

*Finding my place turned out to be more than just adjusting to the new world. I had to juggle new friendships and social entanglements amidst all the potential death and strife. Being the showman, there was an expectation that I could be a one-man powerhouse, when often I just felt no better than a performing animal, repeating the same basic motions while those with bigger vision created the show worth watching. Turn off the lights and remove the glitz and glitter, and I was just a small man struggling for attention and validation. At least in this world, I could kill my critics in cold blood.*

Standing alongside the bear, I narrowed out my eyes down into the valley. It looked like three groups of figures escorting a prisoner each. System-created orcs, that looked larger than a normal humanoid, but not as hulking as the Grak.

Ren came up beside us. She didn't look flustered, but a little out of sorts compared to her usual grumpy fare. There had obviously been a lot of gears spinning in her mind after my odd outburst, just as there had been in mine. I even had to double check my memory to make sure it had been me. Walking across the knife's edge, I pressed my point.

"Three groups of orcs, hostage rescue. Thoughts?" I raised my eyebrow.

"Reward is poor, but it's still experience. Combat should be medium threat." She nodded to me, her intent that we should accept this Quest. Why not, when it had been provided to us so conveniently?

"Wolf?" I nudged the bear, who hadn't moved his gaze from the troupe since I kneeled beside him.

"Yeah, I could eat. Can I have puppy friend?"

"Of course." Hellhound seemed to be a firm favorite among my peers, assuming he meant to assist him rather than to eat. I accepted the Quest.

We slid down from the outcropping and started to work our way down the slope of the valley to the dirt road they were leading their captives down.

"Six normal orcs each group, with what looks like an Elite in the front group." Ren withdrew her bow as she scoured their formation. "Focus to reduce their numbers and draw the rest up the hill."

"Understood." Roger's mace appeared in one hand as I drew the Hellhound card.

She slid to a stop and fired the upgraded entangling shot into the air in a high arc. As the blazing green arrow flew through the air, she drew a second to empower with radiant energy and leveled it more directly at the back group of orcs.

I split the card, so that one was of purple energy, with only a slight pain in my hand. The three groups were almost out of sight now as they traveled through the more wooded area - but then Ren's first shot struck.

Larger vines sprung up around the now confused orcs, just as her smite shot struck one through the chest. Wolf powered forward, his large paws thudding against the grass. I felt the vibration of his charge through my boots as my cards circled over his head.

The middle group turned and looked our way, angered shouts ringing out as they ran in our direction. Group one at the front was slower on the uptake, but had now seen something was wrong. All too late for the back six.

My card struck the face of one, the Hellhound hitting the floor and jumping out of the magic circle to bite out at the unprepared foes.

[New Monster: Orc <6>]

Only level six, that brought me some amount of calm. Wolf thrashed through the remaining opponents, tearing the arm off one with his sharp jaws and mauling a second to disembowel them. I may have the Unique Class and a whole host of things to work with, but the simple power of the bear was something to behold. From a distance, and as an ally.

The other two groups wanted nothing to do with that torrent of violence, and were using the space entangling shot had wrought between their troupe to ignore the bear and run up the hill toward us. Not exactly ideal, but after my speech, my ego was still at the top of the rollercoaster before the inevitable drop.

Ren planted an arrow in the forehead of one just before my pact demon card hit it, and Roger burst out of his new puppet. Too far for me to pass him his mace, so I pocketed it for now. Wolf had finished with his group and would need to catch up to lure some of the ten remaining away from us. Time to see what this old dog had learned.

I picked up a stone from the floor and went to throw it at an orc with a small buckler. He didn't seem too bothered, raising it slightly in preparation for the weak attack - before the stone left my hand as the spear of luck. It was a terrible throw and my lack of Strength did me a disservice—but the surprise attack caused the orc to impale himself on the sharp point as the blunt end hit the soft ground first and friction gave me the assist.

