

Chapter 4: A Miasmatic Beast!

I had a new mission and that was helping the squirrel-folk!

But what were the squirrel-folk anyways? I had sometimes seen creatures that were like people but had animal features in popular games and movies that I often saw during the commercials on TV.

I remembered that the commercials for this game also featured people with animal ears and tails, and they called them beast-folk, as I saw that in the beginning when I could pick a race.

Hmm... The quest also said they were the descendants of Rata... Rat... Ratatos... Ratatoskr? Who is that? I didn't really know. Is he supposed to be another lore character I didn't know about?

Ah, whenever. Once I finished playing today, I'll take a break until tomorrow and investigate a bit more about this game on the net.

"Guide spirit, what are squirrel-folk?" I asked the helper, as we moved towards the direction the red arrow was indicating me. "Are they beast-folk?"

The guide spirit looked at me with his two large and round eyes. Those eyes seemed to be filled with some sort of disappointment now written all over his face. ...Is it okay for an A.I. to look at a person like this?

"You don't even know that? Well... beast-folk are people that are closer to beasts. They're also closer to nature. They come in all shapes and sizes and can be either human-like with just some animal features to completely beast-like but that have several human-like features instead, the squirrel-folk is..." said the guide spirit. "Ah, maybe I shouldn't spoil it for you? We are almost there, look."

The guide indicated to me something, he pointed out at the far left from my side, as a different view greeted our sight. Right at the side of another crystalline river, there was a small village of houses that were atop the tall trees, they were all made out of branches tightly stuck together, and then covered in plants, and mud.

I had never seen such houses aside from those old documentaries of aboriginal tribes in the Amazon Jungles of Brazil... I was quite an enjoyer of world's documentaries. I remembered that the people that lived there made houses like these.

"Oh, a village atop the trees! ...Wait, how am I getting up there?" I wondered. "Is there a way?"

"Hmm... Just climb." Said the guide. "There are a few branches here and there, you could make them the support to climb..."

"Ah... This is going to be a bit difficult. It has been years since I climbed a tree..." I sighed. "After I had my daughter, I really lost a lot of my fitness... My husband spoiled me too much with sweets he always brought after work..."

"Whatever you are in real life doesn't matter! This is a game, as long as you keep your satiation meter high, you can do a lot of stuff." Said the guide. "Come on, just give it a try, you can keep trying endlessly..."

"Oh... Okay then... I will trust you."

I looked upwards and saw no single soul in the treetops. Perhaps all the squirrel-folk were inside of their houses sleeping because they were feeling sick?

I moved towards the nearest tree which had several small branches and was weirdly shaped, and I attempted to climb it...

"Hoop! Ahh... T-This is a bit hard... Huh?"

I continued to move upwards, but suddenly I realized I was strange! It felt as if my hands were sticky and got stuck into the tree. What was this? Was I secreting sap? Well, I was some sort of plant person after all, so that was possible!

Ah, this reminded me of spiderman's powers, the guy who climbed such areas like a spider did... My husband loved those movies, they were the last movies I ever saw with my husband and my daughter together, so they hold a special place in my memories.

"How odd, I am climbing easily!" I said. "My hands are sticky..."

"Oh? Ah! I guess Dryads can climb trees easily? Must be another feature of the Spirit of the Forest Skill." Said the guide spirit. "It does say that it aids you at adapting to any terrain in the forest."

"Being a Dryad is not so bad, see?" I asked. "Every Race has its perks!"

"Yeah, yeah, but there are better Races out there..." said the guide spirit. "You could have chosen Dragon Kin to have immediate Fire Breath and Scales for both offense and defense, or Demon to have very powerful Dark Magic!"

"Eeh? But I got Green Magic, that ought to be nice, right?" I asked. "Ah, we are here..."

I easily climbed a fifteen-meter-tall tree like nobody's business. I really felt like I had regained my youthfulness! I found myself atop the large and thick branches that interconnected the trees. There were large bridges made of wood that were used by the beast-folk here to walk from tree to tree, apparently.

And I also could keep perfect balance as I walked atop the tree branches! If it were my normal body, I would be having a very hard time balancing myself...

"Good job, you're better than I thought. You still had some techniques at climbing that were useful," the guide spirit said.

"Yeah! Now... let's go to that house over there, maybe we can find someone there," I said.

I moved through the branches and ran towards the house. It lacked a door but had red-colored cloth covering the entrance, so I excused myself and moved them aside to enter the very dark place.

"Excuse me... Is there someone here- UWAH!"

"GROAR!"

The first thing I saw as I entered was a mass of... I can only describe it as a mass of darkness.

It had the shape of a rabid... wolf? Or something, and it now glared at me with furious, red-shot eyes!

"W-What the heck is that thing?!" I asked.

"D-Damn it! A Dark Beast!" said the guide. "Quickly, evade its upcoming attack!"

"A-Attack?!"

"GRAAO!"

The wolf made of darkness leaped towards me, but thanks to the guide's help, I preemptively evaded and squatted down into the ground. The wolf jumped straight out of the tent, crashed down into the branch, and then fell down into the 15-meter big fall.

CRASH!

"I-It fell? Oh?"

