

*We had cut the green tumor out from New Forest, and bought some manner of closure to what ailed Ren. The cancer still remained, and it would take more than one brief and desperate act of violence to truly scour those that sought to cause pain wherever they trod. What drove a person to have such little disregard for another's life was something I still didn't grasp, fully aware of the irony as I stood at the end of a bloodied path at those I had killed. Deluding myself was one of the greatest tricks I ever mastered.*

We had ransacked the cove. Any question of why they had turned to this path gradually became clear the more we sifted through burned down shacks and dusty storerooms. They weren't evil by nature, they just wanted to survive and thrive like any living being. The Lady and Grak had been the founders of the idea - finding their pairing almost unbeatable on the island drew them to the cold conclusion that they had to rule the place and not face the dangers of the mainland.

It had been pragmatic for them to kill, loot, or recruit new Players. Keep the equilibrium and keep their control. At the end of the day, the only one surviving was the Lady in Red - level five and abandoning her dead gang to avoid their fate. Survival meant more to her than staying her ground. Although such callousness and self-serving interests didn't shock me, it still chilled my spine if I thought too hard on it.

I wiped the blood from my hands.

"That really isn't normal, you know?" Ren scowled at me as she fired off another arrow into the last troll of the group.

"It's normal to me." I grinned and wiped the sweat off my brow with the back of my arm. "Gives the whole demon summoning a dramatic flair."

She remained unconvinced.

I yawned and checked my log... still eight trolls to go. Now that Ren had relented to leveling alongside me, combat had been not only quicker but also less stressful on my mana. Although we were both keen on getting to the mainland and tracking down the loose thread, the elf had seemed much calmer since killing the orc.

Still just as grouchy, but there hadn't been the same amount of pressure for us to both excel. Combat remained relatively high stakes and brief. Perhaps that was a low level thing and a reason why the gang had chosen to stick around.

My Imp gave a short bow before disappearing into a mist. Their fire helped prevent the trolls from regenerating their health, which allowed us to get through this Quest without too much stress. I had been giving Roger a break; he wasn't able to control the larger monsters - some limitations on his power. I dropped another Imp and sent out dual cards, circling each other through the air into the next target.

"One more Quest after this one," Ren reminded me. Third time so far.

Not that I didn't understand her anticipation - she had been stuck at level four for way too long. Being able to grow in power again must be nice. I was a bit apprehensive about my

keystone ability. As if somehow it was part of a performance review and the System was going to decide on my career path.

Of course, I hadn't had much choice so far, so I shouldn't worry. My cards sliced upwards on the pale flesh of the monster, driving gashes across its chest. Already starting to heal up, an arrow then struck it in the left, piercing lungs. A fireball blasted into it. The charred and injured creature lumbered toward us, but didn't make it more than five feet before our second volley dropped it to the floor.

"Your cards are good at soft targets, but we'll have issues against armored targets."

I nodded, unsure whether to take that as a criticism or a plain statement. We did need someone to be the meat shield for us - as capable as we were at felling slow and brainless targets; we were bound to fall into trouble once on the mainland. Still, with only the recent agreement that Ren would Party with me when we got there, I wasn't about to rock the boat by suggesting finding a tank should be one of our first ports of call.

"We'll need to at least find someone to take aggro for us," she tilted her head as she scanned the hills for the next troll. "Perhaps make it one of our priorities."

"I suppose," I smiled to myself. I wasn't a huge fan of being almost snapped in half by anyone strong enough to throw about melee weapons that large. The fact that the orc had wanted to debilitate me before killing me outright was the only thing preventing me from currently being a smear across the sand back at the cove.

"I would even say a Rare Class, but chances are most will have a Party by now." She scowled out at the hills, as if they were part of the problem.

If people liked to keep their Class Rarity secret, that would be quite the problem, anyway. Why they would, I wasn't sure. If the Rarity had any effect on the power level of the individual, then it would put people like Ren and I in high demand - but might also draw unwanted attention. Better to not stand out in a world where murderers could get away acting like warlords. My overtly dazzling suit glared back at me. Better to not stand out, I repeated.

"If the island starts getting more new Players seeing as we cleared it of the... supposed blockage, perhaps we might find someone around our level soon enough?"

"Maybe." The elf shrugged.

There was still apprehension in her for finding another person to trust, no matter how desperately we would need it going forward. Even my help had been a hard sell until I had shown my worth. Anyone with less patience for the arduous tasks, or an apparent numbness to grand violence, may have given up on her by now. Especially with the constant sour face she displayed. I never failed to win over a fan. I would also never refer to her as a fan to her face. But I knew.

"Is there a reason you're grinning to yourself and not helping with the trolls?" She glared down at me from a dozen feet up the hill.

“Just thinking about...” my brain clicked a few notches, like the dial on a safe. “...the first big failure I had at a show.”

“Mmm.” She narrowed her eyes. “I feel like I will regret asking for more information.”

She definitely would. “A tale for another time. Let’s get these trolls down. What was the Quest after this?”