After the throw, I had continued the inertia of my movement, spinning in a circle as I drew my hat from my head. I threw it in the air and a blanket of dark fabric dropped from inside, obscuring me from the onrushing assailants. Two cards burst from the middle of it, splitting the fabric and spinning wildly to strike a pair of orcs. I clapped my hands, and the blanket vanished, leaving my hat to twirl back into my hands.

An arrow pierced the heart of another, but there were still too many. My grin was wide at seeing the Dazzle icons amongst those approaching. Ren had stepped backward, about to draw her sword. Wolf would join a couple of seconds after we were engaged in melee, Roger was down the hill and looked to be trying to wrestle with the Elite.

"You're all so eager," I boomed, my best stage smile illuminating my face. "Shame this is the <Finale>."

Bright lights flooded the area as small explosions popped one after the other behind me in a row. The orcs stopped, blinded and briefly shocked - no - *enraptured* by my performance. It

had been a short show, but unlike anything they had ever seen. Briefly, for the two seconds that it lasted, I basked in the adoration. The acceptance and validation. I put my inner demon back away as the dopamine took the reins. I gave a deep them a deep bow—my deepest thanks.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, the lustre and pomp vanished, as if sucked from the air. The orcs shook their head, regaining their senses, just before Wolf plowed into them.

I watched one get crushed immediately, broken spine, before the bear's claws tore the face off of a second one. Once again, I was thankful we had him on our side. Radiant light pulsed briefly as Ren shot one of the nearby enemies, who looked as though they were beginning to waver.

There were now only four remaining, undecided whether to engage the two ranged targets or turn to face the bear chewing through their peers. In the end, they chose to try to escape. I cut the ankle tendons of two as Ren dropped the third. The padding of paws through grass followed as the Hellhound leaped up to the last and dragged him to the ground. Wolf stomped up to the injured ones and finished them off with the wet crunch of broken bones.

“What the fuck was that?” Ren scowled at me, slightly taken aback at the sudden loud noises and bright lights. No Dazzle on her, still.

“That is how you end a show.” I grinned, but she didn’t seem impressed with that answer. She already had some idea, but I waved my hand as I went to catch up to my pact demon. “My area stun.” I tried to mentally remember how many Dazzle icons were in play - I needed to do better next time to see how *extra* it could get.

Roger and the Elite were still rolling around the grass, grappling and trying to overpower one another. Any weaponry had been discarded down the hill slightly further.

“Hey, boss,” he gasped as his throat was being constricted by the thick hands of the green orc. “How’s things?”

“Up and down. Trying to strengthen the Party under the constant threat of an organized crime group.” I watched them tumble about a bit. “You need help?”

“Nah... just about... got him, boss.”

The orc leader was a good head taller than me and as muscular as they came. The fact that Roger had managed to get this far was either a testament to his Strength or lack of common sense. Wolf came to stand beside me, licking his lips. Out the side of my peripheral, I saw Ren petting the Hellhound.

“Who’s your bet on?” The bear asked, watching the two figures scabble about.

“Roger.” Although the odds should be against him, I was getting used to being able to punch above our weight. Plus, he could hear me—I wanted to support his efforts and give him the drive to succeed.

“Isn’t this a bit cruel?” Ren now joined us, with her arms crossed.

I raised an eyebrow. "To the demon, or the System-created bad guy?"

"To the prisoners." With a nod, she gestured down the hill to the road where the three that needed saving had just stopped in place, awaiting release. The one at the back was apparently in spray distance of the massacre Wolf had committed and was drenched in orc viscera.

Fair point, we had experience to claim. "Finish it up, Roger. Show's over."

"Yes, bossssss." His hiss turned into a gradual pained growl, before the rough cracking of the orc's neck vibrated through my ears and the figure beneath him lay still. The rabbit-demon stood up and gasped for air, hunched over in his muscled puppet.

"Top marks for taking down an Elite bare-handed." I shot him a finger-gun as we started to walk down to the dirt road.

"It wasn't me," Wolf disagreed.

"You did great too though, Wolf." I patted his side, getting blood on my hand. "You as well, Ren."

"It could have been more efficient. We should have attacked from the back to draw them through Wolf, or used the entangle on the second group to relieve the pressure on us." She scowled back up at the corpses.

