

“We don’t know what’s through this portal,” I said. “If it’s a Delve, we need to hit the ground running.”

“We should still move with caution,” said Varrin. “But we should spend as little time looking at the scenery as possible.” He gave both Xim and me a pointed look.

Xim crossed her arms.

“Hey, I only waste time looking around for research purposes,” she said.

I mirrored her body language.

“And I only waste time,” I said. Varrin raised an eyebrow, waiting for the second half of my statement. There was no second half to my statement.

“We can lean on our stat advantage,” he continued. “Overwhelm the regular enemies with aggressive tactics without relying on intricate tricks that take time to set up.”

“Bad time to be stingy, as well,” I added. “We can’t worry about burning consumables.”

“Can’t drink a potion if you’re dead,” said Xim.

“We have many,” said Nuralie. She’d spent nearly half her time in the Training Expo concocting, focusing on formulas she could make efficiently. She’d already handed us each a dozen health and mana potions.

“Alright, standard diamond formation,” I said. “Shog, you’re in the front with me. Grotto, stick with Xim for now in case you need to buff her Heart of Scary spell.”

“That’s not what it’s called,” Xim said, scrunching her nose.

“The real name’s too long. Does anyone else have business before we enter?” No one volunteered anything. “Okay, buffs up.”

I cast Life Warden on Etja while Xim placed her blessings of Pounding and Hunger on Varrin. With everyone set, I squared my shoulders and stepped through the massive portal. This time there was no intermission within a mind-crushing non-space.

I exited into a chamber lit by a bright, blue-green hue. Large plants glowed with bioluminescent light, each more than twenty feet high. Their leaves were the size of sedans and dripped with condensed moisture from the humid air. My boots crunched on coarse soil as I moved from in front of the portal. Shog came through next, quickly followed by the others.

I scanned the space for any signs of enemies but saw none. I took a moment to inspect the ground, finding it interspersed with fist-sized rocks. The dirt was amassed into small clumps that broke into granular pieces each the size of a grain of rice. I looked back up to the plants, finding tall, thin stalks rising between the leafy bushes. I walked up to one, still keeping an eye out for danger. It looked like a massive stalk of grass. Taking in the area as a whole, I felt like I'd been shrunk down and dropped onto a forest floor.

The ceiling was only forty feet above us, however, and there were no impossibly large trees or other vegetation, so I put the theory of Honey, I Shrunk the Delves out of my mind. Once everyone else had gotten their bearings, we exchanged silent nods and moved forward.

After passing the first group of leafy bushes, we found an obelisk less than fifty feet ahead.

“Uh, that was quick,” I whispered.

Shog hovered up beside me, while everyone else gathered behind.

“Did it take us straight to the end?” asked Xim.

“I-” Shog’s hand on my shoulder interrupted me.

His long, too-many-jointed fingers wrapped all the way down to my chest. I was momentarily distracted by his razor-sharp claws tapping on my armor and the closeness of his thick, powerful feelers. It reminded me that my summon was 8 feet of floating, unadulterated horror.

I gave him a questioning glance, and he gestured above us with a tilt of his head. I looked up and spotted a large creature clinging to the ceiling between the leaves. As my eyes landed on it, it dropped, its body tearing through the vegetation and landing on the ground with enough force to send tremors through my body.

The monster was the size of an elephant, rising ten feet off the ground and more than twenty feet long. It was covered in thick, leathery skin that was dark in color with a yellow tinge. Its torso sat low to the ground, supported by six fleshy legs with bear-like paws at their ends and its head was nearly as wide as its body. It had no snout or nose, but two slits crowned its skull, which huffed and spat vapor into the air while its mouth—a circular mass of teeth—pulsed and squirmed. A pair of wide-set, beady eyes looked at us with the empty gaze of a fish.

## Lardigrey: Beast, Grade 14

We all tensed and I readied my hammer for a throw, but Shog's hand moved from my shoulder to gently push my weapon back down.

***"Slayer,"*** he purred, ***"allow me to test myself against this creature."***

I looked between my summon and the monster. Shog was two grades lower than the beast.

"Alone?"

***"Yes."***

I shot a glance at Varrin. The big guy shrugged and I relaxed my stance.

"Alright," I said. "We'll jump in if it looks like you're having trouble. We don't know what's coming up after this, so we need everyone in good shape."

