

Hemirtal-10

The walk to the smithy earned James plenty of clothing and a level in persuasion, which corresponded to a sufficiently marked increase in the people agreeing to what he wanted, that he had to check his logs.

The increase took him to level 20 in persuasion, and before that, the random number part of skill conflict resolution was spread from anywhere between one and the high teens. But immediately after the level increase, the number was thirty-five. He kept the log window open for the next few people he met.

William uses Persuasion (20 + roll 25)
Anita Resists (Base Will 10 + roll 20)
William wins.

William uses Persuasion (20 + roll 12)
Richard Resists (Base Will 10 + roll 16)
William wins.

William uses Persuasion (20 + roll 28)
Jason Resists (Base Will 10 + roll 16)
William wins.

William uses Persuasion (20 + roll 37)
Anita Resists (Base Will 10 + roll 16)
William wins.

He minimized the log and smiled.

His skill level affected the roll. He'd have to go over his entire log to see if he could figure out the mechanics, but that and the fact that his level added to the roll seemed to give him an unfair advantage over Shimmerland's population.

James enjoyed having unfair advantages.

Getting almost everyone he met to give him something let him find out that the maximum stack of a simple bag was twenty-five items when a new stack started with the twenty-sixth bread he received.

The smithy was a large building with one side open. Black smoke rose from the central hearth, through the open roof, and into the bright blue sky. Did the game make use of pollution? James looked at how far the other buildings were from the smithy, but that could just be aesthetics, instead of a response to the constant hammering, smells, and smoke.

NPCs didn't have to care about stuff like that.

The man working the forge was thick bones and muscled. With a short blond beard that couldn't be safe to have around flying ambers. His blond hair was long and tied in a messy ponytail; as if the man had tied it early in the morning and not paid attention to it throughout the day.

His gaze flicked to James, blue eyes, then went back to the... James had no idea what he was hammering. In the leather apron over the dirty shirt and pants. James thought he made an attractive figure, for the people who liked the down-to-earth, artisan type, instead of the more sophisticated types he preferred.

Unlike everyone else James met, the man didn't greet him, so James initiated things.

"Hi. I'm William. I'm visiting from Stormborough, well I'm considering establishing myself here. And I was talking with the Charles, weapon master." He paused for a reaction, which amounted to a grunt, which James couldn't tell if it was a response or because the man placed the hot metal in water and steam exploded in his face.

James used his insight ability, but got nothing. Trying it a second time didn't give him anything more than a flash, informing him a message appeared in his log window. It would tell he'd already used his ability on the man. It would give him his name, but James wanted that to happen organically. Somewhere in the help file, he expected was the answer to if the ability could be used one per person, or if there was a cool-down before he could try it again.

"Charles asked me to check in on the status of the order for weapons he placed."

The blacksmith stared at the still steaming water. "They're going to be ready when they're ready." He had a low, growly voice. He pulled the item out of the water and studied it.

"He gave me the impression you were supposed to have delivered them some time ago."

"Look around, William. Does it look like I have any weapons to deliver?"

James looked around. By the hearth was a small pile of what might be ore and coal. On stands were pieces of armors, old and battered. Long tables had tools, but as the blacksmith said, James saw no weapons.

"Were they stolen?" James wasn't sure how he'd resolve that kind of quest, but any quests were good for him at the moment.

The blacksmith snorted—someone had spent more time programing this one, James decided. "Only if those good-for-nothing miners not bringing me ore to work with is considered theft. And whatever that warmonger says, metal's better used making farming tools than weapons." He plunged the implement back into the hot coals.

"Can I do something to help?"

The blacksmith worked a bellow with his foot, and the heat reached James at the edge of the smithy. "You can get those good-for-nothing miners to bring me ore."

You have been offered a quest by Eric the blacksmith

Quest: Whistling while we work.

Eric is Shimmerland's blacksmith, but he can't fill his orders without

material, and for some inexplicable reason, the miners responsible for bringing him iron ore haven't brought him any. Go see why they aren't doing their part to keep the town properly armed and ensure Eric gets the ore he needs.

Reward 1 FAME point, the reluctant gratitude of Eric the blacksmith.

Accept quest?

Yes/No

James accepted the quest and looked around. "How about you add that piece of armor to my reward?" He indicated a metal glove.

"No," the blacksmith replied, without taking his eyes off the white-hot coals.

"Then how about you include one of the swords you'll make?"

"No," the blacksmith repeated, still not looking away from the hearth.

Without knowing what motivated the man, finding something that wouldn't give him a penalty made this harder. James had expected him to want people to use what he made. He was reluctant to leave without adding something to the reward. It felt wrong not to get the better end of a deal. "How about teaching me how to be a blacksmith, then?"

"Fine."

