

*That was the beauty of it all, really. Struggle, resolve conflict, rest and enjoy your life. Repeat. I wasn't too keen on the repeating part. That's what made us adventurers, though. Drawn to danger, wanting to overcome odds and carve a better world for everyone. It involved a lot of over the top violence sometimes—you read the part where I sawed a woman in half, right?—but our intentions were always good. The road to hell may be paved with such, but I had enough dealings with demons for that to feel like home.*

I groaned and rolled from the bed. Three days of bliss. Altogether too much and yet not nearly enough. Wiped my bleary eyes to see that Ren was not there. One day I'd get used to her waking before me. She mentioned supplies the night before.

There hadn't been as much tension about possible danger, so having her out with Wolf and me here alone wasn't a cause for concern. I switched to my magician outfit and adjusted my hat. Although this was probably one of the few times I had been alone in the past three days.

A lot of time spent in bed, eating food, and generally just living. Cooked for Ren as promised. Got Wolf some padded armor - and a bow tie. Made some slight adjustments to our outfits so that they were less tortuous to fight in. Checked the shops every day for anything new to add to my repertoire.

Aside from avoiding anything that looked like a Quest, we had been enjoying the System experience as it was probably intended. Peaceful. Three days seemed like the perfect amount of time to fully recover from our injuries, both physically and emotionally. Any more than that, then we'd run the risk of wanting to stay.

We had learned that the continent was ruled over by a King and Council, several areas away. My best guess was that the Lady wanted to become Queen and take over control of everything, if not the System itself. It seemed a big stretch, but given how easily she could convert people to her cause, I could see it happening.

I sighed and left the room. Down the stairs and into the main tavern.

"Hope you had a great evening, adventurer," the barkeep greeted me.

"Was alright," I waved him off. Didn't want to give him all the details, and I only responded because it seemed rude not to - even if he didn't actually listen or respond in kind.

Outside, the sun was bright, and the day was warm. Pleasant. With my eyes closed, I could hear the ocean lapping at the beach. Something I'd miss when we moved further inland.

"Morning, Max."

I opened my eyes to see the burly man with a handlebar mustache, a large axe over his shoulders. A Player.

"Morning, Sven. Off out Questing?" He had come to the island yesterday, the third new Player we had seen since recovering. It was like the System was healing.

"Yeah, some bullshit about getting lumber from trees. Easy experience though."

I nodded, and he went off. After another deep breath, I went off towards the town center where the shops were. At least, I assumed the rest of my Party would be there - certainly would be handy to have a way for us to communicate when we weren't together.

Before I got there, I stopped at the Town Board, where the challenges were posted. There was a fourth page, not part of the System messages. Something we had placed there. A warning about the Crimson Shadow, painting them as the danger and enemies that they were. We hadn't heard of any activity in this area during our rest, but it was better to be proactive.

Any fears of losing my Party members soon melted away as I turned to see Wolf sitting in the town center looking bored out of his skull. His padded armor resembled a waistcoat, which he didn't find as amusing as we did. Certainly made him look the part, though. His nose twitched in the air as he turned to me.

"Morning Max."

"Wolf," I nodded. "Today's the day."

"Shame," he grumbled. "Getting used to lazing around and eating good food."

"I hear that. World won't save itself though." I grinned at him. "Plus, the next area might have even better food."

He licked his lips in anticipation, and his nose twitched.

Someone stepped up behind me, and something metal pressed against my spine.

"What now?" A soft voice said.

I smiled and vanished, appearing back up the road by the Town Board. My grin widened as the Hellhound+ jumped up at Ren in excitement, trying to lick at her face.

"Ah, Max!" she complained as she turned to me with her face wrinkled up. "Bullshit you foresaw that!"

I walked back down to the square with my hands in my pockets. "What?" I shrugged my shoulders. "If I tell you, it'll ruin the mystique."

"Ass." She kneeled down and gave the hound pets. "Did you tell him, Wolf?"

The bear shook his head. "No, never!"

Perhaps if they knew how often I sent out a just-in-case demon, then it wouldn't sound so wild. You only had to hit once to seem like a miracle if they didn't see all the misses. Plus Wolf had the tell. He knew our smells and reacted when we got close enough by twitching his nose.

Not that I was about to tell them either of those things. I had been teaching Ren some more magic in our downtime, but some secrets had to be kept. If only for my own ego at being the

best showman in the System. Perhaps the next area would have enough Players to throw a proper show...

I smiled at the elf as she stood and returned a grin.

"Look what I have," she extended her arm to show a device of polished wood and leather that matched the gray-blue of her waistcoat. "I took the prototype you made and had it crafted for real."

