

*I recall a time I had sprained my ankle on one of our many travels through the wildness. It was an amusing abstraction where we had all this power and magical ability, yet an unseen rock could humble you just as easily. Apparently not dire enough for the System to consider it an injury, I had just hobbled along in the hopes that everything would be okay. Poignant.*

Wolf stopped to scratch himself up against a tree. The branches shook and a few leaves fell down from his weight jostling them.

My mind felt reasonably blank. The walk through the woods was as pleasant and tiring as always, but it felt like... not quite like we were being watched. More that we were being judged. We had the location of some of the Crimson Shadow, yet we were walking over to some Monster that would probably beat the stuffing from us.

All for Quest experience and gold, presumably. It felt disingenuous. We were out filling in surveys instead of saving the cat from the burning barn. Leveling up was important. Neither of us could deny that, but combat between Players had been so brief and visceral that we fancied our chances. Of course, the deadliness of it was one of the reasons we should get more powerful.

Ren must be feeling the same way, as her expression had been... well, I could just tell. Mostly because she had been ignoring the tricks I had been practising along the way rather than feigning disdain or admonishing me for it. Wolf had seemed interested at first, but gradually his focus had faded and I was rewarded with no Dazzle icons. I wondered if that was some form of diminishing returns, or he just stopped caring.

Either way made me a little sad.

"You going to say it, or should I?" I stopped to watch the bear continue to scratch himself.

Ren stopped and tilted her head, looking like she was tired of the conversation already. "You'll have to be more specific than that, Max."

Hmm. My mind started to race over all the possibilities that she might be expecting me to fill. I stuck to my guns. "That this is a poor use of our time when we could be killing people." I wrinkled up my nose. "That sounded better in my head."

"We can't have it both ways." She relaxed and rubbed at her eyes. "Either we Quest to get more powerful or we hunt down the Crimson Shadow in hopes of getting a lead on the Lady."

"It's just a thorn in our side. Any other situation and I'd gladly get my teeth punched in by whatever monster we're hunting down. But now that we have information..."

"That we don't know if we can trust. It might be a trap." She raised a hand to stop me from speaking. "And are you saying you haven't read the Quest objective yet?"

I closed my mouth and shook my head.

She rolled her eyes. "Is that some kind of executive dysfunction thing? Where you can't do everything because you're so hyper-focused on your tricks?"

As much as my brain wanted to try and imagine an executive elf, that was probably some kind of translation from the System that smoothed over the difference in languages. In the end, I just shrugged.

“I’m not...” she gestured for us to continue moving. “If you’re like that, it’s fine - I just need to know so that I can plan around it.”

“You’d think I’d be all the details.” I began walking with her as Wolf joined us. “Although my show sets were very tight and structured, they usually started off with me just going to the feel - or the flow of the act. If that doesn’t sound too weird.”

“No, it doesn’t. I imagine it’s like painting without a sketch. Once the idea takes form, it has a proper shape that you can work from... but before that-“

“It’s messy, yeah.” I smiled. Her take on the process was a lot more generous than my own.

She brushed some of her hair from her face and looked between me and the bear. “I’ll take on the heavy lifting when it comes to reading then, but that means I have more control over what Quests we end up doing.”

I gestured to Wolf, who shrugged his large shoulders. “Sure,” I nodded, “I trust your judgement.”

“Perfect,” she said with a deep sigh. “Then we are going to kill the Monster, which is a big owl.”

My tongue rolled across my teeth. A big owl was probably not an accurate descriptor if it was a Monster worthy of a Quest being generated for it. I wondered if that was a permanent fixture on the board back in town, and if the creature just respawned after a certain amount of time. If the System could procedurally generate Classes and skill sets, then it could probably make up Quests or make new Monsters. Some questions for a different time.

I brought up the Quest Log to avoid annoying the elf further. While my charming personality was slowly eroding at her default disdain, being that our new vocation was prone to violence, I didn’t want to rock the boat too much.

[Quest: Defeat Ghostgust, Ethereal Owl Sovereign]

A big owl, that was also a ghost and could probably use wind attacks, if the name was anything to go by. Now that I had actually read the briefing, my brain went into overdrive thinking about the possibilities. Could we even damage a ghost? Ren had a radiant attack, and I assumed my magic would be able to, but that would be reducing our effective damage output a lot.

If they were an Elite or worse, my cards wouldn’t be that effective - aside from cutting off a few ethereal feathers. Expecting Wolf to tank something he couldn’t hurt, that was possibly as damaging as the cyclops seemed unfair, too. Ren had seemed pretty dead set on fighting the Monster and it was experience and rewards, assuming we survived.

A war raged within me. The cold knife of my survival instinct met the warm softness of wanting to people-please. How could I win my Party over if I didn't support them in their choices? I'd be even worse off in that regard if we were dead, however. My heartbeat was unnecessarily loud and muddled my thoughts. In the end, the lump of pensive energy blurted forth and out of my mouth.

"I don't think we should fight the Monster."

Ren stopped and turned to face me. She crossed her arms and stared at me blankly. "You would like us to abandon and fail the Quest?"

The words stabbed into my ego, and I physically winced. My mouth opened in instinct, ready to walk back my outburst. I closed it again and waited for the swirling panic to calm. "After reading the Quest, it feels as though we are under-prepared for the encounter."

She didn't change her expression in the slightest. "Is that your decision?"

My muscles tensed as if trying to stop me from making the motion, as if it went against all that I had been building up. I nodded.

"You'll have to convince Wolf, too."

