

Wildcards - Chapter 29:

Blessing from the Vampire God

When James opened his eyes, he was no longer in his apartment in District 6. He was back in Abidden as the Dread Pirate Sylvian. When he had previously logged out, he found what he thought was a safe area of the forest.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

There were dozens of corpses surrounding him and in various states of decay. The secluded enclosure of trees that he thought would be good camouflage turned out to be anything but.

James moved tentatively through the carnage, wondering what had happened while he was logged out. The place was a battlefield and yet his character was still alive?

An idea popped into his head.

"Maybe there's a notification?"

James had previously streamlined all of his notifications so they wouldn't pop-up in front of him at inconvenient times. Just like he had thought, there were quite a few pending notifications that were vying for his attention. Some of them blinked erratically to indicate their urgent priority.

"Okay, so what did I miss?"

Your Follower has levelled up!

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"Okay, okay... we're adding this one to the condensed pile!"

James pushed the notifications to one side and recreated the battle report but this time for Follower updates. He didn't need to be bombarded with the same message again and again. It did however make him curious about something that had been in the back of his head. Shari was able to level up as she fought, but the Dread Pirate didn't level up at the same pace. Both of them were the same Rank, and she was already level three by the time she caught up to him. Just from the first few lines of his notifications, James knew she was at least level six now.

"Open Settings."

James said mechanically before shaking his head. He kept forgetting how high tech everything was and how there was no need for voice commands.

As the menu opened up in front of him, James searched through the settings to see if he could figure out what was wrong with his levelling ability.

Movement Control: Automatic

By selecting automatic, the game will adjust your speed to prevent disorientation and nausea.

"Thank you, Jackal!"

James laughed as he unchecked the option and moved the setting into 'Manual' mode.

Movement Control: Manual

By selecting manual, your speed and movement will be determined by a combination of your rig and in-game attributes.

Warning: *Use of Manual is not recommended for new players. Risks include disorientation, motion sickness and nausea.*

James fought the urge to dismiss the notifications and start jumping around to test the difference. He needed to find out what was happening with his levelling system. It took a few more scrolls of the page before he decided to try something different.

Search for level options.

James focused his thoughts in the hopes that the system would register his intentions. Thankfully, the exact option he was looking for popped up immediately.

Auto-Levelling: Off

This allows you to amass a large pool of experience which can be allocated toward Quest Creation for members of your Faction.

Warning: *Any experience that you have gained will be reset to 0 upon your death.*

After reading the options and toggling through the different settings, James realised what was happening. Because he had created a quest for Shari, it had taken away any experience from the battle with the Slavers and likely turned off Auto-Levelling.

But why would it change my settings without my consent?

Before he could vocalise his own thought process, the system popped up with another notification.

Settings / Options: Auto-Select

Auto-Select allows the system to choose your preferences based on your playstyle. The game will provide you with the most optimal recommendations.

Warning: *Disabling Auto-Select could remove key functionality of your character.*

James wanted to toggle off the option that had made the decision for him. He desperately wanted to just switch it off, but the warning at the bottom of the notification had made him pause. He wasn't a developer and he didn't rival an AI in terms of intellect. He didn't want to mess up the game by moving away from the recommended options, but he also didn't want the game making choices for him that were going to stunt him in the long term. The fact that the game had put him into 'Automatic' movement mode was bad enough, the 'Auto-Levelling' was much worse by comparison. The system wanted him slow and at the same level. He needed to find some form of solution to it.

James clicked into it for a moment, thinking that it would allow him to change it back if he got lost in the settings.

What came up on the screen gave him a pleasant surprise.

Settings / Options:

1. *Auto-Select (Default)*
2. *Manual Selection*
3. *AI Approved Assistance: Jackal*

The moment he gave Jackal access, everything started to change.

Duplicates were deleted, bars started getting individual colours and everything became organised in the blink of an eye.

