

*The world was created for us. Although that sounded egotistical, there could be no other explanation than there was some thought given to the fact that we were intended to experience what it had to offer. The levels of Monsters in certain areas, the dangers in Dungeons, Quests that took you through conflict for the chance of reward - all were made with the intent that you should grow at a certain pace. It wouldn't be easy, and you could die along the way, but there was a route to follow.*

It took a few minutes before Ren would even talk to me again after the bad pun. Still worth it, though. I rolled out my shoulders. "There's a necklace here. Increase to radiant damage?"

"Definitely need." Ren flexed her hand out in anticipation to grab the loot from me.

Nothing much worthwhile for me, so far. I handed it over and rubbed at my eye sockets. It was now three rooms since the first, and whatever energy I had was quickly wearing off. There wasn't much appetite to stop again so that I could refuel - which was probably a good thing. If I got reliant on the caffeine to get by, then we'd run into problems once it ran out.

I yawned. "Just to forewarn you, I'm liable to get grumpy soon. I apologize if I snap."

They exchanged glances.

"You, trickster? You'd wish your own murder a good day as they plunged the knife into your heart."

I rubbed the back of my neck and shuddered. "Why would you put that out into the world?" I wasn't that bad, was I?

Wolf wasn't looking too sharp either. After another dozen treats, he was getting pretty bored with wooden Monsters that weren't very edible. He had tried, of course, and the vomited regrets lay in one of the prior rooms. You could only have so much of a good thing. Bad things, too.

With a sigh, I shuffled part of the latest inert corpse away from my feet. "Say, Ren... this isn't like... against your beliefs or anything?"

She furrowed her brow at first. "Oh? No, not really. I have an affinity for the woodlands, but I'm not a 'Wood Elf' as you might understand it."

Watching her do the air quotes was amusing, and perhaps a reminder that this wasn't a world based on my own pop culture references. "For some reason, Oathwarden sounded like something where-"

"Where I had promised to protect the forest, nature, or life? Something cliché like that?" She tilted her head.

I nodded. "Although maybe that's closer to what Wolf has, then."

"I like to eat meat," he complained, only halfway between the conversation and his own rumbling thoughts.

With a grin, I looked over at the next doorway. The inside of the Dungeon proper hadn't really had traps - with the treants presumably living here that would make it complicated. Still, I kept my eyes out as best as I could. I trusted the System to betray my complacency, so I would try not to give it the satisfaction. "So, what is your oath to protect?"

"It's complicated," she avoided my inquisitive gaze. "A longer story for an easier day."

That was fair enough. All things in time, and it wasn't exactly important information right now. I looked at my hands. A little blood, but nothing terrible. I had been managing my mana a lot better and not exerting so much. Using my inventory tricks often allowed enough time to regenerate enough mana to not constantly burn out. Having Wolf about to manhandle more than his fair share of combatants also made things less stressful on me. Once again, I was thankful for our third Party member.

I placed my hand against the cold stone of the door, wondering who did all the masonry, seeing as the treants lived here. Perhaps it was something prior. Or maybe the System didn't think too hard about that kind of thing. Was I thinking too hard about this kind of thing? My tired eyes idly went back around the room. There might even be lore amongst all these books and containers. Neither of the other two had seemed concerned about doing a little learning in here.

As they nodded their readiness, I pushed through into the next chamber. This one was different. No enemies, and one side was curved instead of squared off. A recessed part was filled with water like a shallow pool, and the water had an almost unnatural blue hue to it.

Wolf went to push past.

"Nope." I held my arm outstretched to keep him in place - a fool's errand given his massive size and strength, but he did stop.

He pouted and looked up at me with bright amber eyes, reflecting the light from the water. "But I'm thirsty from all the wood."

Ren tried to push through, too. "It's not normal water. Probably some sort of treant juice."

Exactly my thoughts, as amusing as her choice of phrasing was. Perhaps a translation hiccup. With no way of properly detecting magic or what the effects might be, I wasn't about to risk getting ill or cursed from it. "Best we just pass it?"

The bear looked a little forlorn at the prospect of missing out, but relented to our caution. Ren nodded to agree with me, her blue eyes even more dazzling in this chamber. It would still be here if it turned out to be useful for the Dungeon progress - I imagined some places might have puzzles...

