

Hemirtal-12

James looked around. None of the people walking by were paying the crying child any attention. It was probably a sign he shouldn't either. Maybe this child always cried? Maybe — no, this was a game, so the child was programmed to cry. There was no one hurt, or lonely, or missing their parents.

James walked to the yard. Maybe he'd get a quest out of this, he told himself as justification. "Why are you justifying anything?" He grumbled, "what does it matter if it's a program, when have you ever let a child cry?"

As far as he could tell, the child was a girl. That young it was still tough to differentiate, and she was dressed and the same gender-neutral clothing everyone else wore, if more worn. Was she homeless? The house looked in reasonable shape; if that meant anything. Were there other homeless children? He didn't remember seeing any, or other kids period, but weren't packs of homeless kids staples of fantasy worlds?

"Hello," he called, and the child hiccuped, stepping back. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. What's wrong?" He stopped a meter away and crouched to be at her eye level. "I'm William, what's your name?"

She shook her head.

William nodded. Children weren't exactly his area of expertise. He was sure there was a way to take advantage of one, but simply trying to work out how to go about it made him feel sick. People who did that were no better than pedophiles, as far as James was concerned.

Still, he knew how to go about calming people, inspiring confidence, making them trust him. All he wanted was to make her feel better.

"I'm William Cobbler, I'm from Stormborough, have you heard of it?" Give them something other than their suspicions, or in this case whatever was making her cry, to think about, make yourself more of a person, instead of a stranger.

She still cried, but her attention was fully on him now.

"I was a farmer there, but the harvest's been bad recently, so I decided to come here and see what I can do instead. I'm thinking of joining the militia. Do you think I should?"

She wiped her eyes.

"I guess you're right. I'm probably not suited to go out and kill all those monsters." He gave an exaggerated shudder, and she smiled.

"How?" she closed her mouth as if surprised to hear her voice. "How is it there?"

"It's okay, I guess." He smiled. "It's a town more or less like yours." She smiled. "I lived on the outskirts, you know, like the farms here. I grew wheat, I had a bull to help me." She chuckled. "But he kept running away."

She laughed and clapped. "Do another!"

"Another?" James asked, surprised.

She nodded. "Be someone else."

"I can't be someone else, I'm William." She shook her head, and James almost

insisted, but she was a program. One of the better ones he'd encountered. But she was behaving according to a script, not to anything he was really saying... right?

He watched her, watching him expectantly. Was that the glint of awareness he'd seen in the druid when the programmer took over? Was that paranoia? It was a fine line in his type of work between being careful and being paranoid.

Still, this was only a game, so why not indulge this fake child with a different fake James? He stood, considering what to do. Someone else that was as close to real here as possible? He had enough on carpentry from talking to Louise to semi-fake it. He wouldn't try it against a real carpenter, but the girl here wasn't even a real girl.

He smiled. Why not have some fun instead. He took a step back and gave her what he thought was a proper bow. "Greetings, my Lady, allow me to introduce myself. I am Sebastien the Good, King of Stormborough. How is my Lady doing this evening?"

Her eyes went wide. "Stormborough has a king?"

He smiled at her. "Of course, such a magnificent city most have a king, I am I he."

"What does a king do?" she asked eagerly.

"Why, he ensures everyone is happy." He winked at her. "He gives all the children candies, makes sure not parents scold them for playing in the street."

She laughed, and he grinned. "Do another!"

"Another," James said thoughtfully, looking around. Not finding anything inspirational, he glanced in his inventory. He should have kept branches and twigs to use as a play sword. He did have a variety of clothing, which included dresses. He tried to remember who he'd gotten them off from. Dresses were for special occasions here. Festivals and the like, he remembered someone telling him.

He chuckled. Why not. He equipped the dressed and looked down at himself. It fitted him. He had a sense the clothing adjusted to fit whoever wore it.

The child burst out laughing. He agreed with her. He did look rather silly in the gray-green dress with black trim. Still, he wasn't going to let that keep him from playing this role to the hilt.

He raised his voice to a falsetto and spoke. "Well, hello there, child." He had to stop before he burst out laughing at his own voice. He might have just found the one thing he couldn't pull off seriously. He cleared his voice and continued. "I'm Mary Melody, and who are you, child?"