Instead of the mountain of unread notifications that he was used to, James was surprised to find that he had a very straightforward interface in front of him, listing all the new categories of information.

Before he could even go into it, a summary report popped up in front of him.

Experience Summary:

Sylvian gained 5 Levels. (Standard Rank, Level 6)

Shari gained 12 Levels. (Standard Rank, Level 15)

Otto gained 2 Levels. (Master Rank, Level 4)

Faction XP Sharing is now enabled. (12.5% XP Gain)

Dread Pirate Faction XP Total: 0 XP

Dread Pirate Crew XP Total: 0 XP

Dread Pirate Class XP Total: 0 XP

Quest Summary:

Shari completed 4 Class Quests: **Assassinate A Goblin Camp Leader | Kill 25 Goblins With Your Knife | Kill 10 Goblins With Your Knife | Infiltrate A Goblin Camp**

Shari completed 1 Faction Quest: **Kill All The Goblins**

"Sylvian! You're back!"

Shari's voice pierced through the night, causing James to push all his notifications to the side of his consciousness. He could look at them later.

When James looked up to greet his follower, he was surprised to see that Shari's equipment had changed. A frayed and tattered grey cloak covered her face and torso. The most striking thing about her new appearance was the fact that her whole body was glistening with blood.

Shari pulled her cowl back to reveal a relieved smile on her face.

"A few Goblin scouts found your location, but myself and Otto took care of them. Some of the Escravo Cartel were hunting for you, but well..."

His follower just gestured at the bloodied corpses that littered the ground around them.

"I looted everything of value but had to leave some of the weapons and common items behind because there's simply too much."

Shari reported as she pointed at a few pieces of equipment that she had piled into a heap beside one of the trees. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Otto appeared on the Rogue's shoulder, his entire body casting a gentle yellow glow in the night.

James was stunned, he hadn't expected that Shari would be capable of levelling up so much in the short space of time that he was gone. He also realised that he really needed to establish his lair. He was too vulnerable being out in the open, especially in a combat zone.

The Dread Pirate put his hands on his hips as he started to walk through the sea of dead bodies as he thought about the logical next step.

"Shari, where did you get all of your quests?"

James asked suddenly as he recalled what he had just read from the quest summary. He wanted to get his small party out of the forest as soon as possible and see if he could establish a lair before the end of the night.

The Rogue gave him a blank look as she kinda gestured towards the sky.

"Dervius tells me what to do. After I killed all the Goblins in the area, he spoke to me with an additional quest. After I completed that, another one appeared. I'm becoming stronger and stronger with his blessing."

James paused at that last word.

"What do you mean by a blessing?"

Shari smiled awkwardly as though it was obvious.

"We're a part of the Vampire God's domain. He rules by moonlight. Our abilities are enhanced during the night. Look."

With that said, Shari unsheathed the knife that James had tossed to her previously. The engravings on the blade and hilt were glowing faintly with a pale white light.

James pulled his Moonlight Pistol from his holster and inspected it to see if there was any difference in it.

Just as Shari's knife was glowing, the grip of the pistol which previously held six lights was now different. The constellation of stars was now faded, or rather eclipsed by the bright light of a glowing full moon that shone brightly in his grip. The etchings along the barrel pulsed with the same pale light that was in Shari's knife.

James didn't expect a notification to pop-up because he had no intelligence stat or ability to inspect his weapons, but he was pleasantly surprised when one did arrive.

- **Moonlight Pistol (Heirloom Grade) - Level 1**
 - 25-38 Damage
 - +25% Damage vs. Goblins
 - +25% Damage with Crackshot
 - +25% Speed with Quickdraw

- **Blessing of the Vampire God (Active)**
 - 50-72 Additional Pistol Damage
 - Unlimited Moonlight Ammo
 - +25% Experience for kills with Moonlight Pistol
 - +25% Proficiency with Movement Skills

"Whoa! My damage practically doubles with this, and the ammo is unlimited?"

James exclaimed in shock as he saw the effects of Dervius' blessing.

