

I never really got the idea of experience - in terms of how the System decided you should progress. There were moments where I had suffered and learned a lot about life and my own strength that had no reward, and then other times I handed a box of cakes from one town to the next and received jubilant praise, lavished with gold and a few notches closer to a boost of power. At the end of the day, I was just a performing animal, jumping through hoops for the treat at the end without understanding the nuance of the show. Yet, knowing this never stopped me.

Sweat ran down the side of my face, and I hunched over to catch my breath. Dark crimson marred the thighs of my suit, where I had wiped off some minor exertion blood from my hands. Mostly under control. Pacing myself.

Roger twisted a dagger around in a flourish, his current body covered in the insides of some other goblin.

“This is fun, boss - we doin’ this all day?”

The sun was now waning in the sky. We had been at this for hours. We were on the fourth repeat of the Quest. Each time a reward of gold, experience, and an Uncommon Chance Box. By the time we had cleared the area, the earlier sections had started to respawn. An odd visual of moving and living beings just fading into view, as if they were there all along as ghosts, now made real. We could do this all day, but I was exhausted.

[Goblins Killed 16/30]

“Fourteen more, Roger,” I said with a smile, now partially used to his terrifying visage.

“Aw, then I’ll have to go. Fuck! But you’ll call on me again?”

Despite being bits of near white light shaded by purple, there was an amount of earnest innocence in his eyes. Innocence perhaps being the wrong word, after seeing the joy in him as he slaughtered mass goblins - but he had simple desires and wants.

“Of course,” I tapped the side of my nose, “we have a pact, after all.”

Did things work like that? I didn’t really know, but it helped make the demon happy. Despite my apprehension, I realized I would probably be quite sad if my next attempt to summon him brought a different demon forth. For the more simple creatures, it was fine, but after spending quality time with...

Quality time? I must be losing my sanity.

“Alright, let’s get this over with. I’ve had a long day.” I drew a Hellhound card and threw it out at the next pack of goblins.

Roger was getting used to the goblin physiology now and ran toward the group with more efficiency. My card circled around the fray, cutting and interrupting to allow my summons the advantage in the melee.

I hadn't seen or heard from Ren during this time. It must be somewhat boring to see me so efficiently dispatching all the foes for hours on end - it wasn't a trial of fire like the bandits. Roger acted as a distraction, and paired with the hound, I rarely needed to worry about a goblin coming in my direction. Naturally, any armed with ranged weapons I took out first, and the times we'd draw two or three groups by accident, I could just exert my mana for a more durable card.

My left hand held my right wrist, and I did just that. A blazing card hovered before zipping through the air, leaving a trail of energy behind it. Into a new group, neck, neck, neck. Like a surgeon's scalpel, I expertly cut through all three goblins before allowing the card to vanish. I flicked the blood from my hand onto the floor.

"Seven more," I grinned at Roger as he withdrew his blade slowly from a dead goblin. The hound trotted over and sat by my feet, and I gave it a pat on the head. They may all be different, but word of mouth traveled fast. Assuming they had a way to communicate in Hell, and that Hell was an actual thing.

"Do you give your card techniques different names, boss?" He slowly pushed the blade back into the body.

"No, should I?" I supposed all tricks had different names.

"It's a well known fact that skill names are fucking awesome!"

"Didn't you only start existing a few hours ago?"

"Well, I made up the fact, so it must be true." The puppet body frowned, and he shrugged.

I couldn't really fault that logic, or want to attempt to have it darken my thoughts for a moment longer than necessary. While card tricks had a variety of names, there weren't many for when you slit the throat of three mortals, or punctured through someone's head.

"Let me think on that," I had already established I was at thinking up names on the spot - and if I was one thing, it was reliable. Mostly.

Remembering to loot these last few along the way, my card returned to my hand as the last goblin dropped to the floor.

[Quest Complete!]
[80 Gold]
[Uncommon Chance Box]

"You have much time left?" I raised an eyebrow at Roger. "I'd like you to meet Ren. She's... a friend of sorts?"

"Couple minutes, boss." He shrugged, not having any frame of reference to what I could be referring to.

My STAR was glowing gold, which meant I had leveled up. It was exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time - knowing there was more power to be had, yet also aware

that we were soon to be fighting more Players. Plus, I didn't want to go through that right now until we were out of the goblin village.

I narrowed my eyes to the place where I had fallen down here and watched as the end of a rope now mirror my journey. Roger faded away and came back into one of the nearest bodies to have a bit of extra time, and then we jogged over to the side of the valley.

With a last pat for the Hellhound as it faded away, I sighed and looked up at the rope. "I should have put more points in Strength," I grinned, hoping that was a thing that made sense. My pact-bound demon just stared at me blankly.