“All the troll hearts we’ve been looting, we need to go take them back down near the coast. It’s a long way, but will get us to level five.”

“*All the troll hearts we’ve been looting,*” I repeated, nodding slowly as she clenched her jaw.

“Or... I’ll be leaving the island and you can stay here?”

My gaze moved gradually over to the last troll we had killed. “How many hearts does a troll have again?”

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I yawned as we strode through the woods in the waning light of the early evening. Adventuring was tiring work, even more so than a week long show schedule. Although magician work usually didn’t involve so much of my own blood.

We had been walking in comfortable silence for the better part of an hour. The day had been both a physical and emotional drain, with our social batteries both on their last legs.

“You know what I’m most looking forward to?” I raised my eyebrow at her. “A proper warm bed.”

She nodded, validating my desire. “I hope to find a merchant that sells Sweet Cakes, and then I will spend all my gold there and eat until I die.”

I smiled. “A good way to go. Do you not have... oaths you have to ward?”

“What drives you, trickster?”

The question was clear, but caught me off-guard. “Hmm?”

“I’d like to think you weren’t just riding around on my coattails. I appreciate your help with my vendetta, but you don’t exactly have a tie to the conflict.” She paused and crossed her arms. “So, what are your ambitions?”

I stopped and furrowed my brow.

“You don’t seem selfish enough for it to be about fame and fortune, even if you are self-absorbed enough.”

My tongue rolled around my mouth in search of a concise answer. How far was I willing to stretch for some truth when something adjacent was much closer? “Performance is like...

art. Growing in power will allow me more options and skills to use. Plus, I like to see people happy.”

“And you’ll do that with tricks and illusions?”

“Probably a greater chance than with wholesale murder,” I smiled.

With a roll of her eyes, Ren shrugged and deflated. She turned to continue our journey. “Latter worked with me,” she murmured, just loud enough for me to question whether that was what I really heard.

I certainly hadn’t made the group of thugs down at the cove very happy. It probably should revolt me more than it did, that I conflated them with the goblins in how easily they died. Perhaps they were still low level, and the gang had recently recruited them but not allowed them to level up. No use working myself up over the past - I rolled my eyes at the irony of the statement - and I had almost died in one hit, so couldn’t judge.

Ren had a point in that I had latched onto her own personal quest pretty easily - and there was perhaps nothing really forcing to continue the path. We could split ways on the mainland, she was more than capable of hunting down the loose ends of the gang, and I could go and... be a magician for a few gold a night? Despite my constant drive to be a showman, part of me was working up the courage to convince the rest of me that combat could be a performance of itself.

Blend the two. Correct the evils of the world, and bring a dazzling display to woo whatever local populace was under the darkened cloud of hardship. Yes! My mind started to roll with it, the momentum of what was so simple and yet ticked all boxes - I just couldn’t keep it in.

“I... want to be a hero.”

"A... hero?" The elf looked over her shoulder at me as we continued onwards, her face a conflicted amount of interest and disdain. “You’re certainly no gallant knight, Max. But you’ve got the heart for it.”

Not that I was seeking her approval or acceptance of my new dream, but it was nice to hear she was reluctantly on board. Already the images of posters and statues of me in heroic poses set in village squares had started to fill my mind. The Master Illusionist and Savior of Whatever Town. I could already do the hard part of killing monsters and not dying in the process. All the rest was just public relations. Faux confidence was already waiting in my back pocket for a chance to spring forth.

“We’re here,” Ren eventually said, as I realized I had been lost in my thoughts for a while.

We had reached the shoreline of the other side of the island from the cove. The twin moons reflecting across the pitch sea that seemed to stretch on forever - only the peaks of the waves close to shore picking up the pale light of the early night. Just to the side, against deep gray rocks, was a small shack illuminated by a flickering amber light inside.

“Hand hearts in, level up... teleport straight away?” I raised my eyebrows at her. Apprehension filling us both, despite her frown.

She nodded slowly. "I don't want to spend another night here. We'll surely be able to find an inn or something on the other side."

"Ladies first then," I gestured with my hand, earning a scowl. It erased some of her nerves, however, and we walked down to the shack.

"*Hellooo*," an old lady cooed from the doorway. "How can I help you, adventurer?"

"Troll hearts for your illness," Ren replied bluntly, holding them out.

We hadn't accepted the Quest yet, but the elf had known about the requirements from word of mouth. Getting the items while we did the other troll Quest was a smart move that saved us probably half a day's travel back and forth.

"Thank you, dearie!"

"Same here," I leaned it to hold out the necessary hearts.

"Thank you, dearie!"

"See you on the other side, trickster." Ren gave me a pensive nod. The mixture of relief and weight of the action illuminated by the amber glow of the fireplace in the shack.

With a glow of blue light, she vanished.

[Level Up - 5]

[Stats Increased]

[New Keystone: <Demonic Magician>]

[Teleport to Mainland?]

I reached out a finger and pressed the Yes button.