

Hemirtal-11

A circular series of quests. James cursed. They'd given him a circular chain of quests. Oh, he could strangle whoever that programmer was.

He unclenched his teeth and moved his jaw to loosen it. There was no point in wasting time getting angry. He'd figure out who they were once he was out, and then he'd make them regret doing this to him.

He leaned against an empty weapon rack. Okay. What were his options? Abandoning the quests was one. He brought up the list and yes; he had an option to remove them. He closed the window. He wasn't dropping them unless he couldn't find a way to succeed.

He couldn't think of any games where he'd been handed a circular chain. If only for that, he thought the developers should keep this in. It made for a different kind of puzzle. The trick with any kind of chain was to break one link. With a circular one, if he did that, they would all resolve themselves.

So, which link could he break?

He looked around. Was his persuasion skill high enough to convince them to attack the monsters without weapons? If the soldiers had some sort of survival modifier, probably not. And would it do any good? Olivia needed the monsters removed, not the soldiers sent on a suicidal mission.

Next link.

The weapon master had no weapons to send. That was rather cut and dry. James suspected that because the "can't be done" modifier was ninety-nine, it might be possible for the game to generate the weapons anyway, but his skill was nowhere near high enough for that.

The blacksmith, miners, carpenters suffered the same problem. They depended on receiving material before they could start their part of the chain.

The lumberjack. Him, James might convince him to cut trees down outside his assigned area, but without knowing what made him tick, James would deal with a modifier in favor of the lumberjack, and the way he'd spoken, he was someone who obeyed the rules.

The druid. Olivia wanted to be left alone and make the forest thrive. She wasn't dependent on receiving anything to do her part. The only thing stopping her was anger.

James nodded to himself and looked around for her clearing. Her light had vanished. He brought up the quest list again. The "Go plant swords in those monsters" quest was highlighted. He tapped on the "Michael, remember to put a clever quest title on this", shaking his head.

Do you wish to make "Michael, remember to put a clever quest title on this" the active quest? Warning, you can only have one active quest at a time.

Yes/No?

James tapped 'yes'.

The green glow around the camp vanished, and one in the distance appeared. He began walking.

How 'smart' was the program running the NPCs? The interactions were better than in most of the games he'd played, but those still relied on a written list of responses he picked from. Without that, the NPCs needed to parse what he said, compare that with a decision tree.

Could he utter a single word and figure out the right ones that way? Probably not. There were plenty of conversation bots on the Internet who could simulate being a person.

So he'd need the right phrasing to play into what the druid wanted. For her forest to thrive and to be left alone. Then there was the possibility the programmer was still monitoring him and would try to make his life difficult. Normally that wouldn't worry him. Manipulating people was where he shined, but he didn't know what they wanted, other than causing him problems. If they had to play the role of Olivia, he could handle them. But if they just stepped in to block what he did... that would be a first.

He'd dealt with people actively trying to interfere in a job. Usually, it was another professional after the same target, but they wanted something out of it, and James could use that. If this programmer only wanted to make him miserable, there was nothing he could do to stop them.

Other than abandoning the quests and hope they didn't show up as other NPCs to keep ruining his fun. It wasn't like he had a lot of time to enjoy the game.

He stepped into the small grove, with Olivia now feeding a boar out of her hand. She looked at him over her shoulder and he searched her green eyes for signs the programmer was in there.

"The monsters are still there," she stated.

James looked at the ground to make sure no snakes were around before stepping into the grove. "Yes, you can't imagine how morose they are at the idea they're disappointing you. They asked me to come and beg you for your understanding, but that isn't why I'm here. I mean, really, someone like you is too busy to listen to their petty complaints, right?"

She kept looking at him. No micro expression, that was annoying. James considered bringing up the conflict resolution window to gauge his successes, but dismissed the idea. He didn't need that kind of validation. He was a professional. And until the programmer showed up, he only needed to hit on the right sentiment for the modifier to go in his favor.

"I imagine caring for a forest like this is a lot of work."

She nodded.

"And it takes someone powerful to do such a wonderful job of it. I couldn't believe how vibrant and lively it is during my walk here and back. You really care about it, don't you?"

She nodded again.

"And I know the town is immensely grateful for the work you do. They couldn't function without you, the forest, and the trees you grow. Not to say of the animals you allow them to hunt. It's all about balance, isn't it?"

"Yes."

James searched her eyes again, but didn't see the awareness that had been there when the programmer had taken over.

"That's why the monsters are such a thorn in your side. They unbalance things, pollute the forest, kill animals without restraint."