It was beautiful, a lot more practically functional than what I had managed to cobble together. "I am amazed. You just got the one?"

She narrowed her eyes, but a sly grin went up at the side of her mouth. "Hell no. I have one for the other arm that fits Scrolls better." She showed me an equally well-made one appearing on her left arm.

I wrinkled up my nose, feeling rather green.

"And if you're good..." she adjusted my jacket to look a little tidier. "I got you a pair as well."

Three wands and three Scrolls at my beck and call. I might be able to swap them at will too. Not as powerful as a real mage, but the possibilities...

"Let's get going," Wolf grumbled, "otherwise Max will spend all morning thinking of new ways to get us into trouble."

"Yeah, you're right - ready, Max?"

I nodded, although my brain was still trying to process in the background. We'd need to hit up the next area for better magic shops - if we can get new wands on the regular, then that would be a huge boost. Scrolls too, although-

"Here," Ren tipped the table containing my thoughts as she handed me a Sweet Cake.

"Thanks, Ren." I smiled at her as we left the outskirts of the town. "I thought we'd get tired of eating these by now, but they're still just as good."

"Mhm." She nodded, her mouth already full.

Our comforted elation become somber silence the further along the western road we traveled. The giant warning crosses were toppled now. It had taken us a while, and it was perhaps disingenuous to say the first day of rest was just that. Bodies buried best we were able without being able to carry them too far.

A graveyard of our own making, on our right. Small plots that grass would probably overtake in no time. Flowers we had gathered and left. It all felt so... disjointed from reality, yet still the right thing to do.

We hadn't gone as far as the fort. Even with the partial recovery, it sat out like a sore thumb on the horizon as we approached. Most of it was a burned out and collapsed shell, hardly

recognizable compared to its former shape. About the only good thing I could say about it was that it didn't look like it had been looted, nor anything recovered.

"Still stinks like charcoal," Ren scowled at the surroundings.

"You're telling me," Wolf grumbled.

We picked our way across the debris, moving past the dead bodies and ruined furniture. I didn't much care to loot them, all things told. If it were possible, I wanted nothing to do with them anymore. Even my memories brought a bad taste to my mouth. So much blood and suffering, and for what? So someone on a power trip could rule over everything? It seemed too basic.

Therein lied the reason why it was so evil, perhaps. Uncaring about the lives crushed or changed by her path. Still, all it would take was a crossbow bolt or two, and this thing could be over. I was too clever to be fooled into tricking myself into thinking that was how easy it could be.

We stepped over the ruined gates, charred black in places from the fire. Wolf pushed them to the side, the large metal beams creaking from the movement, causing small chunks of wood to clatter from the decaying floors above. After he relented when we moved ahead, we found ourselves on the edge of the bridge.

It was long. Several hundred feet, by my rough estimation. As we moved from the shadow of the broken fort, the daylight illuminated the river and everything seemed vibrant again. I'd never seen such a large and fast flowing body of water before - it was mesmerizing. All the way to the north, it seemed to come down from a mountainous region, and off in the other direction, it eventually flowed out to the near endless sea.

"It's both beautiful, and humbling at the same time," Ren said, her eyes wide as she was also enthralled with it.

"Makes me thirsty," Wolf added, peering closer to the edge.

"The sooner we get across this, the better I'll feel." I grimaced, and with a nod, we began walking.

It wasn't so much that I had a phobia of water, but there was something about this that unsettled me. The intrusive thoughts wanted me to hop in and see how fast I could flow down, and find out what was at the end. Nothing healthy or helpful for our current task, I told my panicked brain.

Thankfully, it listened, and while we were on-guard, nothing terrible happened. We reached the other side and were officially in the second area of the continent.

Ren narrowed her eyes at her Map. We had gone over it a few times already, but it was always worth triple checking to be sure. "There's a small village just to the north. We should stop there and see what's going on. Maybe pick up a couple Quests?"

I nodded. "Perfect." In amongst the struggles against the Shadows, we still needed to focus on dancing to the System's tune in gaining new powers and keeping up. Usually adventurers would hit the second area at level ten, but I considered the fact we were punching above our weight. Wouldn't take us long to catch up.

In fact, I almost allowed myself a chance to cheer up. The sun was shining, and I had some amazing company. I grew more proficient by the day, both in combat and magical ability. For the most part, we were on top of things. That was plenty to be content about.

We rounded the curve of the road as it rose up a hill, to be greeted by a sign post dug into the ground. In the distance behind it were the shapes of cottages all gathered together amongst farming fields.

*Warning, it read, this area under control of the Crimson Shadows. Trespassers will be killed.*

Atop the signpost, lending some streaks of crimson to the notice, were three impaled heads.

My hand clenched as a fist as we strode toward the village.