

*We had wrought our fair share of evil onto the world - although that word perhaps needed a qualifying asterisk. Even the adventurers who tried to be the model Hero had their fair share of blood on their hands, and we were a couple of rungs lower than that. Rather than allow the gloomy clouds admonish us to climbing higher, we held strong and acted as a barrier to those far below, lurking in the filth with bloodied claws and gnashing teeth. Certainly, at several points we could have fallen and become one with them, but our true strength lied in the balance of not deluding ourselves that we could be any better, while having disdain for any who were worse.*

I rolled out my right shoulder. "That doesn't really seem like something that should be a Quest."

Ren pulled a face and shrugged. "It's experience without risk."

Other than the risk of carpal tunnel, I presumed. I leaned back to look up at the tree, bringing the Quest back up to make sure I wasn't missing anything.

[Quest: Cut down the tree blocking the path 0/1]

This was clearly the tree. We had made sure of it. The fact that it seemed to be twice as wide as all the others nearby and a slightly different hue gave our decision credence. There was hardly a path for it to block, but Ren was right. Cutting a tree down should be murder-free and I did suggest we look for Quests to find. Perhaps it might fall on my head, in an odd twist of fate. I didn't think the System had that good a sense of humour, however.

"Not scared of a little physical labor, are you, trickster?"

"Only one thing scares me, Ren." I sighed and started to remove my jacket. The freedom of movement would help, although I didn't really know what I was doing.

"Failure? Lack of attention? Emotional vulnerability?"

I narrowed my eyes and glared at her.

"Me?" Her eyebrows raised, in a rare holiday from her usual grumpy expression.

"At least two of those things. Do you have an axe?" I worked my jaw and started to roll up my shirt sleeves. They had long dirtied from blood and sweat soaking through them. It was about time I gave them a repair.

"For the tree, I hope?" Her eyebrows lowered again, and she looked through her Inventory. "You should have looted some from the orcs."

I turned my dull glare toward the bear, who shrugged. Sure, the orcs had some and it would have made sense to keep a couple around, but I was hoping for something smaller - hand-axes that I could juggle or throw easier. The spear that I had suited my need for a long weapon, but perhaps I needed to start diversifying.

"I'm surprised you haven't tried using your magic first, before trying to impress me with your muscles." She handed over a heavy two-handed axe.

Despite looking smart in a suit, I was pretty lean of build - even without the System needing to quantify how low my Strength and Constitution really was. "Probably more chance of that than with my tricks," I murmured louder than inside my head.

I closed my eyes and stepped toward the offending tree, peddling from one embarrassing situation to the next. The plan was to weaken it enough to where Wolf could then push it down, or something. I felt very out of place and yet was unable to stop myself from continuing the charade. I had *accepted* the Quest, after all. The call to action.

Clenching my jaw, I gripped the axe tightly, hefting it backward before making the first cut into the thick trunk. A sharp thud echoed out around us from the impact. Then, a crack vibrated throughout the full four-foot diameter of the tree and with a grinding snap it began to topple over away from me. My brain was relieved it wouldn't have to dodge away from it.

I turned and gave the pair a bow, flourishing the axe with a twirl as it turned into my jacket to hang over my shoulder. "Impressed yet?"

Wolf had a grin across his snout and a Dazzle icon over his head, continuing the trend of being my longest living fan. Ren looked rather impassive, which I took to be a sign of her surprise.

[Quest Complete]  
[10 Gold]  
[Wooden Planks (5)]

"Didn't move the needle much experience wise, but we got a little show and it took no effort," the elf said with a shrug. "Let's keep going."

I put my jacket back on, trying to gauge which show she was talking about. Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, I also wondered why that had been so easy. Something to do with my Sleight of Hand? A bug in the System? Perhaps it was even intended that way, as bizarre and immersion breaking as it was. Wooden planks, though. Score.

"You doing okay, Wolf?" I gave him a pat on the flank as I caught up. "You've been quiet lately."

"I'm okay." He lifted his head to look at me. "There's only so many thoughts in my head, and I am not yet used to talking so much. If anything, it amazes me how you two manage to talk near constantly."

"Such is the burden of a busy mind," I said as I smiled at him.

"All I know is when I'm with you two I enjoy the rush of combat and the taste of meat even more. Although you two do not mate, I consider you part of my sleuth."

I winced, then tilted my head. If Ren heard, which she most definitely did, she made no sign of turning or commenting on his statement. "A sleuth is what you call a group of bears? Like a family?"

He nodded. "Family. I like that word."

It was kind of strange, but I did too. For whatever existence I now had to eke out in this world, my current two companions were some of the best I could have hoped for. Ren might be prickly, but there was an earnestness in her heart and a drive to push me to be better. Wolf was a simple brute, but he was loyal and was always impressed with my tricks. That's why he was my favorite. I narrowed my eyes at the back of the constantly unimpressed elf.

She turned her head and gave me the same look, perhaps assuming I had been ogling her, rather than knowing I was plotting to Dazzle her, eventually.

"Something to say, trickster?"

"Yeah..." I narrowed my eyes further to emphasize the point was something valid. "Is Ren short for something?"

"Renesara. It's only used on formal occasions, though. I dislike it." She turned away to look ahead, but slowed down so that we were walking together.

There was some comparison there to my own. "I only use my full name for the stage. It's so gaudy otherwise." I smiled at her. "Did anyone used to call you-"

"Little wren? Yeah, Flynn did." She exhaled through her nose and looked out to the horizon.

