

*Part of me always liked Quests. Something about a set process gelled well with me. Do this and then you get that as a reward. No need to negotiate, work on time management, rehearse, budget, and all the other facets that got in the way of doing a show. It simplified life. When you had death knocking at your door and threatening to push you down the hill into the graveyard, having fewer complications allowed you to dodge his advances for a little longer. It was one of the few things enabling me to have a hold on my sanity.*

“Looks like three options, then?” I tilted my head as if that would change the number of pages affixed to the Town Board. A number of planks painted white with noticed nailed to it were as loose as they could get to the term Town Board without it just being an unfinished pile of debris. Still, the way the STAR System interfaced with it gave it some credence.

“Bandit camp. Thief Hideout. Monster Hunt.” Ren confirmed the options.

None of them sparked any joy within me. If anything, I wanted to go back to sleep somewhere. Now that the barest crack of sunlight had started to edge over the horizon, I doubted my chances were anything more than slim. The slight glow of light illuminated Ren’s blonde even more so than the lantern she held, which was interesting.

“What are you thinking?” She asked, glaring up at me.

“Pretty sick of bandits, if I’m honest. Which I always am.” She rolled her eyes as I continued. “But I’ll go for whatever is either closest or has the best reward.”

“Pragmatic, trickster. In both those cases, the bandits are the answer.”

I groaned and rubbed at my forehead. At this time of the day, the town was still deserted. It was almost a shame we’d come and go without seeing it in full bloom. Like a shadow through the night, we had barely paid lip service to civilisation and almost lost our lives for the brief benefit. “Do you have a preference?”

“We can accept three quests now. Did you not get the pop-up? There’s a route we can do all three and hit the dungeon on the way back.”

The Map came up, and she sent through the coordinates and planned path we could take.

“After the second point, the Monster, we should camp for the night, then hit the dungeon and bandits on the way back tomorrow.”

I needed to bring Ren back to my world and replace Reggie. Logistics were a nightmare on the road. If you had someone with the brain for that then... no, I was distracting myself again.

“Brilliant, Ren.” I grinned at her. With things planned out, I almost had an appetite for the inevitable danger we would be putting ourselves in.

“We’ll need to keep an eye out for Lady Red and whatever lackeys she has hired. If she is trying to level, there is a chance she is in the same area.”

With the Map, I orientated myself and told the STAR to point in the direction of the first objective - the Thieves. "Kill on sight, no grandstanding."

She rolled her eyes at that statement. Probably ironic coming from me. "Let's move on."

It wasn't long before the town slowly fell away behind us as we traveled slightly uphill towards a small woodland. Although more trees seemed a bit old hat now, I had a feeling Ren had more of an affinity for them than I. Instead, I just allowed the pleasant beauty of nature to soothe my tired senses.

I looked back at the town as the treeline of the woodland began, now slightly populated by tiny moving figures half shrouded in darkness. It was a shame we couldn't make use of the amenities there, or perhaps look for a third Party member. I understood it, though. We had to be careful with our trust, especially around the town that we were almost murdered in. There was always the possibility the low level Players there could be compromised.

Ren stood waiting for me to catch up. "Apologies in advance, but I get really grumpy when I'm tired."

I maintained eye-contact with her scowl and slowly nodded. It was hard to tell if that was a joke or not. Safer to err on the side of caution - her normal glares didn't usually reflect her actual mood, so an actual grouchiness might be worthy of being wary of.

"That's okay," I eventually offered as I caught up beside her. "I get less annoying when I'm tired. We'll maintain our usual standing."

She rolled her eyes, doubting my statement could be factual. "Do human women in your world find you too annoying?"

"Huh?" My eyebrows raised as the shadowed canopy of the trees enveloped us.

"You said you didn't have anyone close to you. For all your faults, you're..." she tapered off.

"My schedule made it hard to socialize. If I wasn't working, I was practicing. Any woman I met was usually a fan... and we both know how that is."

"Yeah, gross." She shook her head.

"We have hardly been apart since meeting. This the most social I've been... in years. It's refreshing that you don't care who I am."

"You must have hit your head too hard yesterday." She sighed and brushed the hair from her face. "It's the opposite, Max. I don't care about who you pretend to be."

I wrinkled my face up. The Max I 'pretended' to be was just the larger-than-life figure I was trying to grow into, surely? It wasn't a... well, part of it was an act - but that was the point. I was left chewing on my thoughts as the elf continued.

"You're the one who doesn't care who I am, which makes you tolerable."

“Nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.” I shot her a grin. Coming from a world that didn’t have elves, and never having met a princess before, Ren was both an odd novelty, but something so plainly normal at the same time. With softer ears and less radiant beauty, there’d be little difference between her and a human - at least on the surface.

