

I often wondered who made the System. Although there were plenty of things I could perhaps believe came into existence naturally - if you stretched the meaning of the word - there were also a lot of things had too much purpose of thought behind them to come about just by luck. How did the System decide what Class you were, and what skills that pertained to at certain levels? There was a design to it that seemed both flawed yet beyond the scope of mortal thought at the same time. More than once, I believe us to be in some manner of game conjured up by a bored and sadistic entity. But then, anything was possible when you believed in magic.

[Level Up - 6]
[Stats Increased]
[New Passive: <Star of the Show>]
[New Passive: <Summon Demon: Ember Bird >]
[New Ability: <Finale>]

Even without checking any of the descriptions, I knew what the new Summon would be. I turned to my Party and removed my top hat. Placing the card inside, I took hold of the creature that spawned within and brought it out in my hand. A superfluous flourish, or actually no- it couldn't have happened any other way. Not for the debut.

A dove - although a patchy gray-purple color with bright orbs of amber for eyes. I released it and it fluttered about before settling on my shoulder.

Wolf had a Dazzle icon, but Ren just had her arms crossed. Early days. The bird might not be the most combat-orientated of my summons, but it would find some use and was practically free as a passive skill. Not that there was any opportunity cost when I had zero choice in what I received.

<Star of the Show> was something I had expected to eventually show up. The first skill to mention Dazzling my own allies. For every stack I had on a Party member, it would increase the chances of getting one on enemies. After all, if my closest friends could suspend their disbelief, then why shouldn't the unwashed masses? I narrowed my eyes at Ren as she did something with her own menus.

<Finale> paired with my keystone and the subsequent Dazzle focus the System was shoveling toward me. It had a long cooldown, but when used would take the total number of Dazzle icons in the area and do a wide attack that may have extra effects at certain thresholds. What 'extra effects' were it wasn't so clear - but at the minimum the skill leveled a stun on my opponents.

Anything that took away the capacity to act was powerful, given how easy it was to inflict mortal damage at this current level. Especially on other Players. Although, getting this a day sooner, we could have had a much easier time with the whole bandit camp.

"Dare I ask?" the elf asked, already looking tired with my potential answer.

"The System is keen on me to keep on performing tricks, I'm afraid. An area stun depending on how wowed the audience is."

She nodded, and I seemed to get away with using show terminology without admonishment. It just came naturally, an inside joke that never left the thick walls of my skull. "How about you?"

"Defensive shield, and my heals now also do a portion extra after as regeneration."

"Nice." I smiled, glad that at least one of us was getting something more stable and normal. My eyebrows raised at the bear, who had been staring at my demon dove. "What about you, Wolf?"

"I got... hungry." His eyes switched to look at me and then at the elf. "I'm not sure."

He seemed to have issue in using the System, which made a great deal of sense considering he was presumably a normal bear in his previous world. If only there was a way that I could see his STAR menus to help assist him. "You used a skill last evening, though. Did that just come about innately?"

The bear tilted his head from side to side in thought. "I suppose. It's like discovering a new food growing somewhere and already knowing if it is edible."

"So you just have to dig around mentally to find the tasty treats and get a taste of them?" I rubbed at my chin as the talking animal nodded.

Ren held out her arm and I willed the dove to fly over and sit on it as I mulled my thoughts over. She brought the demon closer to her face to give it a proper look over. Wolf not knowing his skills but being able to activate them in certain circumstances that just felt right wasn't ideal... but it was better than not having any skills at all. If anything, it was a bit of a balance - he was naturally powerful already. Went hand in hand with how the System didn't really know how to process making a grizzly bear a Player. Not that I had any brighter ideas.

I settled for giving him a pat on his large shoulder. "We should get moving, then?"

The elf looked up at me from the bird and nodded, extending her arm again to usher it back to me. I dismissed the demon, mentally giving it my thanks, just as it reached my hand to give the illusion it had just vanished into mist. Which it had, of course. It was enough to give Wolf a Dazzle icon - my number one fan; it seemed.

"You might find some use for these, trickster." As we began to circle around the outside of the encampment, she reached out to hand me a pair of glass bottles. "Oil."

"Thank you." I stowed them away with a smile, my eyes already running through a list of possible scenarios I could use them alongside my dove or just my cards. There must be other bottled substances or magical potions that I could use in my act - maybe even explosives if I dare-

I wavered as I almost walked straight into the stopped elf. "Oh, sorry."

"Don't be." She sighed. "Just give your brain a break for a change. Help me keep an eye out on the journey?"

As much as I considered the both of them much better suited to keeping watch in the woods, I nodded. We needed to look out for the Lady in Red's goons and hopefully find some information about them to get the upper hand.

With the morning starting to wear on, the mist in the woods had rescinded. A brisk breeze had settled in, and the rustling of the canopy overhead had a somewhat calming effect on me. Perhaps my mind did actually need a little rest. As we walked, I let my brain attempt to take a break from work and dabble in some other lines of questioning.

"If Oathwarden is a Rare Class, does that mean there are others?" I was apparently Unique, which seemed mostly self explanatory.