I stopped and kneeled down beside the pool, feeling the sudden glare of the elf on the side of my head. Perhaps it would be useful... like maybe a magical fire covering a doorway that could only be put out with this water. Or it was used to regrow part of a root that blocked our route. It surely wouldn't hurt to scoop a little up - I had an empty potion bottle in my Inventory, after all.

But then... I could just use my hands too. I stared at the surface, as it shimmered with light movement. It looked so inviting. I bet it was really cool and calming. After all, I was tired and definitely deserved a rest more than my companions. So selfish of them to deny me this. *The fucks.*

Yet, I didn't move. My eyes blinked away a blur that had covered them and I stood up. "Huh," I said, and stepped over toward the door. Ren had a look of concern across her face again, but all I did was look at the pool of water for a bit, just in case. Then, with a warm feeling in my chest like a flickering flame, I stopped looking at it. Simple, and nothing to worry about.

"You haven't summoned Roger yet, not that I'm complaining."

I turned my head back to look at Ren. "True, I wasn't sure how much he'd like to be a wood-person." There was another reason, but I couldn't grasp as to what. Maybe I was just tired enough already and didn't need his crazed antics grating on me. That'll do for now - I pushed that excuse into the void to fill the gap so I didn't have to think about it further. For some reason, the exhaustion gave me less patience for who I was or what I could do.

The next room was longer than the rest, and slightly wider, with a tall ceiling. Roots and vines ran up the walls to host a large bulb in the middle of the roof. Green and blue hues shimmered across the rooms as a podium illuminated within and filled with water stood in the center of the room. There was little else inside other than something that looked like a long treasure chest on the opposite wall.

I narrowed my eyes up at the large bulb as Ren stood next to me. Easily a dozen feet in diameter in the shade of dull red, I imagined it either held a beautiful flower or something macabre that was going to try to eat us. Despite having a moderate Luck stat, I was erring to the latter option.

"If this is the Boss room," I ventured, "I'd rather not find out what that does the hard way."

"There is a doorway out of here, so it may not be." She gestured with the tip of her bow to the side wall, where an exit was overgrown with vines and vegetation.

"Can I drink *that* water?" Wolf pressed his large head in between us to look at the raised area.

"Unlikely, friend." I made the mental note to start storing more liquids when I had the chance. Maybe a large dog bowl - although that seemed condescending. Thinking about it, a few large glass containers filled with water - or worse - could be a nice addition to my repertoire. Especially if I started messing around with fire, which seemed like an inevitability.

"I could just shoot the bulb from here." Ren tilted her head. "If you think it'll attack us."

What didn't want to kill us? At this point, it felt like steam was coming off of my brain. This was some manner of puzzle to access the Boss room, I was almost sure of it - as if part of me could just read between the lines of the Dungeon. One last trap or encounter to wear us down before we headed into the true danger. My normally astute mind was lagging behind, and only the barest notion of what I was meant to do started to gather fragments of a plan together.

“It’s a puzzle.” I yawned and rubbed at my eyes. “Let me go look and then if it eats me, you can shoot it.”

I stepped forward, not waiting for the confirmation, and put my hands in my pockets as I made my way around the outside walls. Although I wasn’t immediately assailed by anything, there was an uncomfortable feeling the closer I walked over to the raised podium with the water atop it. My nose wrinkled up as I looked between it and the plant looming above me. Following the roots that ran down from around it, they all seemed to stop at points along the floor.

Air exhaled from my nose. The ticking of a watch inside my head as gears worked around. The podium of water, the trough atop it about a foot square, didn’t seem to have any markings or places that could move or indent. Ren watched me from the entrance still, an interest in her face to see what I would conclude. While disassembling a puzzle or trap wasn’t entirely similar to working out how a trick was performed, there was a familiar thread of deductive reasoning. Not that I had the hubris or mental energy to pat myself on the back any harder for my supposed Intelligence for realizing that.

Wolf had checked out long ago, and looked to be trying to get something out from underneath one of his nails. Wood pulp, most likely.

“The bulb appears to be parched. Judging from the slight lines on the floor where the light moss has been disturbed, I assume that it drinks from this offering pool to rejuvenate.”

Ren nodded slowly. “The bowl is full, yet it does not feed?”