Quest update

Whistling while we work

Reward: 1 FAME Point. +1 level in Blacksmith skill.

"Where can I find the miners?" James asked, looking above the buildings for the glow.

"Drinking the day away at the tavern, probably," the blacksmith answered, as James located the green light in the distance. More walking, which meant more persuading.

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Crossing the town this time didn't earn him a level in persuasion. The formula for how steep the increase was would be something else James expected he could find in the help file.

The tavern was something dingy, with everyone there clearly workers. Unlike every movie he'd seen and many games he'd played, no one took notice of his arrival.

A table with five workers covered in dust was highlighted in green.

"Greeting, stranger," one of them called as James approached, raising a clay cub. "Take a seat, order a drink, join us and relax."

"Hi, I'm William. I was just at the blacksmith, and he said that he's waiting on his ore delivery." He used his insight and found out the man named John, and that he liked to enjoy the end of the day. It was early for the day to be over, James thought, but now he figured he had the sense of this quest chain. Something was preventing them from doing their job.

"You can go back and tell old sour face that we'll deliver the ore as soon as we're

able.” The four other men burst out laughing.

“And when do you think that’ll be?”

The man downed his drink and slammed the cub on the table. “As soon as the carpenter gets out the pickax handle we need so we can mine.”

James nodded. “How can I help you make that happen?”

“You can go talk to him and explain that without him, we can work, and without us working, it’s only a question of time before the blacksmith goes to see him and impress how important his work is for the town to survive.”

You have been offered a quest by John the miner.

Quest. Get a handle on things.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, John is willing and eager to work, but without complete tools, he simply can’t. Go talk to the carpenter and ensure the handles needed for the miners to work are delivered.

Reward: 1 FAME point. John’s gratitude.

Unable to think of anything the miner could add to the reward that would serve him, James asked, “how about you add teaching me to be a miner to that?”

“Sure,” the man replied, “another miner won’t hurt.”

Quest Update

Get a handle on things

Reward: 1 FAME point, John’s gratitude, +1 level in Mining Skill.

James exited the tavern, located the green glow, and walked. How many links in this chain? He looked forward to all the fame points, but would he have the time to do it all before the sun set? He looked up. Was it at the zenith now? Before, after? James couldn’t tell. The trek earned James a level in Persuasion.

The carpenter’s workshop was a building at the edge of Shimmerland. Mostly wood, probably built by the carpenter himself. Next to it were a few small pieces of lumber in a pen of sorts. The lumber would be the problem here.

He entered the workshop.

“Greeting stranger,” a woman said, seated on a bench, leaning against the wall, a knife and small wooden carving in her hands. “It’s good to see a new face.”

“Hi,” James replied, momentarily losing track of his thoughts. “I’m William.” With all the men he’d deal with, he hadn’t expected to encounter a woman in one of the professions. He’d started to suspect the programmers believed only men did work in fantasies.

Maybe in their fantasies.

“It’s a please to meet you, William.” She smiled, and James smiled back. She was stunning. Even sitting, he could tell she’d be tall, a little on the thin side, but healthy. Her

brown hair was short, he smiled pleasantly and her brown eyes... they brought James back to the reality of the game. They lacked the glint of life people had.

For a moment he'd forgotten she was an NPC and had contemplated asking where the closest bar was and if she wanted a drink.

"Likewise," he replied, pulling himself back on track. "I'm here on behalf of the miners. It's my understanding they're waiting on the handles for their pickaxes."

She nodded. "And I'm waiting on wood to make them. The lumberjack hasn't brought me anything in over a week and I've run out. Is there any chance I can convince you to go check in on him? See if he's okay?"

You have been offered a quest by Louise the carpenter

Quest: Timber!

Louise is concerned that the lumberjack hasn't been by with lumber for a while. Not only is she unable to do her work, but it could mean that he's in trouble. She'd like you to look in on him and find out what's preventing him from delivering the lumber.

Reward: 1 FAME point, Louise's gratitude

Accept quest?

Yes/no

He accepted. "Would you be willing to teach me the basics of carpentry as part of the reward?"

She shook her head. "This isn't something you can just learn. You need to dedicate yourself to it."

"How about including one of these figurines?" He motioned to those on the table next to her. They all seemed to represent warriors in combat poses.

She looked at the one she was carving. "That I can do."

Quest Update:

Timber!

Reward: 1 FAME point, Louise's gratitude, a hand-carved figurine of the hero Hendrik.

James stepped outside, and this time the glow was over the forest. He sighed. He couldn't tell how far it was, and he hoped it was within the town's area. He was not equipped to deal with monsters.

He found a path heading in that direction and followed it. It proved to be a peaceful and scenic walk to the sound of bird songs, the occasional darting animal and, James finally realized, a lack of insects.

At least that was one level of reality the developers hadn't aimed for.

