

Mansion of Change

An intrepid group of explorers had set off from their homes in search of the single weapon that could defeat the great foe of the universe. For some inexplicable reason, they had all the time in the world to do this without having to worry about their homes being destroyed, but such things tend to be ignored when the success of the heroes is the most important thing in the story. For this reason, the heroes had been walking around one area of the world in particular, notorious for the large numbers of enemies that inexplicably appeared there at random. They used these creatures as their punching bags, learning what they could from the battles, and slowly gaining confidence in their skills.

The haphazard group consisted of three freedom fighters, none of whom had yet reached the age of eighteen. Their fearless leader was a common boy who had some inexplicable swordsmanship skill, which surpassed the combat abilities of his companions. Regardless of the fact that one companion carried a bow, and the other had been training since his infancy, he somehow always managed to be the first prepared for a battle. His name was Playr, a name that was notoriously hard to pronounce, yet fit within the world's unspoken stipulation that no person should have a name with more than five letters.

The only person whose combat ability was justifiable in any way was a squire in a nobleman's court. Despite this, and the fact that he lacked only a year or two before he would complete his training, he was somehow still unable to match the party's leader in skill with the blade. His sword was also ridiculously small compared to the back-mounted monster his leader wore, regardless of the fact that said leader had been a farm boy up until three weeks ago. Ed they called him, obliging his request that his full name, which surpassed the five letter tradition, should never be spoken in public.

The token female of the group was Eliza, who insisted that her name did not stand for anything longer. She was sheltered her entire life, and yet still managed to handle herself quite well with the bow she produces out of essentially nowhere. She had been brought into the team before Ed, but had always taken the back seat to him in the chain of command. The only reason she was taken with the party was because of another inexplicable skill she had developed, that of instantaneous healing. Combined with the firepower of the boys, her skill as an impromptu healer made them almost invincible, despite the fact that they had faced things the size of castles in the past. Strategy was paramount, and they had long since established exactly what their combat strategies would be in any given situation.

These three finally deemed themselves ready to move on, and so proceeded to the place where their advisor, NPC13, had instructed them to go next. So helpful were the people of their city that they had never been without such direction, and so never found themselves wandering in frustrating circles. When they arrived, they found the place to be a mansion. It should be a break at the current rate; after all, the mansion could not possibly contain anything larger than what they had already faced, since it

was itself smaller than their last conquest of note.

So they set off into the first hallway of the fortress, passing unmolested through the curiously open door, which just as curiously closed behind them. They did not worry, though. Just as it had many times before, the door to this fortress would open as soon as the villain within had been dealt with.

Their wary search of the halls continued on for the next few moments until they noticed the disturbing fact that there were no others in the halls with them. Besides the unforgivable lack of loot to be found, they were also faced with the tension created by unfulfilled expectation.

As they tried to set off again after clearing the empty halls, a sudden disturbing *thunk* broke the silence of the halls. All three stopped to look at each other for a moment, but very quickly lost sight of their companions as they disappeared through three tubes leading to various area of the mansion. They were on their own now.

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Playr mused as he slid through the strange stone tube, trying to consider just what this interruption meant. For one, the extremely well-thought-out battle style that he had developed was toast. Fortunately, they had stockpiled enough healing potions in their shared stock to tide them over until they were reunited. He was certain that they had enough. All that remained, then, was to avoid getting himself into any huge trouble until his friends arrived. If he knew this battle as well as he thought, that reunion would probably take place in the foyer of the mansion's owner, and their host in this area.

The tube ended about twenty feet from the floor, but Playr mysteriously landed in a three point stance with little more than a quick exhalation. He stood and looked around, considering the room he was in. It was not a prison, a fact that somewhat relieved him. On the other hand, it was a completely random room, and that was something that was slightly less comforting. Random rooms rarely meant anything good. This one was, however, more or less without enemies. At least none that he could see. Wary of chest monsters, however, he proceeded to loot the room with care.

Several hundred gold pieces later, Plays felt confident that he had found everything worth finding. That is, until he turned and ran into a table that he had not noticed before. The intrusion of the furniture concerned him little, though, especially when he noted what sat in a curiously centric position on the round table.

