

This story was written as a celebration of gaming and the furry community. If popular, I may continue it. For now, it's just a bit of fun in a gamers' fantasy world. The setting (containing the fictional MMORPG "the Duelists of Menagerie", Ashmere's Rift, Aeickburg, the Lost Sands, and other landmarks within this story's context), and the characters of Jayce Hammond/Jayce Totekal and Andrew Sutton/Aldrew Satyn are owned by myself. It is set in the near future ... or, just maybe, a little bit sooner...

The Duelists of Menagerie: Puzzles

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Tomorrow, or perhaps the day after...

Jumping puzzles were his second least-favorite challenge in the game, but he didn't like to lose. Only riddle quests made him feel more helpless in the wake of their often inscrutable requirements. Jayce also hated looking up the answers online. It felt like cheating. Standing before Ashmere's Rift, a towering black stone-and-iron keep perched on the edge of a vast, mile-deep chasm, he silently cursed the fact that the dungeon entrance had to be guarded by both.

Idly, he stroked the small puff of wispy beard growing from the end of his dusky muzzle. He'd designed his avatar to be something of a realistic representation rather than his usual wish fulfillment. Since characters in "the Duelists of Menagerie" could change with in-game effects such as spells and magic items, he'd decided to make this particular character work for the desired result of perfection. At game-start he'd been a bit pudgy, out-of-shape, and had a scraggly goatee. But despite it not being maximized for his personal fantasies, it still felt more real to him. The choices he had made in character creation had made the game much more satisfying.

Having given his avatar his real-world name, but appending it with the Jackal-folk surname "Totekal", the game had more immediacy. And while the Oculus Reality environment lacked the senses of taste, smell, touch, or balance, he still heard and saw everything so well that he sometimes really felt he was living in a world of beasts and heroes. But standing there, on the slowly rotating gear platform, he was starting to regret not maximizing his statistics.

If only he'd chosen to put a few more points in his character's Intelligence, maybe he'd be able to coax the system to release some more clues. That was how puzzle quests worked. But the general ratio of ten points of real-world IQ equalling roughly one point of in-game intelligence, prevented it. If Jayce Totekal was supposed to be as close as possible to his real-world self, it would have felt wrong to artificially inflate his intelligence. He wasn't entirely sure of his real-world intelligence quotient but on a Mensa entry application, he'd once scored a one-twenty. Using that as a guideline, he had created his character with only a slightly higher-than-average score in that statistic.

He'd been standing on the second of the slowly rotating gear-platforms that separated the rocky plain from the the keep's main doors. Each of the copper gears was the size of a small house and floated over a pit that not only bubbled with hot magma but flowed around the keep to form burning lava-falls into the rift, behind it. Jumping between gears was the only way across. But each, once you landed, spawned an Air Spirit with a timed riddle. If you failed to answer it in time, its eyes went red and it attacked. Jayce Totekal was only a twenty-third-level spell-sword and couldn't handle the level-forty creatures that each gear spawned. There were even more inside the dungeon and they would be tougher. But he craved the challenge. His only hope was to out-think them.

But while he had eventually managed to figure out the first gear's riddle, the second had stumped him. He'd fallen into the lava six times, now, and been forced to retreat to the blasted plains another seven. It was getting tedious having to re-spawn half a zone away and run all the way back after re-supplying his lost, non-account-bound equipment. Worse, the riddle changed with each attempt. So the first gear's riddle had been different on his second attempt and gotten him fried, pretty quickly. At least there only appeared to be ten different riddles available to the Air Spirit of the first gear. So his multiple attempts had revealed that most were fairly easy. But that second gear...

Hey Jayce; what U duin?

The text popped before his vision with a tiny ping. It was accompanied by a chat channel request. The Air Spirit bobbed before him, eyes gradually shifting towards the red. He could ask Andrew if he'd ever made it into Ashmere's Rift but that would feel like cheating.

"Iron ore," he said aloud, "with coal and a drop of Lady Allyn's blood."

As he spoke, the interface identified the key words from his speech and arrayed them as icons between him and the spirit. They floated over the apparition's head as it considered his answer.

He mined iron ore, daily, as part of his progress and used coal, often, in crafting items to build up his weaponsmith skill. He'd discovered the tale of "Lady Allyn's blood" by reading plaques in the Floating City's Library Garden. If the spirit was asking him how mortal souls could forge the ultimate escape, it would make sense that it involved Lady Allyn's in-game suicide to "escape" the torment of her husband: the Blacksmith King, Carron the Grey.

The eyes of the spirit faded from red to green and it bowed in acquiescence. As it vanished, he felt a surge of elation. Before him, only five more gears floated.