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"I'm from Medford, Wisconsin," he told her, then nearly panicked as he realized he gave her his hometown, but reminded himself that even if there was a programmer behind the child at the moment. They didn't know who he was, and James Johnson didn't have any link to Medford.

"Where is that?" the girl asked, awed.

"Oh, it far, far from here, in a mystical land called Canada." He grinned at her.

"I don't know that one," the girl said, forehead creasing.

"I wouldn't worry yourself too much about it," James said. "Even in Canada, no one's really sure if it's a real place." The child laughed and James grinned, please with the joy he

saw.

She approached him. "I like you," she said.

"I'm glad you do," he answered, letting his voice drop. Falsetto was hard on it.

"I think I'm going to keep you. You brought me a nice gift and you're good with stories."

"Gift?" maybe she meant the interaction, making it so she wasn't sad anymore? "And where are you going to keep me?"

She laughed. "Here, silly." She spun, arms extended. When she stopped, she looked at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "And I know exactly what role you can play." She reached up and bopped him on the nose before James could ask what she meant.

You have been assigned the role of Trickster

James stepped back, surprised at the pop-up. He dismissed it. "What did you—" the child was gone.

He looked around. Where had she run to? Inside the house? In the street? Had she just despawned, having performed the function she'd been programmed to do? He didn't think so. No one else despawned after performing a game-related function.

He equipped his regular clothing and stepped into the street. "Excuse me," he asked the closest person, a woman carrying a basket of bread. "Did you see where the young girl went?" he indicated the yard. "She was right there."

"No, she answered, I didn't see anyone."

James nodded. "Can you give me one of your bread?" he asked.

"Of course." She handed a loaf to him and he realized he had nowhere to put it. He already had two stacks of bread, and every other slot was filled with the crap he'd gotten people to give him.

Okay, he wouldn't find the girl, he was sure of that. She'd done her function, and even if he found her, he might not get an explanation out of her. She was an NPC, and she wouldn't know unless this was part of some story. But wouldn't there be a quest if it was so? Or she had been a programmer and the NPC wouldn't even know they're interacted... probably.

Then he needed to figure out what he'd gotten out of that interaction. There was a bench by the closest house, but he didn't feel like doing his thinking outside. He always preferred thinking and planning at home, and since he didn't have that here, being indoors would be a good substitute.

"Excuse me," he asked the passing man. "Where can I sit down and eat," he asked, remembering the loaf in his hand. "Maybe have something to drink?"

"The Tipped Cup and Bed is right over there." The man pointed to a wooden sign visible a few blocks away.

"Thanks." James headed for it.

The building was large, one of the rare three-story ones, with a drawing of a clay mug, tipped over on a bed over the door. Inside, it was dark, with the only illumination that

of the sun through the two large windows covered in squares of smokey glass. Unoccupied tables filled the space, with a bar on the right side of the building taking half the wall. The stairs on its left went up to the second floor.

“Greeting, Stranger,” the man behind the bar called as he polished a mug. He was stocky, with tanned skin, with hints of gray in the black hair and full beard. He was the only person in the room.

“Greetings,” James replied as he stepped up to the bar and offered his hand. “I’m William.”

“Welcome to the Tipped Cup and Bed,” the man said, ignoring the hand. James had to stop offering it. Handshakes weren’t a thing here. “What can I get you?”

“First, is it just the cup that’s tipped, or is it also the bed?”

“Just the cup, like on the sign,” the man said, surprising James. He’d been sure the programmers wouldn’t have considered how the wording made it sound. “And the cup’s empty, do the bed’s dry.” Okay, whoever had written this NPC knew what they were doing

Insight use successful

Osborn, the Innkeeper, is a man hoping for his inn to be a success. He had invested every gold coin he amassed as part of the militia and hunting parties, and now he just wants customers to talk with and make enough profit to keep the inn going.

“That’s good to know.” Was his goal dependent on when the game officially started or did the world evolve until the players arrived? “I’m curious. Can I exchange this loaf of bread for a meal and ale? I’m sort of tired of eating bread and I just couldn’t refuse the nice lady of offered it to me.”

“I already have all I need. I couldn’t do it for just one.”

“How about two?” James brought another one from his inventory.

“Sorry, but it isn’t going to be enough.”