He found the lumberjack's clearing, with stumps everywhere, and a small log house

on the side of the path by the edge of the clearing.

“Greeting stranger,” the man seating on the porch greeted James. He was dressed in heavy denim-like clothes, had a messy dark brown beard, long hair, and an ax leaning against the wall.

“Greeting,” James replied, offering his hand, “I’m William. The carpenter, Louise, sent me to check in on you, you haven’t brought her any wood recently and she’s getting worried.”

“Milad,” the man replied, then motioned to the field of cut trees. “I don’t have any trees left to cut down.”

James looked around them, at all the trees still standing. “Can’t your cut those?”

Milad shook his head. “This is my plot of land. It’s all I’m allowed to cut.”

“So, you have to wait for them to regrow naturally?”

“Oliva will come and regrow them.”

“Who’s Olivia?” James asked, trying to assert what Milad’s motivation was.

Insight use unsuccessful

“She’s the town’s druid. She looks over the forest, makes sure it all grows well and healthy.”

“When is she going to be over to regrow them?”

“I don’t know.” Milad considered something. “She should have been over a few days ago. She’s usually here before I cut down the last one.”

There it was. “Do you want me to go see her and find out what’s keeping her?” James wondered if he could try to activate a quest before the details came out.

“I’d be grateful.”

You have been offered a quest by Milad the lumberjack

Quest: Michael, remember to put a clever quest title on this

Milad no longer has any trees to cut down until Olivia comes and regrows them. He’s asked you to go find out why she hasn’t come yet.

Reward: 1 Fame, Milad’s gratitude.

Accept quest?

Yes/No

James stared at the quest name. Someone hadn’t done their job, it seemed, and quality assurance had missed it. James made a mental note of it and if it was still here when he could return to the game, he’d log it as a bug. The game was too good to allow something like this to break immersion.

He accepted the quest and tried to come up with something he could ask to add to the rewards, but he couldn’t think of anything the lumberjack had that he could make use of, or probably even carry.

Actually, he needed to test if his bags could hold anything ridiculously too large for them.

“How about including that beautiful ax of yours to the reward when I get her to regrow your trees?” He asked, knowing it would fail, but it would still count as using his skill.

“I’m afraid I need to do my work.”

“Not surprised.” He looked around and located the green glow. Still over the forest, and this time, no visible paths were heading there. “Is there a trail that takes me to her?”

“No, she’s the one who comes to me, and she knows the forest.”

James nodded. It didn’t look to be any deeper in the forest, so still safe from monsters.

This walk was slower, and a few times he had to climb a tree to see the glow and orient himself. On the way, he picked up ever larger items and put them in his bag. Branches, growing in size, large flat stones. He didn’t keep them; he had no use for them, but he determined that if he could pick up an item, he could up it in his bag, regardless of its size. And once in the bag, it seemed to lose all weight.

Which meant his inventory limit was controlled by how many bags he had, and how much each could contain. Since both volume and stack size could vary, with the right set of bags, he might empty the town of all its valuables, if that was something he cared to do.

The clearing in the green glow, with the hut and the woman tending a garden, was smaller and livelier than Milad’s. Flowers grew everywhere, even on the hut walls, small animals ran around, rabbits, raccoons, mice and rats, ferrets and snakes. On the other side, at the edge of the trees, a deer was standing, eating leaves.

James discovered he wasn’t a fan of snakes as one slithered over his foot.

“Greetings,” he called, since the woman in the brown robe hadn’t noticed him.

“Go away.”

James was taken aback. Everyone had been friendly until now. “I’m William. Milad sent me to check in on you. He’s worried, since you haven’t come by to regrow his trees.”

“Telling him that only those thugs do their job, I’m not regrowing anything.” She never looked up from the garden.

James used his insight on her.

Insight use successful

Olivia is a solitary person and wants to be left alone with her plants and animal friends.

“I see.” James considered how to approach this and decided to test something. “How about I go talk to those thugs you mentioned and make sure they do their job?”

She shrugged. No quest message, so either he couldn’t simply trigger the quest by offering to help, or that wasn’t the quest she offered.

“You have a beautiful clearing,” he said. She might be a program, but someone had programmed her, and everyone was susceptible to flattery. If they’d done a good job of

programming, they'd have included that. There was a social aspect to the game, after all. "How did you come to be a druid?"

She looked over her shoulder and fixed deep green eyes on him. "If I tell you, are you going to leave me alone?"

Something was different about her. The tone of her voice wasn't uniform like the other NPCs were. Had a programmer taken over again? He cursed inwardly. Would they know Michael? How he played?

He smiled at her. "I don't want to intrude, as I said, Milad's concerned. If you tell me what's upsetting you, I'll leave, either to help resolve it or to explain things to Milad, whichever one you decide."