"Approve voice chat," he muttered under his breath.

Steeling himself for the run and jump to the next gear, he gritted his teeth.

Jayce Totekal was an anthropomorphic jackal. His in-game people were the Issyrians, called "Jackal-folk" in the game documentation. He'd chosen a dark-grey color for his fur and had initially made his build slender with a slight pot belly. His golden eyes resembled that of the small, stuffed jackal he had in the physical world and his tail was bottle-brush and unruly like his real life hair. Gritting his teeth and judging the spin of the spokes, he started running. The timing had to be perfect: each got just close enough for him to clear the gap only once per rotation.

"Thanks, mate! Where are you?" Andrew's voice was sudden and jarring. Jayce faltered at the game's controls and mis-timed his jump.

Cursing all the way down, he fell into the lava. In seconds his health bar dropped to zero and "You have died" appeared before his eyes accompanied by a laughing skull and the demonic voice of the game's UI telling him to either use any self-rez tools or teleport to the respawn point of his choosing.

"Damn it! Andrew!"

He had no resurrection devices. They, too, felt like a cheat. This character had to be honest. That was his very nature.

Annoyed, he called up the zone map and clicked on the re-spawn point in Aieckburg's Tanner's Market. There, at least, he'd be able to re-equip the non-account-bound items he'd lost in the fall as well as access his character's bank account for more money. He thought about breaking out his boots of fire resistance, too, but decided against it. All that would mean was that his feet would burn more slowly when he fell into the lava the next time.

"What?" Andrew's voice sounded concerned. "What happened?"

"I fell," Jayce grumbled. "One sec, while I re-equip." At the same time, he took himself off single-player mode so others in his Cadre could find his location.

"Sounds good," Andrew's voice said. After a moment, he added, "Ahh, you're in Aieckburg? Trying Ashmere's Rift again? I've said it a thousand times: that's a level eighty dungeon, dude!"

"Yes: thank you for reminding me," he said sarcastically. "I don't know *what* I was thinking."

"You should play with Teams more often. I mean that's what your Cadre is for: back-up."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he grumped. "But I like the sense of accomplishment by doing stuff on my own."

"Like getting killed?"

"Any dungeon can be beat by *any* character of *any* level," he maintained. He walked up to a stall and purchased the food items that would allow him to cross the Lost Sands back to Ashmere's Rift. "You just have to be clever enough."

"Or you take on dungeons more your level," Andrew responded. "There are plenty, you know."

"Yeah, but this one's the newest; only a few people have gotten through it."

"And that makes it better?"

"That makes it a challenge."

As he approached the bank vendor to pull out more coins with which to purchase the saddle and mount he'd need to traverse the zone, Andrew's avatar approached.

Like ninety-eight percent of the game world's inhabitants, Andrew's character wasn't human. He was a fox standing on two legs with black fur and almost raccoon-like markings around his eyes. The Kashinabe, or "Fox-folk", were a distrusted race: good at being sneaks and cut-throats. He'd chosen

“assassin” as his class. Andrew Sutton was good at stabbing people in the back. His character’s name, “Aldrew Satyn”, wasn’t very creative but that summed up his play-style. When they’d met at a furry convention six months ago, they had hung out in the gaming suite for most of the weekend. During that time, if a game ever required finesse or subtlety, Andrew would tackle it with anything but. And although he would lose again and again, he never seemed to let it get to him. He kept pushing and pushing until he brute-forced his way through.

“That makes you an idiot,” Aldrew said. “Just ask for help! I’m level eighty.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jayce said. “But I’d rather accomplish it on my own. Otherwise, it’s not an accomplishment.”

“Then why don’t you try tackling something more your level?” the black fox asked. “Or are you just a masochist?”

Jayce didn’t answer. The truth was his friend reminded him too much of himself. More blunt, sure, but just as proud and fiercely devoted to the game. If Jayce wasn’t unemployed like Andrew he’d probably spend all his time in “Menagerie”, too.

“Look,” Aldrew said, “I’ve got something to cheer you up.”

Jayce finished with the porcine banker and watched his “local gold tally” rise to 200. “I don’t want any hand-outs.”

“No hand-outs,” Aldrew promised, tail swishing. “A new riddle game popped up in Caledon. It’s built for levels twenty to thirty.”

“Riddle quests are the worst in Menagerie; you know that. The whole mechanic is a kludge: they assume certain knowledge that a given player will acquire by the time they’ve achieved a certain level and, then, ask questions about it. And if you already know an answer but your character hasn’t encountered the raw data to populate his answer icon roster, you still can’t answer the riddle. It’s a test of the player, not the character.”