“Well, you’ll have time to socialize here, without the baggage of your old world.” She looked off into the deeper woods. “If you don’t die, you will eventually find someone to break you out of that shell.”

I slowed with a frown across my brow. My internal organs seemed to want to continue at the same speed, and an odd churn within me grew uncomfortable - but I didn’t know what part of her statement had caused such a reaction. A smile went across the outside of my face and I exhaled.

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Under the early morning sunlight, the small, rocky hill before us looked otherwise unassuming. Actually, it was quite the opposite, the longer I looked.

“Definitely in there,” I murmured.

A wooden door painted gray sat over a dark hole hewn through a similar gray stone. Not quite the same, but an effort had been made. The floor around the supposedly hidden entrance was scuffed and muddied.

“Terrible thief hideout,” Ren agreed, from beside me. “Based on the Quest I’m assuming two dozen or fewer.”

“Close range, maybe trap.” I nodded. Although still a foreign world to me, I was starting to put the puzzle pieces together based on what tropes and brief knowledge I could pull from the back of my mind. Close range meant Hound and Roger, fewer opportunities for Ren to use her bow.

“I’ll switch to sword.” She caught my raised eyebrow. “I’m trained in it, but my stats are dexterity and agility based.”

“Intelligence and dexterity here.”

“That’s surprising.” She tilted her head and her bright eyes narrowed slightly.

I opened and closed my mouth, then narrowed my eyes in return. Definitely a jab about my smarts. In fairness, I tried not to think too hard about that side of the System. I would increase the stats it said benefited my abilities, but trying to tie the loose numbers against tangible existence seemed futile - or at least beyond my tiring brain.

“I’ll go first then,” I ventured. “Let me kill something to get Roger out and then we’ll go from there. I’ll support you.”

Ren placed her hand on my shoulder, oddly warm through even my suit jacket. “And I’ll keep you safe.” She nodded, which I assumed was in place of a reassuring smile.

I then stood from our hiding place - more of an awkward formality given my sparkling purple suit - and began walking toward the hidden entrance.

It was even less of a perfect disguise as I stood before it. The woodwork was so shoddy that I could see clearly into the dark cave beyond - the dull amber of a torch further in. In fact, if I were a little slimmer I could just slide in between the gaps in the planks.

Now, if I were a thief's guild, I would probably either have a very well hidden entrance, a tough lock to break, or some manner of trap or alarm that only guild members would know about. The latter most option seemed the most plausible given the circumstances. I moved my face up to the gaps and narrowed my eyes, peering around the inside and - ah!

"There's a small wire tied to the door." It looked like pulling the terrible covering open would pull on it and ring a bell hanging from the ceiling a bit further back. Assuming it wasn't magic, cutting the tension beneath the bell should disable the trap.

I could feel Ren's presence behind me by a few feet without hearing her make any noise. Perhaps I had been too focused on the door, but she was remarkably quiet when she wanted to be. I needed to learn that. A card of purple magic filtered through a gap in the wood and quickly snipped through the cord attached to the bell.

Hands clenched tightly, I waited a few tense seconds. Nothing happened, and I relaxed. Shot a glance back to the Oathwarden, who nodded her readiness, sword already drawn.

With one last deep breath of fresh air, I pulled the door open and stepped through. There was an expectation of a second trap, and my body was tensed ready for something unexpected. A lesson from the System to be diligent. But there was not.

"Amateurs," I whispered back at the elf, who just shrugged in return. If I had been in charge of security, well - I could at least think up some better traps than a bell. Perhaps I should save that mustache-twirling for later in the day.

I crept toward the light further down the tunnel. It was pleasantly dry, but dusty, and whoever had carved this place out had done a reasonable job. The tunnel twisted to the side, and the Hellhound card sat ready in my left hand to be thrown.

Murmured voices ahead. I peered around the corner to see another door. Just as badly fashioned, but this time they had forgone the gray paint. I gestured for Ren to look, and she held onto my suit as she leaned past me. Her eyesight was better, and may be able to make out more from the gaps in the woodwork.

Eventually, she moved back and whispered in my ear, something that almost caused a shiver to run through me.

"Four figures around a table, two further in."

I nodded. There were bound to be more - but knowing we'd have to deal with potentially a handful at once was good to know. System-created should be easily held at the chokepoint of the doorway, if we were smart. Which we were.

I moved across the hallway and took the torch from the wall, putting it in my Inventory and plunging the tunnel into darkness. My breath held, I waited to see if I had been noticed. No, it didn't seem so. Only after the act did I wonder how the thieves would react to the darkness, if it even affected them. There was one way to find out.

A dual card, held together, appeared in my right hand. The tunnel illuminated in the dim glow of purple. With one eye closed, I focused on the gap in the door - the darkness now showing the gaps filled with the amber glow of the light beyond.

I smiled and set them free.