"My dad would say 'I didn't name you Minimum' whenever he thought I wasn't putting in enough effort." I tried to turn the wheel to skirt around the sad point of the deceased elf, more because I didn't want to feel like a dickbag, than thinking I could course-correct that easily from something so important to her.

"He should have seen you cut down that tree." Ren whistled and turned her eyes to me. There was something in them I couldn't quite pinpoint, but certainly more emotion than I was used to seeing from her—despite the soft frown still being present.

"Well, I know what my vocation will be if this adventuring thing doesn't pan out."

Wolf sniffed into the air, raising his head. "Hmm. Burned wood. Death."

Any budding rapport quickly cooled at his words. "Which way?" I frowned and scoured the surroundings as if we might have just been oblivious to something untoward in our midst.

The bear stood up tall on his hind legs, possibly the first time he had done so in my presence. It was humbling, as he was nearly twice my height. It was no wonder he shredded through most of the humanoid opponents.

"That way," he pointed a paw up before settling down back to being on all fours.

Ren already had her Map up and her face turned into a grimace. "That's the direction of the outpost."

Part of me had known it as soon as Wolf had said *death*. Our scenic route hadn't dragged up many potential Quests, and we were close to circling back around to the intended resting place for the night.

I nodded, and we set off at a slightly quicker pace. Apprehension caused a knot in my stomach, and I was too focused on the possibilities of fiddling with tricks or talk with the others. Ten minutes later, as we drew closer, I could smell it now too.

The harsh, smokey tones of burned wood were unmistakable. Nothing as soft as a campfire put to rest. This had the odor of unwanted property damage written all over it. While I couldn't pick out whatever *death* the bear had been able to smell, there was definitely something wrong that prickled at the back of my neck.

Another five minutes, and the sun was clearly sinking toward dusk. I was thankful now that our journey had been mostly uneventful and we'd arrived here while daylight still graced us, rather than stumbling into the unknown at dark.

We came across a pathway that led to our destination, and with weapons now drawn, we followed it until its conclusion.

The outpost.

Or perhaps, what was now left of it. The log wall smoldered and had been completely burned away or destroyed in parts. The watchtower was little more than a weak ladder leading to a sheet of charcoal. Various shacks and small tents had been set alight, and only the charred skeletons of their previous structure remained.

We stepped slowly into the area, eyes looking around for potential saboteurs.

"It looks like a dragon hit it," I murmured, unsure how likely that was in this world.

"Not a dragon, look." Ren gestured with a nod.

To our side, upon part of the wooden wall that hadn't been scarred by the flames, was a hand-print of crimson blood.

"Macabre coincidence?" I worked my jaw and looked around. As much as I... hoped for that to be the case, part of me knew it couldn't be anything but what it clearly looked like.

"Same as what Hadrian had on him," she exhaled, putting the nail into my thoughts.

There were other places around the destroyed outpost that had similar prints. Some had been half burned away or dried and flaked off in parts, but it was now clearly a deliberate act. A warning to anyone who came here that the Crimson Shadow was around and in charge.

"Over there." Wolf sniffed around the dirt and led us around one of the husks of the prior buildings.

There were the bodies.

Ren grimaced and averted her eyes, but I could not. I stepped forward and kneeled, drawing a cloth from my Inventory to cover my mouth. There were maybe a dozen or so corpses, stacked into a corner like refuse. Each had been terribly burned to the point of being little

more than shriveled flesh and charred skeletons. Dark red and black, it reminded me of Hell for some reason.

I blinked away the thoughts of memories I didn't understand. There wasn't much I could tell from looking at them. As much as I had hoped to be able to chalk it up as them being all System-created, something told me it wasn't that easy. The truth would be closer to the worst-case scenario than I could imagine.

"Why would they do such a thing?" I stood, my mouth still covered. So destroyed were the figures that the System hadn't even prompted me to loot them. They were inert.

There was violence, and then there was... *this*. Slaughter, sacking, and the absolute disdain for life. It was abhorrent.

Ren said nothing, but her eyes were practically alight with blue-flamed fury. She stepped away to look around more of the ruins, and I nudged the bear to follow suit. System-created should respawn, or so I believed. What if the destruction of the area had turned it into a zone where the System wouldn't bother to bring things anew? Seemed futile to destroy something if it would pop back into existence at some point. Unless the outpost was just collateral, and Player-murder was the true goal.

The bear continued sniffing across the ground. Marred with different hues of ash and mud, I wouldn't have been able to pick out any tracks if I tried.

"Lots of blood," he muttered.

"The hope is that the cremation was post-mortem then." I exhaled, not particularly comforted by that thought. How long had it been since the act was carried out? I knew little about that sort of thing. Not that we could have stopped it, we should be owl feed around now.

"Fuckers." Ren deflated and her arm holding her bow sagged.

"I guess this settles it, then." I rolled my neck around, but it didn't loosen the tension. "Killing Crimson Shadow is going to be our priority."

"*You think I wouldn't find you-*"

Ren swiveled at the sound of the voice, her radiant arrow streaking through the ruined outpost even as I still drew my card up.

A blur of shadow went to move, but was too slow. The pained yelp following the voice was familiar, and I held my card as they came into view.

"*Assholes!* What the..." Hannah growled, looking at the end of her tail, part of it severed from the rest by the arrow and stuck to the wall behind.

Her pained anger turned to confusion as her wide cat eyes took in the surroundings.

"...fuck?"