Shari's smile widened as she nodded her head in agreement, her blood soaked cloak creasing with her movements.

"Yes! My stealth skill is constantly refreshed and I have an amplified proficiency in my backstab skill. It made my quests much easier when the sun went down and the moon appeared. Most of my levelling up happened in the last two hours."

James just continued to marvel at the Moonlight Pistol. He had thought it was overpowered during the day, but now it was considerably more powerful during the night.

"Okay... this is incredible, but I can't test it just yet. We need to get to Rayth and establish a Lair. Shari, do you know how to get there?"

The Rogue nodded her head enthusiastically before pulling up her cowl to cover her face again.

"Yes, it's very close to the shore where we first met. The Escravo Cartel was bringing my group there to sell us off to the Veil Network and the Alldark Orphanage."

Shari's voice had a distinct edge to it as she said the words, 'Escravo Cartel'. James just smiled at how in-depth the character motivations and interactions were in the game. He was quickly becoming attached to his new follower and wanted to see how strong she would become as they quested together.

James paused for a moment before looking at the assembled pieces of loot under the tree.

"I guess it would be a waste to leave all of this here! I have capacity in my inventory to carry some stuff."

Without waiting for her answer, James darted forward towards the loot and immediately realised his mistake.

His body moved like lightning, striking forward at an insanely high speed towards his destination. In a split second, James twisted his body and slid his left leg out while lowering his torso and centre of gravity. It allowed him to decelerate at the expense of power sliding past his target.

The look of shock on Shari's face made the quick movement totally worth it. The manual speed adjustment allowed James to use his incredibly high dexterity stat, and from that slight movement he knew that it was going to take a lot of practice.

Coughing awkwardly, James ignored the expression on his follower's face as he picked up the equipment and willed it to enter his inventory. He had no idea what was good or bad, because he couldn't inspect any of it, but thankfully he had enough capacity to add it all to his stored space.

James got to his feet and looked at Shari with a smile on his face.

"Want to race to the shore?"

The Rogue grinned in response before disappearing completely into stealth.

Otto started to teleport from branch to branch which made James laugh out loud.

"Fine, you can both have a head start."

"Keep looking! They're bound to be here somewhere!"

An annoyed voice grunted in exasperation.

A few of the Escravo Cartel redoubled their efforts in searching the forest, while others rolled their eyes.

"Do you want to tell The Butcher that we lost our merchandise and about a dozen men? Because you can leave right now and tell him?"

The voice became scathing as he shouted an ultimatum at the assembled men. At the mere mention of the Butcher, all doubt left the scouting party as they threw themselves into searching earnestly.

"I thought so! Get to work and find them!"

As the men searched through the forest, they suddenly came into a wide clearing bathed in moonlight. Tree trunks scattered around the area, nestled amongst flattened branches and a few aged campfires.

One of the more junior men in the group started to fidget anxiously as he saw the charred rocks of the former fires. His eyes went wide as he looked to their impromptu commander.

"B-Boss... is... is it Goblins?"

Instead of answering, a heavysset man with a chainmail chestpiece shoved the junior aside as he took a knee to inspect the ground.

"Ugh, not fucking high enough. Anyone with a half decent inspect skill here?"

When none of the men ventured a response, the leader just sighed in exasperation before looking back at the nervous man.

"Stop being so jumpy! You're a part of the Cartel. Act like it!"

Suddenly a shout erupted from one of the men at the front of the group. All six of the assembled Cartel members readied their weapons as they turned to face their attackers... only to find nothing there.

"Dirk, I swear to the Prime fucking Evil, if you just raised a false alarm!"

The leader shouted harshly before the man named Dirk raised his sword in a panic.

"No... no, it's here! It just fucking disappeared! It's... its fucking invisible!"

All six men froze at those words as each of them raised their own weapons anxiously. The Leader wanted to snap at the man but instead edged to the back of the group, hoping to at least get a better idea of the situation. If it indeed was a ghost or something that could turn invisible, he wanted the fastest escape route to report back to The Butcher.