James nodded and decided to try playing off the insight he’d gained. “In that case, can you point me to another inn, or anywhere I can get a meal? I haven’t picked the place I’m going to eat at regularly while I’m in town yet.”

The man looked at him, frowning, then sighed. “I’ll take your loaves.” He filled a mug from one of the large barrels behind the bar, placed it before James, then took the loaves through a door between two barrels.

Interesting. He’d gotten responses that he couldn’t attempt to influence people twice for the same thing while walking through the town. But hadn’t this been just that? He’d haggled for his meal, then played dirty. Was haggling not considered manipulation?

James was tempted to look at the conflict log. It would tell him clearly what had happened, but where was the challenge in that? It was possible that as a merchant, Osborn worked by different rules. James hadn’t done a merchant run yet. He should find one to dump all the clothing he’d accumulated.

Other games he’d played, even the virtual ones, worked on activating any power or

skill he used. Most had buttons on the interface, some used motion recognition, but this one allowed him to just talk and the game figured out if he'd used the skill or not. It made this feel more real.

His quest "Get a handle on things" completed as Osborn brought him a bowl of stew. "This smells good," James said, breathing in the aroma. It smelled good. Meaty, spicy, slightly sweet. It tasted just as good, but oddly enough, he couldn't tell how hot it was. Osborn went back to polishing a mug. The NPC's waiting animation, James figured. Which was fine. He wanted to think and research. He brought up the message that had popped up before the girl disappeared.

You have been assigned the role of Trickster

He focused on 'trickster'

The trickster is an agent of Chaos, chosen for their ability to disrupt order, trick others into doing things that might not benefit them, or simply play tricks on others. Tricksters often have high social skills but are not exclusively social players.

Abilities: Anonymity, Recasting.

James narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the capitalization of Chaos, and focused.

Chaos is one of the Forces of the world of Hemirtal.

"Son of a bitch!"

Osborn looked in his direction.

"Never mind," he told the innkeeper, and the man went back to polishing the mug. Already knowing what to expect, he brought up information on the Forces.

The Forces of the World of Hemirtal are those that govern important aspects of the world, such as weather, order, chaos, the ground, and more. The Arbiter is the one Force who is above all and resolves conflicts between the other forces when they cannot be resolved among them. Some Forces will have minor Forces working under them, such as Rain and Wind, for Weather. Every Force has the ability to pick players as their agents, and will do so at their discretion picking players they feel are good representations. Agents will be informed of their new role, but only other agents will be able to tell agents from the general population of players, and only on sight. Only in cases where agents are working for opposing Forces will they be able to tell who the other is an agent for.

He'd been tricked. James cursed silently. Chaos had to have been the programmer

who'd taken over Olivia. Unless multiple programmers could be a Force? James didn't know, but this had been the same one, he was sure of it. She was getting him back for pulling one over her, or him. No, whoever the programmer was, they were probably a woman. Why come to him as a girl if they were a man? To confuse him? He couldn't see the point in that.

He cursed again, then focused on eating. She'd was in for a surprise if she tried to assign him tasks. James was no one's puppet or agent. He was his own man. He decided what job he took.

Of course, the real joke was that in no more than forty-eight hours, he'd be pulled out, and she'd find out she had wasted her time and if making an agent required something within the game, she'd lose that too. He smiled. That would almost make getting pulled out worth it.

Having found something to be pleased about, he brought the information on the trickster back and looked at the abilities. It made sense that as an agent of a Force he'd have something that put him above the other players, but as names, Anonymity and Recasting weren't exactly telling.

Anonymity

This ability allows the user to hide all his information from other players, rendering them as far as any player can tell, no different from the NPCs that populate the world of Hemirtal. Warning: when Anonymity is used, the player will be subject to NPC rules when it comes to PvP, not Player rules.

Anonymity is broken if the player initiates violence.

Okay, James could see how useful something like that would be among a server full of players. Just by acting like townfolk, he could send players to the wrong locations, get them into traps. If he had underlings players working for him, he could even see how to get around the 'initiating violence' clause by using said underlings.

Now, what was recasting?

Recasting

Once every 24 hours, the player with this ability can redistribute all their points, re-select their modules, change the name and/or titles that are displayed. Skill can not be altered using this method. Only unlocked modules can be assigned to freed slots.

James stared at the information.

If he read this right, he'd just been given the key to playing whatever he wanted in this game.