I glanced back up at the large bulb. Perhaps a particular spell or phrase woke it up? Had our disdain for the written word left us with a missing answer? It was probably a simple thing. I shouldn’t get ahead of myself when my brain was already rattling around. Too many sharp edges in here that I might trip and strike my battered skull on.

In my Equipment, I swapped my gloves to being shown - and now some rather gaudy light brown gloves appeared on my hand. They were nice though, the Luck and Action Speed ones. Useful. I clapped them together and then an empty glass bottle was between them as they parted. Cautiously, I stepped up to the water and scooped a portion out, not wanting to look into whatever was illuminating it.

Once contained, it looked relatively normal except for the slight blue hue to it that remained. I still *wanted* to drink it. Delicious and refreshing, undoubtedly. My lips felt dry, so I licked them. I gradually raised the bottle towards my mouth, my eagerness dancing in my eyes.

“*Max!*”

And then it was gone, as I put it in my Inventory. I shot the Oathwarden a sheepish grin, and no longer felt the need to drink it. If my brain had been sharper, I would have done that immediately. Whatever effect the tainted water had didn’t seem to work when stored away, as evidenced by my lack of desire to withdraw it even though it took little more than a conscious thought to do so.

I stepped over to the largest of the partially withered roots that led up to the bulb and gestured for them to be ready. Ren drew an arrow and Wolf hunkered down, ready to pounce. Partially, I wanted to pause my action for a bit to draw out the tension, but wasn't so keen to test my arrow catching abilities on the fly.

Into my gloved hand, the glass bottle. As soon as I could grasp it, I poured it out atop the root. It splashed, dampening the vegetative appendages as well as the floor around it. Nothing immediately happened, as if it was waiting for me to make a note of such out loud so it could surprise us. I held up a hand to keep the others silent, and I called the bulb's bluff. I wouldn't be beaten at my own game.

Eventually, with a begrudging creak, the petals slowly opened as the roots slithered across the floor to the podium. The reds and amber within the bulb as it bloomed were much more vibrant than the outside, and it pulsed with a rose glow. No giant teeth or barbed vines to assail us with.

The roots went up into the stone basin and drank from the odd water. Why it was already full was beyond me, but it seemed to give the plant life - and as it pulsed and brightened, the vegetative coverings over the door began to crack and shift away.

"Not the strangest lock I've seen," Ren shrugged and relaxed her bow.

At her word, a brighter pulse came from the flower. Tiny motes of pollen burst down around us, saturating the air before we had a chance to cover our mouths. I winced, and we ran for the exit, pushing it open and closing it right behind us.

I took a gasp of air to find that I felt... reasonably fine.

"It's a curse." Ren deflated. "Nothing dire, but you can see it on your Status window."

[Fallen Grove Pollen] [Curse: Exhaustion, Manaburn, Reduced Stats for one Day]

The joke was on the System—I was already exhausted. I hadn't seen Manaburn before, so I brought up the description. Magic skills were twice as effective, but used three times as much mana. That almost seemed like a buff in the short term. Living for a whole day causing agony to my hands might make me change my tune on that.

I rose my eyes to see the room that we had gotten ourselves into. Our short walkway was more of a bridge that led to a circular stone platform. Around this area was a moat of water. The walls were thick trunks and vines intertwined that rose up to a high domed ceiling. Blue light flooded the chamber from a large glowing crystal at the apex.

Due straight ahead of us was a large tree in the moat. Deep brown and aged wood, verdant thick leaves. It was a beautiful specimen, if you liked that sort of thing. Also very out of place, considering. With a nod, we started off down the bridge, and I wondered if either of them noticed me swiping another bottle full of that liquid before we walked in. Not that I intended to deceive my Party members, but sometimes a good trick took a little calculated risk—and they may not appreciate that stance. I just had to prevent myself from drinking it.

As we stepped into the middle of the circular chamber, ripples in the water emanated from the trunk as two large arms rose out of the shallow pool. It wasn't just a tree, after all. Large eyes of bright yellow opened up as a crooked maw split in the middle of the trunk to grin at us. Although it went without saying that this had to be the Boss of the dungeon, I had the-

[New Monster: Treant Elder <8> (Boss)]

Oh. Thanks, System.