“What’s the difference?”

Jayce sighed and his avatar, picking up on his real-world motion, emulated via the Oculus helmet he wore. “Don’t be a dumb-ass.”

“I’m not,” Aldrew said. “But the thing about the new quest is, if you win, you get wildcards.”

Jayce was surprised. Wildcards helped a lot. Whenever you got stuck, you could use a wildcard to fill in for a missing icon or something you didn’t have. They could even be added to a weapon slot to stand-in for a missing enchantment. If you faced a creature only hurt by fire, a wildcard could temporarily make your weapon a blazing beacon of righteous wrath. They were incredibly rare and valuable.

“They’re giving away wildcards? As in more than one?”

“Seven,” Aldrew said, confidently. “But it’s an OBATA quest; character-bound.”

OBATA: One Bite At The Apple. Each character only got one chance at it. After that, the quest was simply unavailable. Still, taking on a level twenty-to-thirty quest for the chance of seven wildcards was definitely worth it.

“I guess I’m in,” Jayce said.

Caledon was six zones away: practically the other side of the world. Aldrew was uncharacteristically altruistic, purchasing their zone mounts and food to get them there. Jayce almost felt like he was cheating but his recent failures at the Rift made him feel like, perhaps, Aldrew’s altruism was something he had earned. Clearly his friend was excited to give the new quest a try.

They dismounted their gryphons and the black fox bought them steeds to take them from Oranar’s Peace across the Plain of Sorrows through Tanglewood and then along the broad and rushing Deepfont River to the new quest instance. After about a half hour of travel, they dismounted upon arriving at the steps of their destination. It was almost invisible. Aldrew showed him a shadowy entrance to a secluded grove. Jayce used the controls to make his character duck under the low tangle of vines to follow Aldrew in. There, in the middle of the shadowy trees, he spied a stone dais resting in the grassy loam.

About ten feet across, it was inscribed with runes and had deep, worn cracks running through its edges. In its center, floating about four feet off the ground, was a green orb: the instance’s entry-point.

Jayce thought for a second and went back outside. He tied his mount to a tree by the entrance. Although steeds couldn’t leave the zone in which they had been purchased, they could still be stolen unless you bound them to your account. He had a free temporary account-bind slot and decided that on the off-chance Aldrew was trying to play a trick on him, he’d make sure his mount couldn’t be taken.

“So, let’s go,” he said, returning to the grove. He strode forward, onto the dais.

"You'll have to go without me," Aldrew said.
Jayce stopped and turned around. "What?"
Aldrew's avatar shrugged. "Like I said, it's an OBATA."
The jackal sighed. "So, in short, you tried already."
"Hey: you said you liked doing things on your own."

There were a world of reasons for Jayce to argue with Aldrew but all of them vanished in the wake of realization that this was how his friend was trying to help. Maybe he had finally understood what it meant for Jayce to accomplish something on his own. He felt a smile creep across his muzzle.

"Thanks, man," he said.

Aldrew looked a bit sheepish for a moment, his emotes working overtime no doubt, and started to say something. But, seeming to think the better of it, the black fox just nodded and gestured towards the instance.

Jayce smiled, turned, and walked to the center of the dais. Putting out one furry hand, he touched the light and, in a flash, was suddenly somewhere else.

Rather, he was in the same place but the instance opened up around him like the unfolding petals of a flower. He could still see Aldrew and the grove but they were fuzzy, in grayscale, and wavy: as if seen through a wall of water. The only things that were in-focus were the dais beneath Jayce's feet and a newly-appeared apparition.

The apparition looked human. That was a bit of a surprise since the in-world continuity said that humans were rare. All the animal races of the game were descended from humans and the only individuals who remained of that race were prideful and selfish. Humans were a player-character race but almost no one played one. They almost always spelled trouble.

"Greetings, Jayce Sutton," the apparition's voice intoned. "You challenge me for glory and honor?"

"I do," he confirmed. A check mark appeared, briefly, over the apparition's head. He had accepted.

"Know ye this: if you shall fail at this quest, then—"

Jayce waved his hand, dismissively, to skip past the flavor text to get to the actual challenge. He already knew the consequences: if he couldn't beat the riddles, he couldn't try again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah: hit me. What's the first riddle?"

The apparition looked momentarily nonplussed as it skipped ahead to the meat of the quest. Dressed like a bad Renaissance Faire pirate, the human apparition looked like someone's idea of a ghost who had died at sea. Doubtless the quest had something to do with ships and the nearby ocean zone.

"Do you accept?"