It was a pendant, with jewels inset in a gold talisman, all strung onto a long gold chain. The beauty of it was overwhelmed by just one thought in Playr's mind. What kind of attack bonus might it have?

He picked it up, and felt nothing particularly special about it. There was no attack bonus in it, and he was magically inert and so could feel no magic bonus if there was one. All this important information slowly faded into the background, however, as he noted once again the beauty of it. That was curious; he had always been very utilitarian. Once he had thrown out the queen's wedding ring before he realized that it was important, and spent five hours searching the bushes outside the castle before he found it again. This pendant was different, however, for reasons he himself did not comprehend.

He stroked along its surface, feeling the fine details that had been worked into its surface, marveling silently at the work of art. As he examined it, he felt less and less focused on the fine details, and began to appreciate the full effect. Finally, all else faded into the background, and he could only think of one thing that really mattered about the pendant.

It was shiny...

As his mind was thus drawn to the less specific details of the pendant, he failed to realize that it was shaped in the likeness of an animal's head. Within a mask of curiously black gemstone lay two lighter gemstones, standing as the eyes of nature's bandit.

Playr himself was paying for his banditry, along with his lack of care around possibly magical items. As his attention settled wholly on the talisman, grey fur began to grow in waves, covering his body in a matter of seconds. It was broken only by black gloves on his hands and feet, as well as a very familiar mask around his eyes. He shrank rapidly, and as this happened his body reformed, hands becoming paws, face growing out into a muzzle, and ears moving to the top of his head. He did not notice, even when his clothing removed itself in a swirl of smoke. He continued to admire his latest acquisition, occasionally chittering as he prodded it curiously.

Finally, as he fell to all fours with his treasure in one paw, a ringed tail grew out behind him, and Playr had become a raccoon. He didn't seem to mind. For the time being, he just wanted to find someplace where he could live and, more importantly, keep his treasures.

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Ed was a unique type of person. He had never liked being in charge of anything. He locked up whenever his master gave him a great responsibility, and he hadn't been much better since joining the team. Still, his sword arm was well used to battle, and he formed a good fighting duo as long as Playr didn't force him to make any calls for himself. That usually worked out well enough; after all, Playr was the hero with the big sword, and he liked giving orders. A lot.

Now, however, Ed was on his own, and his blade trembled under the weight of responsibility. Choosing thing for himself just wasn't his specialty, and he was now forced to make all of his own decisions. Such are the downfalls of the professional sycophant...

Ed found that he had more success than he could have hoped. Just through wandering around, he somehow made it out into the open air without running into any enemies. He was exulting in the feeling of individual accomplishment for the first time in ages, when he noticed exactly where he was. He was still under a roof, albeit a flimsy thatched roof which simply kept rain from entering, and all around him were signs that he was in some sort of stable. Down to the various stalls, everything looked much like it did back at his master's castle. Turning, Ed found the equipment for his master's horse hung in the same place as always, and he moved over to take them out of sheer force of habit.

Once he had the leather straps in his hands, however, he noted that there were no horses in need of equipment. The stables, while well-stocked, were also quite empty, and the clean, uncrushed hay in the stalls told that they had seen little use in recent times.

Ed chewed his lip for a moment. He had always known exactly what he had to do in the stables, but now that ease was denied to him. He held all the equipment, but there was no creature present to equip, and so he found himself in another quandary, unsure of how to handle himself.

Presently, however, he felt the bridle being lifted from his hands. Curiosity would usually have caused him to turn about to see who had done this, but he felt frozen in place. It was almost as though he knew what would happen next. Indeed he did, but he had more often been on the other side of the process.

The bridle was slowly pulled back onto his face. As it moved slowly, the straps moved curiously, as though they were being filled by some invisible form. Even the bit was pulled up strangely, floating in midair as though it were already inside a horse's mouth. Ed's mind refused to question this, however, and he just stood there calmly as everything fell into place.

