

CHAPTER 21 – WE EVOLVE II

The fact that each class had a different amount of awarded stats per level was interesting. Without any means of rating the power of these classes, such as level or rarity tier, that was really the only means by which he could establish a baseline.

Luke wondered if he picked a class that gave lower stats, would that reduce how much future classes gave, or were the awarded stats a roundabout means of declaring rarity?

Oddly enough, Luke found himself relaxing. Perhaps for the first time since the assessment test started. Ever since it began, it had been a fight for survival, with danger lurking around every corner.

For once, he actually had some downtime with the nearby monsters defeated and nobody else to worry about. There had been no sign of pursuit all day.

He didn't *completely* let his guard down. His shadow powers lent some measure of security that nothing was going to sneak up on him for the time being.

Truthfully, this sort of decision-making was what he loved most about playing games. It was uncanny that his new reality was so similar. The potential for failure was huge. He could pick the wrong class and it could screw him over for years.

But so too was the potential for a meteoric rise in power.

Keeping his eyes shut, Luke tried to get a feel for the two classes. He didn't know what he was doing truthfully. However, something about it felt natural. The more he relaxed his mind and meditated on the decision, the more he felt a series of mental tugs toward Thief.

Maybe it was his imagination, but he swore he could feel a series of thin gossamer strands wrapped around him, leading toward Thief.

There was nothing for Marksman.

The main reason he didn't immediately decline Marksman was because the System appeared to be giving him advice. And the concept of crossing class branches was interesting. If he went with Marksman, would he be able to cross over to another branch later?

If the System opened up possibilities based on prior behavior, then crossing from one branch to another now should make it easier to do so in the future. Which meant he might be able to collect multiple skills from various branches, bending and twisting them along the way until they were truly unique.

Of course, the opposite was true too. This could be a one-and-done opportunity.

Luke groaned. *At least with games you have an idea of the rules and possibilities. If you screw up, you can always reroll a new character.*

It's not like I've been sleeping super well since even before we got here. I used to need a sleeping pill just to get more than 4 hours.

And yet the more he thought about selecting Thief, the more it felt right. As if a very subtle guiding hand was giving him a nudge toward it.

Is that my Fate or just sleep deprivation?

There was no answer. Not that he expected one.

Could be a bit of column A, and a bit of column B, Luke thought wryly.

Feeling surer of his decision than he had any right to, Luke chose Thief.

The following cascade of notifications was both awe-inspiring and informative.

Your class has evolved to [Thief].

Skill gained:

[Treasure Hunter (Uncommon)]

(Class Skill)

A Thief always knows where the valuables are stashed. Treasure Hunter adds a chance to find loot from the most unlikely of places. Adds a small bonus to the influence of Fate when using this skill.

Uncommon-Rarity Upgrade: There is now a chance to upgrade the rarity of any loot you find.

Luke was immediately impressed with his new treasure hunter skill that instantly came with an upgrade. It was interesting to know that skills could have expanded capabilities through upgrades.

The potential for [Treasure Hunter] was huge. If he got lucky enough to find a piece of gear that was already uncommon, the skill had a chance to bump it up to whatever was higher than uncommon-rarity.

This could help me be less reliant on the Company Shop, and thereby keep more of my Loyalty Points. That's what the scoring is based on after all, Luke thought, trying to plan ahead. And now, my Fate stat has an even greater impact since it influences my ability to find items.

Skill gained:

[Novice Dual Wielding (Uncommon)]

(Unique Class Skill)

Having developed your abilities and fighting style, you have tapped into an innate talent for wielding two weapons. Few are those that can develop the control, speed, and reflexes necessary to move two weapons as if they were one. Grants beginner proficiency of

wielding two weapons at once, paving the way for combo attacks, techniques and forms. Adds a slight bonus to the influence of Dexterity and Strength stats when using this skill.

Requirements: [Ambidextrous], [Intermediate One-handed Weapons]

Knowledge flooded his brain, detailing how to seamlessly wield two weapons at once, as if he had been practicing the style for years. It clashed with his restrictive fencing training, then suddenly melded with it until it all clicked into place.

Interestingly enough, dual wielding didn't just cover using simple one-handed weapons. The skill governed throwing weapons too, even though the ranged weapon skill wasn't required to pick up the unique class skill.

“Wow, now that skill is *good*,” Luke said aloud to himself, eyes widened in surprise.

Grinning, Luke rubbed the growing stubble on his chin.

Dual wielding required both his unique race skill, [Ambidextrous], and intermediate aptitude with one-handed weapons. The latter which he had only recently acquired.

That heavily suggested that dual wielding was an incredibly rare skill for anyone in the multiverse to possess.

Despite himself, it felt like he was beginning to turn into an asset for the Company. Maybe that could lead to a brighter future for him down the road, since that organization had the power to uplift entire universes and all.

He wasn't sure if there were different variations of skills, so it might be possible that there was another path to dual wielding.

The fact that the System proclaimed it a “unique class skill” further cemented his belief that it wasn't something that just any Thief had.