Jayce blinked. He thought he'd already accepted. Maybe he'd skipped something in the introduction. That annoyed him. Normally, after the acceptance all you got was a lot of meaningless dialogue before the actual challenge began. It could be skipped and was, really, only there for the hard-core role-players.

"Yes, I accept," he said, watching a second check mark briefly flare into existence and fade over the human's head.

The ghost-pirate bowed. "Very well," he intoned, ominously.

Jayce crossed his arms in the real world and his avatar's in-game arms followed suit. "Fire away," he said.

He half expected the game's text parser to try and cue off of his use of the term "fire" and balk at him saying either "you have no fire equipped" or "there is no fire here". But although that happened every now and then, this time it didn't.

"What is the price?" the apparition intoned.

"Uh, what?" Jayce uncrossed his arms.

"What is the price?" The repeated answer was spoken with a slight change in inflection, making the ghost-pirate sound annoyed at having to repeat himself.

Oh, great, Jayce thought. *I did miss something.*

"Could you repeat the quest parameters?" he asked.

"I am sorry, spell-sword, but I have already spoken on that topic," the apparition said.

Jayce frowned. It really was an OBATA: in every way possible. Not only could he not take the challenge again but, apparently, he could only hear the instructions once. Briefly, he thought about taking off the Oculus helmet and logging into his computer to Google the answer. Someone, somewhere, must

have documented this quest.

But that would break the illusion.

If there was one thing he loved about these new, immersive reality games was the illusion that it was real. His character may have worked off his pot belly in the last month of playing virtual Jayce (better than he had on his real-world body) and that was emblematic of what he liked about earning his accomplishments the hard way.

He almost asked Andrew for help but, for the same reason, didn't. Instead, he said through player-chat, "I skipped the full explanation, I think."

Andrew's voice came back, ghostly and echoing. "Well, there's not much there. It just tells you the full scope of the decision you're about to make, really."

"And that is?"

"Well, if you fail, you're stuck until you can get someone else to try in your stead."

Something clicked and Jayce sighed. "Is that why you invited me here? So I can try on your behalf and it can reset your character so you can go through it, again?"

He couldn't make out the emote on Andrew's face through the shimmering grey but he looked decidedly embarrassed. "It's not personal," the black fox started to say.

"The hell it isn't! Jesus, dude: why mislead me? I'd have done it anyway. You could have said!"

Andrew didn't respond.

Jayce returned his attention to the pirate apparition. The question was extremely simple. And although Andrew had said there was nothing in the flavor text leading up to this point, all that meant was he'd probably missed some subtle clues. It was typical of his playstyle.

The question was about a price. Jayce would have to figure out the answer based on his observations. He would also have to hope that the game had monitored his activities and populated his library with all the appropriate answer-icons he would need.

So, he was looking at a pirate in the middle of a grove. There was no water nearby and that was strange. Perhaps that was part of the riddle. He looked at the apparition more closely. The ghostly human wore jeweled earrings and had two coin purses on his wide, leather belt. His sword had an ornate pommel encrusted with gemstones. This was clearly the ghost of a wealthy pirate; possibly the captain of his own ship.

A ship.

There was no ship here.

There was no water and no ship.

Perhaps that was the meaning. Maybe that was the answer. Maybe this was the ghost of a pirate captain who'd paid the ultimate price: not his life, but his livelihood.

He smiled, proud of his deductive reasoning. It might not work but it certainly fit what few clues he had at his disposal.

"The price is your ship," he said.

Before his eyes, an icon of the apparition appeared joined by the icon for a sailing ship. The two floated towards the challenger and bobbed above his head.

The apparition's eyes glowed red and the icons vanished.

"You have failed," his voice intoned. It was deep, resonant, and smacked of the game's general demonic "You have died" message.

And in a second, everything went black.

When Jayce awoke, his head ached. His neck was sore and his back felt like he'd been lying on a something small and hard for hours. He groaned and shifted his weight, feeling grass beneath his splayed fingers. That, however, wasn't what made him freeze in place. His hand...

His hand was covered in dusky grey fur.

Black claws, small but strong, poked out from each fingertip. He looked at them, shocked, and turned his hands over. There, on the other side, he saw paw pads on each finger and his palm. A shadow of a narrow muzzle jutted from beneath his field of vision. The smells of trees and birds and insects and moist mold in the undergrowth assaulted his all-too-sensitive nostrils. With a bark-like yelp of surprise, he jumped to his feet and spun around in place. He momentarily took in the small stick he'd been lying on as well as his tail and the isolated, pirate's grove. It all looked far more real, now, and tracked, perfectly, to his motions. But there was more: he could *feel* it, too. He could smell it and even taste the subtle

fragrances on the air. Something was wrong ... something was *very* wrong.