None of the men spoke as they readied themselves for a fight. When nothing happened, it was the Leader that started to curse at Dirk.

"You stupid son of-"

His words cut off abruptly as tiny yellow tentacles wrapped around his throat. His eyes bulged in panic as the poison was forcibly injected into his body by Otto.

Dirk yelled for the men to be careful as he turned back to face the direction where he first saw the ghost. At the edge of the clearing in the distance stood a man holding a pistol.

"There's a shooter!"

Dirk managed to call out before the clearing illuminated with a brilliant flash of white light that punched a hole through his face.

As the remaining four men saw Dirk's lifeless body crumple to the ground, they turned on their heels to run.

One of the men screamed in panic as the Dread Pirate burst past him with incredible speed. The force of the movement was enough to throw the man off balance. Before he could even react, a flash of white light signalled his death.

"It's a demon! Wait! NOOO!"

A terrified slaver panicked as he ran straight into the awaiting blade of Shari who had been behind him the whole time.

James gritted his teeth as the momentum threatened to throw him off balance. Instead of sliding and tumbling into a heap, James extended his free hand and intentionally attempted to turn his fall into a cartwheel. The resulting momentum of his body caused something hilarious to occur.

Villainous Flair has been Activated.

Suddenly James' body turned his forward momentum into a series of acrobatic movements.

At the final landing, the Moonlight Pistol snapped up and fired at the remaining slaver.

The resulting headshot killed the low levelled grunt instantly.

Shari allowed her dead victim to slump to the ground, her face was a picture of admiration and excitement.

"Will I be able to move that fast if I level up?"

Her voice was a mixture of innocence and wonder that caused James to smile reassuringly.

"You'll be faster than me if you work really hard!"

The Dread Pirate responded, whilst being careful that he didn't accidentally create a quest for her that would take all his experience again.

Battle Report 8 of 8: Dread Faction vs. Slavers

Enemies Defeated: 6

Highest Damage: Otto

Most Kills: Sylvian (3)

Least Kills: Otto (1)

Experience Gained: 652.5 XP (450 + 45%)

- (x3) Slaver: 150 XP
- (+25%) Headshot Bonus
- (+20%) Villainous Affinity Multiplier

Experience Granted: 0 XP

Faction Experience Gained: 70.3 XP

Experience Total: 722.8 XP

Progress to Next Level: 72.3%

Preferred Weapon: Moonlight Pistol

- Highest Damage: 184 (Critical Hit)
- Total Kills: 3

Preferred Skill: Crackshot

- Skill Progress: Unknown

Charlatan's Cutlass:

- Skill Steal Progress: 3%

When the notification came up with the Battle Summary, James looked at it in a bit more detail to see what sort of bonuses he was getting with Dervius' Blessing. Much to his surprise, he was

getting a cut of Shari and Otto's experience. He recalled that it was one of the options that Jackal had changed for him.

"Shari, does it upset you that I'm taking a portion of your experience after each battle?"

James asked out of a genuine curiosity. He wasn't sure how he'd feel if the situation was reversed.

The Rogue gave him a quizzical look before laughing goodnaturedly.

"It's for the betterment of the Dread Faction! By giving back to the Faction, we'll be able to get stronger and establish our territory."

James smiled in response as he stood back and watched Shari go through the loot from the Slavers.

"Anything interesting?"

He ventured as he looked over her shoulder. It looked as though her cloak had managed to pick up a fresh sheen of new blood.

"Only the chainmail vest their leader was wearing, but it's too heavy to be worth taking with us. There are a few little trinkets though that I've added to our stash."

James nodded as he looked in the direction of the shore.

"You know, we didn't get to finish the race?"

He started as he turned around to look at Shari, only to see that both she and Otto were gone.

"Fuckers."

James laughed as he started to run towards the town of Rayth.