What little time he had spent with Henry and his group of psychopaths had been useful, however. If any of them had any such abilities, none of them spoke about it.

There were a few people, taking Henry's word for it, that possessed unique race skills that seemed more like personal talents carried over from their life on Earth, but they were rare.

In Henry's group, there was only supposedly one. In John's group, Luke was the odd man out with a unique race skill.

The sample size was far too small to extrapolate any meaningful data, but it did seem possible that the System grouped people up like that on purpose.

Giving one person with a unique skill per 12-man team. So far, it seemed every group of humans that appeared in the multiverse did so in a group of 12.

The heavy losses that John's group had suffered hardly seemed uncommon. Luke paused and realized that he had stopped thinking of the group of coworkers he came here with as his group for a little while now.

Henry could have been lying, but there was a ring of truth to it. Each tower contained 12 people at the top, and there were dozens visible from his original vantage point.

How many was anybody's guess. Luke wouldn't be surprised if there were thousands of them stretched across this place. The forest below Henry's tower didn't seem to house any.

The towers would have stuck out like a sore thumb above the lush green canopy, but that was just one region. Compared to how vast the ruins appeared to be, it was a small region at that.

He frowned, thinking of John, Alice, Janet, Ed, and the rest that he left behind.

It wasn't like he had a choice. It seemed like they would ultimately be safer there anyway, rather than on their own. That place was basically a fortress in Luke's eyes.

A fortress run by at least 1, perhaps 2, complete psychos who were likely hunting him down as he sat here resting.

After less than a day, Henry's group was already 20 strong before John's group joined them. He was sure Marcy was the brains of that group, but even in the privacy of his own head, he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction.

If Henry kept gathering people to him, and it would be hard not to with such an impressive base of operations, they could number in the hundreds in a week or less.

Likely less.

But there was one problem that Henry—and by extension, John's—group had that Luke did not.

They were anchored to one spot. If monsters either didn't respawn or their levels were bound by their region, then they would be forced to hunt farther and farther afield.

Over time, all that commuting—for want of a better word—would add up and they'd have to make some hard decisions. Either pick up stakes and move away from the safety of their base closer to better hunting grounds, or accept slower progression.

Luke, on the other hand, was entirely mobile. He could go anywhere he wanted, provided he was strong enough to fight whatever got in his way.

While Luke lacked the safety and protection that a base would provide, along with the support of people who wanted to survive, he wasn't bound to any specific place.

He could roam like the ancient hunters on the African plains, following his prey, always tracking the next strongest monster and staying within striking distance.

It was far more dangerous than what Henry's group was doing, but the potential for reward was obscenely high.

He would need to be careful. He was already finding that just moving away from the ruins section of the assessment yielded higher level monsters for him to fight.

Which was exactly what he wanted.

Until the level 10 gigant rat, they were boring and simple to fight. He had begun to wonder if there was something wrong with him, because he wished he could relive the rush and thrill of dueling a person to the death.

There was nothing else like it.

Luke would never admit it to anybody else, though. This was a secret he would take to his grave. He didn't *want* to hurt anybody, but there was no mistaking the battle high he got while pitting everything he was against everything some other person was.

Monsters just weren't the same, even the gigant rat was only a step above the mindless low level creatures.

They didn't think like people. They didn't use tactics or feints, at least not yet, and they weren't capable of holding grudges and doing everything possible to see you dead.

In the end, a human was just a far more dangerous foe, no matter the level. It didn't hurt that they gave more LP due to taking a portion of the LP they had already gained. And with his [Fate Stealer] title, he gained Fate as well.

Something that he was beginning to suspect was a very rare and valuable resource.

Without [Fate Stealer], Luke would have a total of 5 Fate to his name. Assuming he didn't cannibalize any to get some free stat points.

He now was at a whopping 28 Fate, nearly 6 times the amount he should have at his current level.

That made his [Treasure Hunter] skill far stronger than it should be at his level. In fact, if anyone else had evolved their class into Thief, their ability to find loot would more than likely pale in comparison to his.

He grinned, feeling pleased with himself.

While the [Fate Stealer] title clearly seemed to bend toward killing murderers, he gained half as much Fate if he defeated any other human.

If Luke was a darker person, he would have had a field day siphoning off Fate like some red named Player Killer in any number of popular games.

But that would mean that he didn't value human life, which couldn't be further from the truth. He had given that first Rogue a chance to surrender, didn't he? Even though he looked as if he was going to kill Ed without any provocation.

Then the trio of assassins had come barreling into his room, hoping for an easy kill while he was asleep. Even then, he hadn't gone immediately for the kill.

If you had, you'd have gotten out of there a lot sooner, a small, dark voice chided.

It was true. He didn't think he would have been able to live with himself if the first thing he did was kill anybody he saw. This wasn't a game. These people had families, friends, and loved ones.

And one time somebody more at peace with killing is going to get the jump on you and your hesitation will give them the opening to finish you.

There wasn't much use in honor if you were dead.

That's not me, Luke protested. If I want to be better, then I'll just have to train that much harder so that even if somebody gets the drop on me, I can take them.