I raised an eyebrow at the bear, who looked tired of the words back and forth. "The Monster is a ghost and would have no meat."

"Gross," he shook his head as he stuck his tongue out. I had expected a little more pushback.

Ren rolled her eyes. "Alright, you've convinced us. Now what?"

I brought up the map and narrowed my eyes. We were almost at the furthest point from the town and would need to circle back now to avoid whatever was beyond the woodlands. We had only taken up the challenging Quests from the town, but if there were some basic floating ones we could hit on the route back...

"We'll go around toward the Dungeon, avoiding the middle part where we think the Shadows are. Pick up any minor Quests we are offered along the way. Hit the town safe and in one piece to hand in the thief Quest and get some rest."

She nodded and gestured off to the side. "Lead on then, trickster."

I did, and we started back down through the forest at an angle. There was still a pit in my stomach where I felt that I had forced the issue and changed our course. Had I made the right decision? Perhaps this was another point the elf was trying to force out of me. My brow furrowed, and I tilted my head at her.

"Was this a test to see if I could override my need to people-please? Or to be more of a leader?" I rubbed at my chin in thought.

“Perhaps I just wanted to make sure you could actually read.” She didn’t meet my gaze, but she seemed calm enough beneath the usual scowl.

“After you said you’d deal with the Questing stuff,” I clucked my tongue.

She turned to me now and narrowed her eyes. “If you wanted to follow blindly, I could gouge your eyes out now.”

I glanced at the bear, perhaps the biggest third wheel on this side of the continent. Whatever his thoughts on the matter, it seemed he was content enough to let us work our way through the problem first. In honesty, I wasn’t sure where I stood on the matter, or what Ren’s actual complaint was. With a shrug, I gave her a glum smile.

Ren sighed deeply. “I’m... sorry, Max. Not everything should be a test. I’m not sure why I have to keep trying to squeeze change out of you.” She looked away from us, out into the woods, and stopped walking. “Growing up, I had so many expectations forced on me, I feel like I’m just lost to the wind in this world.”

Some of the pieces clicked together in my mind. Aside from the loss of her family and groom-to-be, I imagined that the pair of them were being shaped into being leaders of their enclave, or whatever elves had. The weight of a community needed certain skills to keep it afloat. Without them and her equal, she felt adrift and was trying to see if the boots fit me in some manner. Meet up to her expectations, but I had missed the whole presentation on what she really expected.

I sighed and gave Wolf a pat on the side. “Party meeting, huddle up.”

Conflict was something I tried to avoid in my own life. Even when some of the stagehands were sloppy, or someone had failed to take direction, as was their role... I maintained good standing and tried to guide them with a smile on my face. Often forced, and giving them more leniency than deserved. Reggie was usually better at that sort of thing. It didn’t really feel like my place. I was no prima-donna, despite my flare for seeking fame. A rousing speech to rally the troops? I’d done one or two before, and perhaps that was what we needed to maintain course.

Ren turned back around with her arms crossed, and Wolf circled so that we were in a loose triangle.

“Right. We’ve been running like a rudderless boat recently.” I eyed between them, trying out my stern expression for a change. “And as much as you are both equals in my eyes, without each of us performing as expected, the show will be a flop.” My right eye twitched.

Ren opened her mouth to speak, but I raised my hand up to stop her. “If you want me to lead or be more decisive, you need to approach it in good faith rather than trying to break me down with tests.” I put my hand on her shoulder, a pang of panic rising within me in expectation of how long it would take for me to regret it. “I can’t bend to the shape you expect me to be, but we can meet halfway?”

Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times, before she relented to nodding, and looking down at the floor.

“Wolf,” I put my other hand on his shoulder. “Your voice is no less valuable, even if your needs are simpler. You will often suffer the brunt of our decisions, so do not be afraid to weigh in.”

The bear wrinkled back his nose. “I think you both have more issues than I’m qualified to engage with.”

I nodded with a wide grin. “To conclude, although I may take center stage, a good performance is only the sum of its parts - I’m just the pretty face at the front, but without your support and guidance I’d just be... a bloodied mess on the floor.” The metaphor started to fall flat once I realized that I couldn’t get away with copying my prior speeches wholesale. A lot less murder in my usual acts.

My hands withdrew from them as the enigmatic fervor faded away and I had to continue to talk to my peers instead of abscond to backstage.

“Almost convincing.” Ren tilted her head. Wolf sniffed at the air and started to wander away. Something inside me was burning, a flickering flame that was unfamiliar.

I turned to face her and pressed my index finger on her shoulder. My eyes met her renewed scowl. “We can lead this together, I will do my part in my own way. If you think you can handle that, and will support me.”

As much as her brow was knitted together, the tension around her eyes softened and her eyes shone brighter.

“So no more tests. I need you and you need me. Can you accept that?”

She nodded, her tongue appeared too caught up to give any more of lucid response.

“I accept it too,” the bear murmured, sniffing at the air as he wandered away.

“Good,” I smiled, “then let’s go level up.”

I turned from the stunned elf and walked away, mostly to hide both the panic and grimace on my face. My insides were a turbulent sea. It felt like briefly I had let something out. My own demon. I tried to think of the last time I hit my head. Did I really emerge unscathed from the cyclops fight?

Wolf had his eyes narrowed ahead over an outcropping, his large form squashing the bushes between two trees. He turned his head as I approached, my head a whirl of false bravado and unabashed panic.

“Trouble ahead,” he growled, as a Quest notification popped up on the STAR.

[Quest: Rescue Villagers from Orc Patrol - 0/3]