively. The exit door was considerably better made than the two prior, and looked rather secure. Roger caught my gaze and went over to it.

"No, don't." I raised my hand and furrowed my brow.

Ren loosened up her sword arm. "Trapped?"

It wasn't even that. "Most definitely, but there's something else." My brain did a quick rewind and checked around the room again. "There's a body missing - we saw six at first."

The elf pet the Hellhound on the head as it sunk from this realm. "They probably went through the door then, unless they're invisible too?"

I rubbed my face, briefly distracted by the fact that I found I couldn't put corpses in my Inventory. Probably not living things either. Some of the furniture though... "Ah, no, I think we would have seen or heard it. I think that is a fake door."

Roger leaned forward and sniffed it. An awkward motion for the body he was puppeting. "Looks real to me, boss."

"It's too perfect." I shook my head. "It's the first thing in here that is well-made and in good condition."

Ren tilted her head. "So what are you thinking then, trickster?"

A poker chip appeared in my hand, and I turned to the wall behind me. I flicked it to the left and after spinning through the air, it bounced from the wall and rolled across the floor. Then a second one more towards the middle. Bounce. Then at the far end, the chip sunk straight through, the slight sound of it rolling across stone dissipating beyond.

"Illusion magic," I grinned.

"In you pop then, Roger." The Oathwarden rolled her eyes. "I'd hate to go through and find there are thugs on the other side waiting to break my skull open."

"Might be an improvement," the demon murmured. If she heard it, she made no sign of it - which was either an extraordinary poker face, or I could only hear due to the pact.

She caught my slightly raised eyebrow. "I have what you might call 'holy' energy. That's why he finds me distasteful."

"That makes some sense." I nodded. Demonic and Holy energy... or magic... seemed opposite to each other, and somehow that explanation was more palatable than just the idea that he didn't think she was pleasant on the eye.

The demon walked over to the wall I had designated and felt around for the upper edge of the secret passage. Part of me expected him to go full speed into it and knock himself over - perhaps that was just me hoping for some brevity rather than wishing slapstick injury on him.

Just above waist level - crouching but not crawling. He slunk down and then was gone.

"I feel somewhat guilty for sending him to test for traps." I tilted my head, trying to hear his progress. As much as I had wanted to send cards through, attacking blindly when I didn't know the depth of the passage was futile.

"Better him than us. At least he can come back with another summon." She shrugged and walked over next to me.

If he ran out of time, then it was simple enough to throw another card at a corpse, but if he actually died in combat then it wasn't so easy. At this stage, I wasn't sure if it would then bring me a different demon after a long cooldown, or he would need to reform back in Hell before coming back. Either way, I'd be down a pact demon for a while.

"Feeling okay, Max?"

I looked at her; her glare was no less menacing than usual. "Better than ever," I responded, actually with a healthy handful of truth to it this time. Not only was I getting a better hold of my magical abilities, but fireworks of inspiration for new tricks were in constant bloom in the darkened reaches of my mind. My eyebrow raised. "Why do you ask?"

"There's just quite a bit of furniture missing from this room now." Her impassive stare gave no hint at her actual concern, or perhaps amusement.

I glanced around, faux surprise on my face, as if I had only just realized.

"Must have been *magic*." I tipped my hat.