

When your world could apparently draw on people or creatures from across a multiverse, you eventually gathered some odd characters. Why you would force such unknown factors together in hopes that they could dance to your intended tune on a functional level was beyond me. Would I ever find an answer that satisfied me in this regard? Doubtful, for many reasons. You just had to take everything in stride, unless you wanted to trip on the small details and crack your head open on something untenable.

My dove flew out into the opening and fluttered around the head of the cyclops. At first, he showed nothing but brief annoyance. With a grunt, he stared down the flapping bird as his anger level almost visibly increased. His patience hit the breaking point, and he lashed out with his empty hand and grabbed my summoned demon from the air. A brief crunch, and he held his fist up over his head to drop the remnants of his caught prize into his open maw.

Only, there wasn't the crushed corpse of a bird to drop out. Instead, a wisp of dark smoke floated away as broken glass and a clear liquid splashed down his front. The confusion in his one eye was almost childlike, which made the arrow also doused in burning oil seem rather cruel.

Out from the bushes where we remained hidden, the projectile struck his chest. Down his arm and across his chest, where the majority of the payload had been dropped, immediately burst into flames. The thought of whether oil actually did that was quickly wiped from my mind. It clearly did in this world. The cyclops stumbled around, trying to put it out. Probably wouldn't be enough to kill him, so we still had to act. Now we just had the advantage of the distraction.

My card swung out in the clearing and narrowly missed his eye, driving a cut along the side of his head as he tried to pat out the flames. I was disappointed that our ploy hadn't been enough to earn me a Dazzle icon, but given that the monster hadn't seen me, it felt somewhat fair. The real bonus was having Ren come up with the idea and be willing to do a little scheming. Something to dazzle my own mind with when we were in less danger.

The cyclops turned his large blue eye toward us, managing to pick out our attacks just as a radiant arrow slammed into his chest. "Tiny cowards come fight fair!" He bellowed out and made to run toward us. Despite my bright suit, it didn't seem as though he had actually seen us—just where our attacks had emerged from.

Wolf burst out of the bushes slightly away from us and growled at the Monster, his deep tone shaking throughout the trees. The large humanoid immediately turned to him and stomped heavily across the worn dirt to bring his club around.

Some kind of Taunt, I imagined. Or perhaps the bear was just that loud. It was hard to judge. Ren held her palm forward beside me and a radiant shield appeared around our tank, orbiting him like a golden moon. That'd be her new skill then.

The club came down toward Wolf and struck him hard. He dropped to the floor onto his stomach and the radiant shield broke and faded away. Panic flooded through us both at seeing the bear fall from a single blow. He didn't look bloodied, though. It must have been some kind of stun.

“Shit!” The elf cursed and began to cast her heal.

The cyclops chuckled to himself, and brought the trunk back up over his head for a follow-up smash on the prone bear. Small flames still lapped at his burned chest, although they were now mostly extinguished.

“Ren, I trust you.” I gave her a smile, which did nothing but confuse her, before I turned back to the fight. “Hey, big guy!” I called out, stepping through the bush into the clearing. “Want to see a magic trick?”

I could hear the Oathwarden grumbling as her heal went through to the bear, but I’d rather Wolf didn’t receive an unprotected strike from the weighty weapon of the cyclops. It was my job to receive the head trauma on the regular. While the bear might be tough and hardy, he had little actual avoidance from strikes - which was a big deal when it came to being out of our depths. We would need to come up with something for that, assuming I wasn’t about to get my head eaten off.

“What trick?” The cyclops turned and stepped toward me, his brow furrowed. Despite being engaged in a fight, he was surprisingly receptive to my offer. Might just be boredom.

Top hat in my hands, I reached inside and drew a handful of meat. Some kind of pork chop, as if I had properly butchered it at some point. Dazzle icon. I passed my hat over the front of it, and now I was holding a jug. Two icons.

“Bring meat back,” he frowned at me as he leaned in closer. Close enough for me to smell his burnt flesh and stale breath.

“Hold out your hand then, and I’ll change it back. You’ll never see a trick like it again, I promise you.” Not a lie, but a bending of the truth.

He was enamored, drawn by the lure of potential food and the mysticism of the little human that could conjure it out of thin air. I too, felt enraptured by this audience member, so besotted by the simple trick. Almost made the final reveal such a shame...

His empty hand extended before me. The thick fingers intimidating. He could easily crush my head just as easily as he had the demon bird. I placed the jug upon it.

“Now, watch *very*... carefully...”

The cyclops was bent over, his head getting closer to his hand as his bright eye widened in anticipation. Drool fell from his mouth and onto the muddied ground in front of me.

Slowly, I lowered my hat over the jug until it was now sitting on his palm. My heart was pounding in my chest as he stared in the hope of a tasty snack soon to appear. A whistle of displaced air went somewhere between my shoulder and ear as an arrow barely missed me and struck the monster straight in the eye.

He roared in pain, and I leaped backwards, diving across the grass into a roll away from him as his club swung through the air wildly. With a growl of his own, a patient Wolf jumped up

from his prone position and bit into the back of the cyclops' thigh, ripping into the thick skin and muscle.

I threw another dove card at the nearby tree and the bird flew out from a brief magical circle. Sent it to harass the head of the monster. It wouldn't do any damage, and he was already blinded - but if we could confuse his hearing and make him believe something was right above him constantly, it'd draw the focus away from us. Well, mostly me.