Perhaps the most humbling task of the day, realizing how hard it was to pull myself up a short rope was a battle both hard won and not worth the reward. As I rolled over the bushes and lay prone on the soft grass, Ren stood over me with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. Still, after the hours of grinding out death with a corpse-puppet, I was happy to see her.

"You could have done that a little faster," she tapped her foot.

Roger followed my example, tripping over my legs as he tried to power through the bushes and fell atop my back. "Ack! Oh fuck. That's a weird-looking goblin, disgusting!"

"That's Ren, Roger." I shuffled him off of me. "She's an elf."

"Then elves are disgusting." The demon rolled into a sitting position and crossed his arms.

I pushed myself to my feet, dusting down my suit. "She is not, Ren is very..." I caught her intense glare and any compliment that tried to balloon into my mind was quick to burst and wither away under the heat. "...pleasant?"

"Your new pet has a terrible mouth, but seems useful."

Somehow I managed to nod slowly, now caught between the two giving each other the most intense glares I had thought possible. They would need to get along if this was going to be a long-term Party thing... but currently I didn't care to invoke any more of their ire onto myself.

"Oh, let me do my level up." I forced a wide smile to hopefully distract the pair from any brewing argument.

"Actually," Roger raised his hand, "wake me when you need something killing, boss." The purple energy blew away in an invisible wind and the goblin corpse, now inert, fell back across the ground.

"*Pleasant, Max?*"

"You have a certain charm about you," I murmured, slowly turning away from her and focusing on the blue windows now appearing.

[Level Up - 4]
[Stats Increased]

[New Passive: <Soul Bind>]

[New Passive: <Hell Born>]

[New Ability: <Card Fan>]

I rubbed my eyes. Now level four and twelve things I could use my Power Token on. “Is it always one ability and two passives per level?”

She didn’t reply at first, and I turned back to her to make sure she hadn’t vanished. But no, she was there, looking like she had something to say she had been chewing on. Whatever it was passed as her frown met my gaze.

“I’ve heard at five there are no passives, but you get a core ability - like a keystone skill for your Class.” She deflated and rubbed at her head.

Core ability? I wondered what that could be for me - I could already summon demons, including one that was semi-permanent. I couldn’t imagine the System would give me another summoning ability so soon. Ren began walking, and I followed behind as I brought up my Ability window.

Soul Bind shared 5% of my stats with my summons, which didn’t sound like much. It was a flat benefit though, and the stronger I became then the more they would reap the advantage. Hell Born just increased both my Fire and Demonic Resistances - which was a little abstract, but sure, I could go with the flow on that.

The active abilities were always the interesting ones. Card Fan used three cards and created a brief wall in the direction aimed that would absorb a certain amount of damage. It didn’t say whether I could use my magic cards through it or not, so some testing would have to be done - still, some defensive skills wouldn’t go amiss. Not every enemy would be a goblin or distracted by my summons.

“Anything powerful that can save us a headache?” Ren asked, briefly looking over her shoulder at me.

“Tell me your actives first, and I’ll tell you mine.”

The look in her eyes tired, but she slowed down to walk beside me. “<Smite Shot> is the radiant shot you’ve seen. <Sacred Grasp> is an area entangle. My heal, <Nature's Blessing>, can also be imbued into an object.”

I waited a second before it looked like she wasn’t about to continue. “The last one, I don’t think you’ve used?”

“Correct,” she said plainly, then looked up at me. “It helps me kill demons.”

I looked back at her, trying to read the look she was trying to give me behind the constant scowl. As an Oathwarden, it made sense to have abilities to help thwart whatever was threatening her... grove? I had started making things up now to justify my thought process.

“Nice. Mine are the magic card, the summoning of either Imp or Hound, Roger, and now I have a defensive wall I can bring up.”

She didn't reply at first, maybe expecting more of a push-back on the reveal of her ability. If anything, I just felt bad that it wasn't more useful currently. Perhaps she thought I wouldn't trust her knowing that she could expel my fighting force easily.

"Sounds good," she eventually agreed. "Apart from Roger, but the defensive ability will help since we are both ranged."

I looked around the quickly darkening forest. "He's a demon, but he means well." Before she could argue the point, I continued. "You know, is it odd that we haven't seen any other Players?"

She followed my gaze around. "No, new Players are becoming uncommon... there seems to be some metric as to how they're added - maybe related to rarity? Word of mouth says there used to be a dozen or so a day."

Interesting. My hand rubbed at my chin. "You think the thugs hanging about and not moving on could be a bottleneck, keeping new people from joining?"

"If so, we are about to to the System a favor." She looked off away from me. "We will rest tonight, unless you can see in the dark and have the energy for it?"

"Sleep sounds nice. Give me a chance to go through my Inventory and prepare. Tomorrow we will kill those that remain."

Ren looked back at me, her frown fully her determination to see the deed done. With a brief nod, we set off to find somewhere to camp.