"And it's those thugs' job to stop them," she retorted.

James nodded. "Yes, it is. But isn't anger something that just plays into those monster's desires?" She kept looking at him. The lack of suspicion threw him off. Then he continued. "The pollution they spread continues unchecked, that makes you angry, you demand the militia do their job, and because they've been kept from fulfilling their part of the agreement, you get angrier and dig your heels in. Tell them you won't help the town until they do. Who suffers because of that?"

She looked at him. Right, not an actual person. She didn't answer something that wasn't part of the decision tree, and he was probably pushing that to the point the programmer might be warned.

"It's the forest," James answered. "By making you angry, those monsters have caused a situation where you are allowing the forest to suffer."

"It is those thugs' job to remove those monsters," she stated angrily.

"Yes, but they're discouraged because they haven't managed to succeed yet. What they need is something to show them you still believe in what they do. Your anger is understandable, but it plays in what the monsters want. All you have to do is show them you still believe in them, in the town. Something simple for you, like maybe regrowing Milad's clearing, will send the message. I'm sure that once you're done that Milad will let everyone know you haven't given up on them, and the boost in morale will make the militia fight harder against the monsters and succeed and in destroying them."

She nodded, petting the boar's head. "I see what you mean." She straightened, nodded again. "Thank you. I hadn't realized how my actions were playing into those monster's desires."

She walked out of the grove.

James suspected the programmer had nudged the NPC. That phrasing felt out of character, but at least she was moving toward completing one link in the chain. Now all he needed to do was wait, and they would all complete.

He smiled and fought the urge to check the logs. He'd succeeded. What did it matter by how much, or if it was the programmer he'd convinced?

Instead of following Olivia, he made the blacksmith quest active and used the green glow to guide him back to the town.

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Quest Completed: Michael, remember to put a clever quest title on this
Reward: 1 Fame point and Milad's gratitude

The message appeared as James stepped out of the forest. Olivia walked faster than he did.

Now that all he needed to do was wait, James wondered what he should do. The next

chain was the carpenter, but he didn't know how long that would take and he didn't feel like simply waiting there to get the figurine.

It was silly; he knew that. Anton was just another NPC, a program, but James figured he'd like something other than a sword to remember his son by.

"That's me," he said with a chuckle. "Connecting with NPCs more than real live people." He activated the carpenter quest and headed for her workshop. "At least NPCs don't stab you in the back." Unless they were programmed for it, and then it wasn't their fault.

He talked with everyone he met, persuaded more than a few to hand him something of theirs. It was almost too easy now, but he wanted the increase in skill, if not everything he filled his bags with.

He reached the carpenter's shop to a new level in persuasion. And two notifications he couldn't use the skill on the same people for the same actions. He was talking to too many people without taking the time to notice them; if he was losing track of who they were. James prided himself on getting to know everyone he interacted with. It was one of the things that made him so good. He easily remembered details about people. But this was a reminder that he wasn't treating all NPCs as people. Which made sense. They weren't people. But what would happen if he needed to deal with one for a quest and didn't remember the important details?

Quest Completed: Timber!

Reward: 1 FAME point, the figurine of the hero Hendrik, Louise's gratitude.

That had been faster than he'd expected, and as he looked at the building again, he noticed the pile of lumber next to it. He hadn't seen anyone deliver it. Would people complain about that, about how it wasn't realistic? Or was it so accepted as part of time-saving in a game they'd just go along with it? James appreciated the promptness in getting his reward, but wasn't sure how he felt about it.

Inside the workshop, Louise was hard at work planing a stick. She looked up and smiled. "Thank you for your assistance. If there's ever something I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask." She nodded to the counter with the figurines. "Go ahead, take one, you earned it."

James looked them over and chuckled. Identical pieces, as if they'd come out of a factory, or the same model used over and over. Another way to save work in the game. He took one and was reminded his inventory was full with stacks of clothing, bread, flowers, stones, branches. He stepped outside and dropped the branches by the lumber and put the figurine in the vacated inventory slot.

He considered heading to Anton's farm, but the sun was reaching the top of the trees. It would be dark soon. It took an hour to reach the farm, one to return. Part of that was outside the town's protection. How safe was it to travel at night?

James decided not to risk it. He'd go in the morning.

Which meant he could spend the night getting to know the people in town, and

grinding his persuasion skill.

He made it to two intersections when the sound of crying stopped him. It only took him a moment to locate it.

In the small yard of a house, a child of ten or eleven in simple clothing was crying.