She sighed and stood, wiping her hands on her robe. "Fine. What do you want to know first? Why I'm a druid, or how I can get rid of you?"

James did his best not to smile. She reminded him of his cranky neighbor. Then he caught himself. He wasn't dealing with a program anymore, but an actual person playing their role. He had to be careful not to give anything away. He didn't understand a programmer had taken over.

"I leave the choice to you," he replied. This would be an actual test of what he was dealing with. He couldn't see a program being able to make the choice. A program would just have a conversation tree. Here it was better hidden, but it was still one.

The indecision on her face told him everything he needed to know. Someone was trying to determine if the backstory was more important than the quest. A program wouldn't debate that.

"The thugs in question," she finally said, "are the militia that is supposed to keep my forest clear of monsters. Instead, they've let a group of them take residence in it, and now they are polluting my forest." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"You're a druid, can't you just, I don't know, chase them off?"

She marched to him and poked him in the chest. "Listen here, William. I have an agreement with the town. I keep the forest and the fields growing. They keep the creatures out of it. It's their job, not mine, and if they aren't going to do their job, why should I do mine?"

"You make a good point."

She looked at him in surprise, and James saw intelligence and worry in her eyes. He didn't smile as he thought, 'gotcha'. He'd taken the programmer by surprise. Either by agreeing with them or by not immediately going for the quest. And they'd realized they'd given themselves away.

Still, this wasn't about getting at the programmers, it was a game. They'd probably only jumped in because his behavior had caused a conflict in the decision tree. Still, he didn't have to make it too easy on them.

"What would you like me to do?"

Again, the druid hesitated. "I'd like you to get those thugs to do their job."

James nodded and waited. The druid didn't react, but eventually it came.

You have been offered a quest by Olivia, the druid.

Quest: go plant those swords in those monsters.

The town militia isn't holding up their part of the agreement with Olivia, and until they do, she isn't going to do more than make sure her clearing thrives. Go and ensure the monsters who have taken residence in the forest are removed.

Reward: 1 FAME point, Olivia's gratitude.

Accept quest?

Yes/No

James held the druid's gaze. Could the programmer leave her before he'd accepted the quest? Would it be easier to get the program to add to the reward or the programmer? James knew his skill level in persuasion, but he *knew* how to manipulate people.

He smiled. "I'll be happy to help, but I think it would be easier if I had something that would boost my ability to influence them, don't you think?"

The quest window closed, meaning the game considered what he'd said as agreeing to perform the quest. That didn't bother him. He wanted to see the programmer's reaction.

The druid nodded. "Yes, I think you're right." She reached into a pocket. "This is Ardir root. It tastes rather bad, but it makes the person more charming for a while." She handed it to him and he took it.

This time James smiled as five roots appeared in his inventory. "Quick tip, the program adds the item to the quest reward, it doesn't give it ahead of time."

The druid's eyes went wide, then turned neutral.

"Well? How about you get going and leave me alone?" She turned and headed back to her garden.

Stupid, he chastised himself. He'd just drawn the attention of a programmer or developers, or whoever looked after the NPC interactions. Not only that, but he's pointed out they'd made a mistake. He'd gotten cocky, and it might cost him. Never, ever, put the mark in a position to dislike you.

He sighed. Too late now. He'd deal with that problem when it reared its head. He looked around, located the next green glow, and started walking.

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The air grew pungent as the glow became wider; as he got closer to the quest destination. This time, the clearing was a militia camp, with men and women in leather armor walking about, tending to fires, preparing food, and on the whole, looking like they weren't getting ready to fight monsters.

A man standing in the middle of the camp was surrounded by a green glow. Interesting, none of the others had been highlighted. But then again, they hadn't been in a crowd of people.

"Greeting, stranger," the man called as James approached.

"Greeting, I'm William." This time he didn't offer his hand. "Olivia sent me to find out why the monsters are still around. You know she isn't going to do her job until they're

removed.”

“Sindiso,” he replied, nodding. “I know. And I’ve impressed how important this is on the weapon master, but he doesn’t have any weapons to send us, and until he does, either someone has to go kill the monsters themselves or go to the weapon master and convince him to give us the weapon we need.”

You have been offered a quest choice by Sindiso the militia captain.

Quest option 1: why don’t you do our job for us.

The militia has no weapons with which to go remove the monsters who have taken residence in the forest, so it falls on you to do their job for them.

Quest option 2: go squeeze weapons out of a stone.

The militia had no weapons with which to remove the monsters who have taken residence in the forest, so they need you to go to the weapon master and find a way to get him to send weapons for them to do their job.

Reward: 1 Fame point the gratitude of the Shimmerland militia.

Chose a quest.

1 or 2?

James stared at the quests. This had to be the work of that programmer, he cursed mentally.