It was one situation where we didn't want to use the entangling shot. As he swung in an attempt to dislodge the bear and escape the dove, he was walking blindly about. One of his wild attacks struck a tree, and the combined shock mixed with the cluttered branches held the weapon caught. A magic card sliced across his stomach before embedding in his outstretched forearm. Damage, but not much. At the base level, my cards were having a tough time getting through his skin to do anything substantial.

He let go of the club and turned to grapple at the bear. Wolf saw the attempt and bit into one of the encroaching hands, slashing out with his paw at the other arm. An arrow embedded into the back of the monster's neck. Lethargy was beginning to overtake him from all the wounds he was sustaining.

"Not fair," he huffed, dropping to bloodied knees. "Man make trick."

He slumped over to the floor, either the pain or eventual blood loss overtaking his desire for violence. With a tearing sound, Wolf bit through his neck and put the creature out of his misery.

I walked over and picked my hat from the floor. Dusted it off and turned to the approaching elf. "Are my tricks unfair?"

"I'd say *overdone* more than unfair. He was just too ignorant to understand them." She shrugged.

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. "Please. Try to tell me you didn't have fun getting him with the oil trick."

"It wasn't a trick." She wrinkled up her face and frowned at me. "I admit nothing."

Wolf walked over to us, licking his maw. "My head hurts."

"You alright?" I moved over to him and rifled my fingers through his fur to check for any serious damage. It was matted with blood, but I couldn't see any wounds, so it might have belonged to the cyclops. I turned back to the elf, who had her tilted to the side.

Wolf looked up and rubbed the side of his face against my arm. "I'm happy that you saved me, Max."

I grimaced at the slobber soaking through my jacket, but turned it into a warm smile. Genuine, despite the situation. "I wouldn't say that I saved you... it's just part of what we do, right, Ren?" I raised my eyebrows at her.

“Something like that.” Her face softened. “We keep each other alive. That’s just being part of a fam- a Party.” With a nod to us, she looked away, back over to the crates that the monster had been guarding.

“Let’s see what we got here then,” I agreed with her unsaid gesture. My hand gave Wolf another pat on the head before I could consider if that was condescending or not, but he didn’t seem to mind it.

I hummed to myself. All things said, that went a little better than I had expected. Certainly, I had put a bit of pressure on Ren to fire past my shoulder without impaling the back of my head. That brought a smile to my face. Imagine dying to that and flopping my corpse atop the cyclops’ open hand as the end reveal to the trick? *Ta-da!* Here’s the meat, just like magic. The meat was me. Although the other two might not have seen the humor in it.

“Should I be worried that you are smiling while looting?” Ren looked up from the first box as I checked from the other end of the pile.

“If I said no, would you still be?” I scooped through what the meagre items were in this container. Everything else was junk.

[18 Gold]
[Candles (4)]

“Probably,” she said with a shrug. “This was good practice for fighting large enemies, though.”

“Definitely room for improvement.” I looked over to Wolf, who was sniffing around the dead body of the cyclops. I’d have to remember to loot the dead body if Ren didn’t get there first.

“That’s where you excel, trickster. Improvisation.”

I turned back to her and raised an eyebrow. She perhaps had a point, but I hadn’t seen it that way. Each trick or ability I had was just a part of the process - like matching dominoes. I just had to see what the enemy had going on and pair it with the numbers I held. Usually these things were planned out well in advance, rather than on the fly. That said, I would definitely hold onto that compliment and cherish it for longer than was healthy to.

“Oh.” She tilted her head. “That’s unexpected.”

I gave up on trying to decide if I wanted to take the set of cutlery from the second box or not. I did, and I did. She had moved over to the cyclops whilst I had been deep in thought.

“Four Power Tokens.” She looked half ready to express her excitement, but decided against it. “There’s a spear with a point of Luck, and a couple pieces of Strength gear, Wolf?”

“I’m not sure how to put clothes on. Or if I want to.” The bear tilted his head and managed to look disgusted with the notion.

“I’ll keep them until you see sense, then.” She rolled her eyes. “Spear, trickster?”

“Please.” I held out my hands as she passed me the weapon and two Tokens. It might not be immediately useful, but seeing as I could only withdraw items into my hands or onto the ground within my reach, having something with a bit of distance to it could be beneficial.

“I’ll look after Wolf’s for now, if that’s alright?” She looked down at the beast with a wrinkled up nose. Our tank was seemingly no longer interested in this necessary part of adventuring.

I smiled and nodded. “Of course.” It wasn’t even a matter of trust. She didn’t seem too power hungry despite how much of a boost the items could be. Wolf definitely needed his own when he could understand how to work the STAR properly. Perhaps I’d save one of these so that he could have two when ready, and catch up to us quicker. I was amazing that he was this strong without playing to the System rules, but that only meant we needed to get him on board with the rest of it to make the best use of his capabilities.

The bear growled as Ren put the Tokens back away in her own Inventory.

“Easy, bud.” I raised my hands. “It’s just temporary.”

He wasn’t looking at us though, but past me and out to the woodlands.

“Someone is nearby.” He continued to glare off at the trees and bushes.

There was no reason for me to doubt that his senses were good enough to tell, even if now I could not hear the approach of anyone. In saying that, Ren was almost silent when moving sometimes, so I couldn’t really be the best judge. Already the elf had an arrow to her bow.

A purple card appeared in my hand as my mouth dried. Standing in this clearing, I suddenly felt exposed, expecting an arrow or spell to find itself in my neck from one of the shadowed bushes. Without consciously doing it, I was pooling more mana into the card than I needed, causing it to glow brighter as I held it.

From within the bushes, a dark shape sauntered into view.