She shrugged. "Never met one if there are. My understanding may be flawed as it's just from the people I have been able to talk to, but the rarity seems to be more based on your power in your previous life."

"I see. So it might not be that there are only a few Oathwardens, but the abilities that you are granted, few may have?"

Ren tilted her head as if letting the prospect sink in. "So my abilities might not be Rare, but the combination or order in which I am granted them to maintain my prior power would be considered beyond the norm?"

I nodded slowly. "I was not powerful in my old life, but perhaps the other soul of a different Max was - and I'm Unique due to that." He was certainly more used to death and violence, so it might give credence to that thought.

She stopped to put her hands on her hips and furrowed her brow. Wolf went over to sniff some trees as she thought. "There was an old man. Used to be a farmer and he found the portal beneath a sinkhole in his field or something. Common class. Hadrian was apparently a soldier of some kind, his was a Rare class."

"So there's a disparity. Common for no skills, Uncommon for some, Rare for experienced. Unique for whatever it doesn't understand."

"I can accept that until we know for certain." She shrugged and started walking again.

Although that all seemed reasonable, there wasn't an exact way for us to find out, and I doubted the System would be keen to fill in the gap of knowledge. I worked my jaw in trying to chew some sense out of this world. Maybe we had missed some important exposition between our odd takes on the leveling process. Then again, things did seem a little unmanaged and out of control once you got past the initial prospect of simple Quests.

"What happened to the old meat?" Wolf asked lazily as he caught us up.

"Found him dead. Looked like he tried to solo the bandit camp."

Despite not knowing anything about the man other than that he existed, I felt bad that he had met that fate. It had been rough for me and I had a comparatively well rounded set of skills compared to what he may have had.

I snapped my fingers as my brain remembered a nugget of information. Without saying anything, I brought up my map and shared the co-ordinates with Ren.

“Treasure cache? You got this from the thieves?” She bit her lip in consideration. “Alright, sure. It’s not too far off our course.”

“And it might have something worthwhile.” I grinned. At some point between the top of the tree and the ground below, it had slipped out of my mind.

“Like meat!” Wolf added, although his blank expression gave a hint he wasn’t sure what we were talking about.

Ren nodded. “More likely things that Max won’t even loot.”

My mouth opened and closed, but any excuse was dead before it left my lips. I let the silent ghost of my argument lead us on toward our target.

An hour and a half of meandering through the woods, and we arrived at the location to find that at least one of us was correct.

“I guess we now know why the shipment was abandoned,” Ren murmured, as she narrowed her eyes through the foliage.

Conversely, I said nothing. While fighting boars and bandits had some semblance of normality, and the talking bear I let slide, what stood ahead of us tugged at my brain in uncomfortable ways. As if I couldn’t already take a poke at it, the System was keen to fill in the details for me.

[New Monster: Cyclops <8 E>]

Tough flesh tanned by years spent with only a leather loincloth to hide their modesty, their large singular eye gazed around the small clearing lazily. A large club that looked like it was just an uprooted tree trunk sat in his hand, Fifteen feet tall, perhaps, and built like a barn. By his feet, a handful of containers sat beside the remnants of what was probably a horse-drawn cart. The remnants of said horse were also on display. More likely set dressing than something natural, but it sold the experience pretty well.

“Eight Elite,” I eventually whispered. “That’s easy enough, right?”

“There’s a chance our basic attacks might not even break his skin. He has high absorption, very sturdy.” She caught my inquisitive gaze. “One of my passives lets me see some Monster information.”

I nodded. That was really nice, in fact. She just need to be able to tell me what manner of tricks each creature preferred and that would make my life a lot easier. It would perhaps be unfair to expect Wolf to run in without a say, given that he might be the one taking hits from that club.

“They can talk, right?” I raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I could go talk to him, impress him with a little-“

“Run that scenario through your head twice. Best possible and worst possible outcome.” Although she was glaring at me, she seemed to be earnest in trying to temper my whims rather than outwardly shutting me down. “If the worst version is too dangerous, then we don’t do it.”

As much as Best Version Max was having a laugh, impressing and coercing the cyclops into giving us the goods, Worst Version Max was a miserable paste on the grass. “Alright,” I ventured. “Let’s play it safe.”

Perhaps a bit too soon to call it character growth. In fact, I was already thinking of tricks I could pull off even we didn’t go the charismatic route. There were Dazzle icons to earn, of course, a reminder of my successes. They gave me a damage boost, too—so it wasn’t solely for the act of it. I tried to remember to bring that up next time I was chastised for my over the top manner of fighting.

Wolf looked eager to go, and hadn’t moved his eyes from staring at the large humanoid since we got here. He just needed the word to be set loose. No muscle in his body was hesitant to launch himself into the fight. It was easier when you were a giant beast and could take the damage; I supposed. Part of me was apprehensive for him, but I trusted his instinct. Better him than me.

A swing from that club when I wasn’t prepared would easily break bone, if not worse. Still, with potential treasure only a stone’s throw away, we would take our best shot. As I raised my left arm slightly, ready to prepare a card or two, Ren put her hand on it.

“Hey, trickster. Do you have any cloth left over?” A small twinkle of something mischievous blazed in the back of her blue eyes.