I suddenly found a creature that was hidden beneath the bed of the house. It looked like an actual and adorable, brown-colored squirrel, it had the size of a child, and he trembled fearfully.

"...!"

"Don't worry, the evil dark beast fell down to his death, so stand up, come out," I said. "I am not evil, I swear."

"W-Who are you?!" asked the tiny squirrel, as it came out of the bed.

"I-I am a Dryad! The Tree of the Beginnings sent me here and- Ah, you're so cute and fluffy!" I said, as I began to pet the big squirrel with my hands. Its fluffy fur was soft and warm, it was very cozy to touch, and I felt the urge to squeeze it with a hug...

"A Dryad?! Really?" he asked, he seemed to have the voice of a young boy.

"Yeah! Anyways, why were you with that thing? Are the other houses having the same problem?" I asked. "That's a bit dangerous, what if they get eaten?!"

"No... Don't worry, that thing just appeared like half a minute ago..." said the squirrel-folk. "My grandma died here a week ago due to the disease, and when she died there was a lot of this dark mold left... I had been trying to

clean it, but today it suddenly converged into a living being and I was so scared I hid beneath my bed..."

"Aw, you poor thing... Don't worry, mama is here for you," I said, as I hugged the cute squirrel and kissed his forehead.

The squirrel seemed a bit embarrassed over my show of affection, but he didn't shy away from it.

"Y-You're a bit too expressive, Lady Dryad..." he said. "D-Did you kill the thing?"

"Oh? The thing? It fell off. It must be dead by now, right?" I asked. "Nothing can survive such a big fall anyways!"

"What? No! It must be still alive..." said the squirrel-folk boy, as he walked outside the tent, and I followed him from behind.

We saw the dark wolf slowly attempting to climb back here by shaping its body as if they were large claws. It no longer looked like a wolf, but it was more of a werewolf thingy...

"GROOARR! GRAARRR...!"

The damn wolf thing now looked right into my eyes! It was so scary I felt suddenly paralyzed... Was this really just a game monster?

"Quickly, kill it, Planta!" said the guide. "It already lost some HP from the fall!"

"K-Kill? But..." I said and bit my lip as I looked down.

"You're going to hesitate to kill that thing? It tried to kill the squirrel-folk!" said the guide. "Also, these things are not even normal monsters, these things are literally just miasma, a dark energy, I don't know if they're even literally alive!"

"T-That's..."

I looked down into the wolf, it was getting closer and closer...

The squirrel-folk was also paralyzed in fear, trembling as he looked into this dark entity.

"This darkness... Why don't you leave us alone?! Damned be the Demon King!" cried the boy. "Please, help us, Lady Dryad!"

I... I've always felt bad about killing other things, I even hesitated to kill bugs, or even ants when I was a child. I just didn't like the concept of mortality... I've never liked to bring down the life of another living being, it felt bad... I always thought that such a thing was God's work, not mine.

But this... was not real life... So... it should be okay?

And even if it were... for my daughter I would do anything... And for this small child...

If I have the strength to do it... Why shouldn't I do it?

"...I will! Don't worry, dear! Mommy will do it!" I said, as I looked into the wolf slowly climbing, I was already just a few meters closer.

"Okay! How do I do this?! Can I attack from a long distance?" I asked.

"Yes! Use the Green Magic Skill you got, there is a spell named [Plant Manipulation]. Use it to manipulate the tree and form sharp spear-like branches right into the wolf's body, that should kill it, the damage is based on your INT stat, and you got a bunch of that!"

"Okay!"

The guide spirit told me a valuable tip, as I quickly imagined what he told me.

"...Plant Manipulation!"

FLASH!

Suddenly, I felt as if my Mana was drained out of my body. Rivers of blue energy emerged out of my body, as they flowed into the tree.

TRUUMMM...!

Suddenly, the tree shook and trembled as if it was about to fall, but that wasn't the case. The tree suddenly started to crack but it was because the bark began to shapeshift itself to the image I had in mind.

"K-Kill that thing!"

CLASH! CLASH! CLASH!

And right after those words, enormous spears made of wood with sharp tips came out of the tree and pierced through the entire body of the wolf-like creature made of darkness!

"AWWROOOO...!"

The beast gave a last, agonizing howl, as its entire body suddenly exploded into black smoke, and dissipated...

Ding!

[You have defeated a Wolf-shaped Dark Beast (Elite): Lv4, you gained 500 EXP (BONUS!)]

[Race & Job Class EXP: 550 / 1000]

[You acquired [Dark Essence] x1, [Black Core] x1]

[You acquired 85 Gold Coins]

"I-I killed it..." I sighed. I looked into the system's notifications, as I had acquired two weird items and a lot of gold...

"W-Wow... Amazing, you're really like the Dryads I've heard about in fairytales, lady!" said the squirrel-folk, as he suddenly hugged my legs adorably.

"I am glad I could save you, dear..." I sighed in relief and actually felt a bit tired.

I suddenly realized my Mana stat was in red color, as if warning me of something.

Ah, it was too low. That one attack consumed... 200 MP?! I certainly couldn't do that all the time, I guess...

"Good job! See? It's not that hard to kill, heheh..." laughed the guide. It was as if he had fun seeing me kill things.

What a strange guide.

But now, it was time to assess the problem with the village.