Finally, as all the straps tightened and adjusted around some invisible shape, Ed's face began to stretch forward, even as his eyes slid to the sides of his head and darkened. His nose and mouth pushed forward until they rested against the bit, and Ed opened his mouth without question to allow the device to enter.

It tasted horrible to put it bluntly; any question Ed may have had as to why metal was rarely put in a person's mouth evaporated as soon as this registered. Then again, so did many other thoughts. Rather than continue his concern over where he should go next, he felt perfectly content to let the person who held the reins lead the way.

Nothing seemed odd to him, even as the bit pulled forward and caused him to fall to all fours. It seemed slightly odd perhaps that he had not already been on all fours, but he had been through a lot

lately.

As the fur quickly covered his body, his physical features were also rapidly altered. His ears slid to the top of his head and began to move to pick up every sound. His arms became more sturdy, while hands and feet hardened to hooves. Finally, a lush brown tail emerged behind him, and he stood as a stallion on his four hooves, content as always to do what his master said, but now thinking of the woman who held the reins as that master. As the vision of the stable collapsed to cold stone walls, his master led him upstairs towards the real stables, where he would find the other horses that his mistress had acquired before.

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Eliza was irate, in a word. Her beautiful locks of raven hair had been blown in every direction on the way down, and she had no way that she could fix them without being able to see them. She had often worked on spells that would do this automatically, but no trick could possibly replicate the beauty of her style.

It was no secret that most of what she did was to impress. She always needed her mana restored rapidly because of the extra she used in her healing spells, but the boys knew better than to complain. After all, she was the one keeping them alive out there. She had a right to showboat every now and then.

That said, she really needed to find a mirror somewhere so that her appearance could be fixed without delay. She searched every room, ignoring easily-accessible staircases that led back up. After all, if it was so easy to get back up, the boys would be there, and she would not allow them to see her as she was now.

Finally, she found something that would do the trick. It was in a drawer, just a simple hand mirror, but it was large enough that she could angle it in order to see how she looked. Still, she needed both hands to perform the necessary task of fixing her appearance, and so she propped it up against the wall, using the desk in which she had found it to pin it against the wall.

She was good at what she did, and so her hair was fixed before very long at all. She stood there admiring herself for a good five minutes, posing in any way she could to make sure her hair would fall right in any position. After that, however, she was suddenly stopped by another face in the mirror.

She would have turned around, but the woman in the mirror stopped her by asking one simple question.

"Who's a pretty bird?"

Those words triggered something deep inside Eliza, and she found herself staring into the mirror even more, not to see the mysterious stranger in the mirror, but to admire her own beauty some more. She could truly be called a pretty bird with no hesitation, and she was surprised that this stranger was the first to call her such.

Still, there were things that could be better...

Eliza began to adjust her hair, her clothing, and her posture all at once, making sure that she was as pretty as possible. As she proceeded, however, she failed to notice when her hands stopped working on her clothing, and her mouth began to preen and reposition feathers.

It was a mouth, for it had not yet changed enough to be called a beak, but her skin was now absolutely covered in bright, colorful feathers. She preened them proudly, puffing them out so that she could gain better access and order them one by one. She was somewhat haphazard at first, as her mouth was not quite suited to this task, but the changes soon remedied that situation. A beak grew where her mouth had been, giving her a much finer tool for setting her feathers in order. She was so satisfied with this adjustment that she did not even notice when the hair that she had been arranging so carefully before simply ceased to exist, as did her ears. Her eyes also changed and shifted, while the final touches were being added to her wings, and her legs were becoming more suited to a perching bird than a fighting mage.

Finally, she felt that she had preened enough, but she found that she could no longer regard her appearance. With an indignant squawk, she took off from the ground and landed, perched on the back of a chair. She regarded herself in the mirror and cracked her beak in a smile.

"I'm a pretty bird!"

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So ends this tale of intrepid adventuring. The heroes were defeated, but eventually the companions that were playing cards at the local tavern during the events of this story realized that it had been a long time since they had seen their friends. They set off on their own adventure, and only another tale may tell what will become of them.