"We got through it without injury. That is a success. But I am open to your tactical changes next time."

She turned to me and nodded, her eyes lingering on mine for longer than I was used to. I smiled and looked over at the prisoners as a way to escape the glare of the piercing blue eyes. The villagers seemed to be System-created too, which I found to be a good thing in the grand scheme of it all. After we removed their bindings, they ran off toward wherever they felt was safe, without much in terms of thanks.

The third one, however, paused and scratched at his rough brown beard. "Thank you, adventurers. There's an outpost you can rest and resupply at nearby. Let me mark it on your Map."

He leaned forward and made some pen-like motion in the air, before turning and running off like his fellow detainees had. I raised an eyebrow at Ren, who shrugged in return. Opening up the Map, there was indeed a new location marked, not too far off from here.

[Quest Complete!]

[50 Gold]

[Bandage (3)]

[Common Chance Box]

Not really worth the price of admission, but at least it was something. Even the experience of combat was worth the effort even if the 'experience' gained was minimal. Grimacing as I opened up the Chance Box, my mind turned towards what the freed villager had said.

[Crossbow]

"I wonder if they have proper beds," I thought aloud. From my Inventory, I dropped the two broken crossbows to replace with this whole one.

"And nice meats," Wolf added.

"There's enough distance where if we take a slightly scenic route, we can possibly pick up another location Quest or two, and arrive there by dusk." The elf was frowning at her own Map with her eyes unfocused.

"Perfect." I grinned. "Let's loot these bodies and get moving." Oh, maybe I *had* turned over a new leaf?

Roger gave me a brief salute, which I returned with a nod as he went away and the body fell to the ground. The Hellhound had already gone, and I hoped Ren told him that he did a good job.

Picking the battlefield for spoils was one of my least favorite parts of this new existence. It was different if treasure was found from a chest or delivered unceremoniously by the System itself, but looking through the corpse-menu to see how much a life was worth was... it felt like learning the secret to a trick you saw someone else do. Once you had the formula and motions down, saw it for what it really was, it took some of the lustre away.

"Anything good?" I asked the elf as we finished looking.

"Not much. A couple of things I'm saving for Wolf. You have any rings on? I have a basic Mana increase one you could have."

"Oh, I don't - that'd be great." Despite the odd paper-doll of me with boxes in my Equipment screen clearly having ring slots, it hadn't crossed my mind before. My search through the bodies hadn't revealed anything more than gold and basic weaponry. Most damaged or paled in comparison to what I already had. I had been on a bit of an unlucky streak with looting lately, and I hoped it was just in preparation for the System giving me something worthwhile.

She flicked the ring through the air and I caught it in my hand, opening it back up to reveal an orange now in my palm instead.

[Ring of Mana] [+10% Mana]

Ren rolled her eyes - but no Dazzle icon.

"Aw, I missed the trick." Wolf came and sat down to watch to see if I would continue.

Well, I couldn't let an eager audience down, could I? "I'm not much for juggling, but..."

My left hand went into my trouser pocket and I withdrew two more oranges. I relaxed my shoulders and exhaled as I began juggling the three of them. Wolf already seemed

completely sold, and was grinning with his mouth open wide. Ren was less impressed, but I still held her attention. Sometimes that was enough.

On one of the rotations, I changed an orange to a dagger and continued. A few rotations later and the second orange became a knife - and then soon after a third, and I was now juggling three blades. Wolf clapped his paws together.

With a flourish, I threw each of them high into the air as they reached my right hand, and then I held my palm out. As the first knife went to pierce through my hand, it turned back into an orange. The second struck atop it as an orange too, with the third remaining a dagger and piercing through them both, holding them together.

I took my hat off and dropped the offending items into it, before taking a bow to the raucous chuckling of the bear. "Now turn it into meat," he suggested.

With a smile, I pulled out a pork chop from my hat and threw it to him.

Although I rarely did requests, I felt we needed all the brevity we could get before the inevitable shadow of something terrible smothered us.