Aldrew stood nearby, looking nervous.

"What ... what the fuck is going on?"

The fox looked ashamed and stepped back. "I ... I'm sorry, Jayce. I had to do it; I had to get you to take my place..."

"What did you do?" Jayce demanded. He took a threatening step forward. In his mind's eye, he saw all the icons of the sword-spells his character had mastered. It was an interface he wasn't familiar with and its appearance surprised him. Beyond that, he found he suddenly understood the principles behind those magics. In just a few strokes of a rune, he could see how the power was gathered from the aether and shaped into the spell he desired. He could see how it would flow into his blade and out into the world. It was so intimate, far more informative than the game had ever provided him, before...

And all it had taken to present his options, as if remembering them, was his angry intent.

He put his hand to his hip but found his blade was gone.

"I'm sorry," Aldrew repeated. "I ... I didn't know what else to do. You've always been smarter than me; maybe not a better player, but smarter. I ... I thought you'd be able to—"

"Be able to what?"

"Get me a second bite at the apple. And...and if you couldn't, you'd take my place."

"Take your place?" Jayce snarled. His sharp eyes caught sight of his sword. It was hanging on a branch of the gnarled thicket that surrounded the stone dais. Aldrew had probably removed it from him while he was unconscious.

"It's real," Aldrew said. "The game world: it's not just a computer simulation. I don't know how but ... but if you fail this quest, you get stuck here and the game becomes real."

"Are you fucking *kidding* me?" Jayce snarled.

"I...I didn't mean to get trapped," Aldrew whined. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen! But you—"

Jayce dove forward, past Aldrew, and towards his sword. It was a clean, quick motion that he doubted he could have managed in the real world. But the in-game version of himself had earned those reflexes through weeks of hard work and questing. In seconds, his hand wrapped around the hilt of his blade. He drew it and spun to face his "friend".

Before his eyes, Aldrew was already fading away.

"Player Disconnected," intoned a soft voice.

Jayce stood, alone, in the pirate's grove. The stone dais was still there but the green glowing orb, the entrance to the instance, was gone.

He was stuck.

Unless he could find someone to take his place, the world of "Duelists of Menagerie" was going to be his new home.

What did that mean?

Was his body lying on the floor in front of his computer desk, in a coma? Was he even there anymore? Would his friends and family notice he was gone but still active in the game?

Slowly, he stumbled back, away from the stone circle. Ducking, low, he left the thicket that surrounded the grove. He came to stop next to both his mount and the steed that Aldrew had ridden to the location. They smelled real and whickered with a realism they'd lacked in the Oculus interface.

There had to be a solution to this.

If there wasn't, it wouldn't just be bad game design, it would fly in the face of everything he'd learned about the game world. There were always more ways out of a given problem than the one presented. Always. That was one of the strengths of "Menagerie": it was flexible.

He just had to be smart and figure out the other solution.

In the back of his mind, he heard a faint ping. Faintly, he saw a notification in the corner of his vision: "Cadre Friend Connected: Alyson the Bold".

Alyson. Maybe he could reach out to her and...

No.

No, he wouldn't be a coward and trick someone else into this. He wasn't like Andrew; not in the least. The trick to any puzzle game was figuring out its nature. Once you understood the context of the challenge, what remained was just filling in the details. But that required time and research.

That was the answer.

He'd take his time and not put anyone else at risk.

Hitching Aldrew's steed to his own, he figured he could take it back to Oranar's Peace and sell it for decent amount of gold. That was the least Andrew owed him. But a nagging thought picked at the corners of his mind. This place, this quest, was dangerous. He didn't know if the coders who made the game were watching right now, or if anyone could even "see" him, but he didn't want anyone else suckered the way he was.

Thinking about it, carefully, he got an idea. Retrieving some parchment from his horse's saddlebags, he quickly drafted a sign that said, "Danger: Quest Instance Malfunctioning" and, with some thread from his vest, strung it up over the entrance to the grove. It might not work to keep everyone out but at least he could say he'd tried.

He couldn't stay here and guard this place. He had to solve this. His answers were probably not near: they were out there in the world of Menagerie. He wasn't entirely sure where he would go but he knew had had to start looking. Somewhere in the twenty-one zones of this fictional world, an answer must exist. Beyond the quests and monsters and spells and jumping puzzles, there had to be a solution that didn't require him sacrificing someone else. That, he realized, was the true quest.

After all, it was a challenging game and no one liked to lose.

End