***"It will not be necessary."***

The c'thon pulled out his rapier and saber with two Yaretzi-handed tentacles and floated forward. The Lardigrey snuffled at the air, then snorted and angled its body to follow Shog. A croaking growl rumbled through its body, spits of liquid shooting from the slits.

Before Shog could grow too close, it charged, paws digging into the ground and trodding with thundering beats. The growl turned to a hoarse roar, and its mouth opened wide. When it was ten feet from my summon, the mouth launched out from its body on a long, slimy tube as thick as my torso.

Shog flew to the side with more speed than I knew he was capable of, thrusting his rapier into the creature's flank. The blade's tip bounced back from the monster's thick skin, and Shog followed up with a slash from his saber, but it also failed to penetrate. The beast turned sharply and its mouth struck at Shog like a snake.

The c'thon whipped out with a pair of tentacles and knocked the striking mouth off course, maneuvering himself further toward the monster's rear. The beast continued to spin as Shog sent more exploratory thrusts and slashed at its armored hindquarters.

After a few more quick attacks, Shog hovered up into the air. The monster reared back and batted at Shog with its meaty paws, talons raking, but Shog easily dodged. The beast's back legs coiled, and it launched up at the c'thon as though its enormous bulk

were meaningless. Shog fell backward from the lunge, staying out of the beast's reach while his stinger-tipped tentacle landed three quick attacks into his enemy's face. Three more of his feelers wrangled its eel-like mouth. The beast fell back to the ground with a deep thud and began running its two front paws over its head in frantic strokes. Apparently, the stinger had found purchase.

Shog looked down at the beast from on high, studying it until it abandoned its hectic grooming and turned beady eyes back up to him. It took a few steps back, crouching low and readying itself for another leap.

Shog reached into his beard of tentacles with his humanoid hands and pulled out two greatswords.

One was the ocean-blue c'thonic bone greatsword that Varrin had received from our creation Delve. The second was the big guy's frozen steel greatsword that he'd recently replaced with Kazandak. Shog hefted them, dual-wielding the six-foot blades like they were as light as his rapier. When the beast charged forward and leaped into the air, Shog spun his body and brought the bone sword across the monster's face.

There was a *crack* as the blade landed, its edge also rejected by the creature's flesh. However, unlike the lighter swords, this one had *weight* behind it. The Lardigrey's head snapped to the side, its slithering mouth trailing behind it like a lolling, alien tongue. Before the beast could fall, Shog finished his spin and stuck the monster along the neck with the tip of the frozen steel greatsword. It cut through the skin, leaving a two-foot gash behind, though it was shallow.

The monster landed on its side, its paws scrambling as it tried to right itself. Before it could, Shog passed the bone greatsword off to a pair of feelers and gripped the frozen steel blade in both of his 'normal' hands. He angled back so that the end of the weapon pointed down at the Lardigrey, then blasted down through the air in a blur. As the beast struggled to its feet, Shog connected and drove the blade directly into the wound he'd carved. The sword sank deep, the armored skin of the beast no longer an obstacle. Shog's strike was angled so that the blade entered through the wound at its neck, but traveled into the creature's torso. In an instant, the entire blade was buried inside the beast.

A burst of vapor blew from the Lardigrey's skull, and then it crashed to the ground.

Its legs twitched as Shog drew the blood-covered sword from the beast's body, but the creature was otherwise still. Shog studied it for a moment, then drove the blade into the monster's skull through one of its beady eyes. There was no reaction. I felt a swell of pride toward my summon for being an adherent to the double-tap philosophy.

There was a moment of quiet on the battlefield until Xim stepped up beside me.  
“Was that it?” she asked.

**Your party has slain 1 Lardigrey: Beast, Grade 14. Your party receives the following rewards:**

- 1) 14 Emerald Chips**
- 2) 1 Lardigrey Essence**
- 3) Personal Loot (Shog'tuatha) 1 Segmented Core**

**All party members receive their personal loot.**

**Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to: Even Distribution.**

**You receive: 2 Emerald Chips.**

**Remainder of 4 Emerald Chips have been awarded to Shog'tuatha for outstanding contribution.**

**Party Leader has set item allocation to: Master Looter**

**Party Leader receives all other rewards.**

“I guess so,” I said.

I walked up to the body and looked it over. I prodded its skin, finding it rough like low-grit sandpaper and as hard as solid stone. I knocked on it with the head of my hammer, eliciting a gravelly thunk as though the entire beast was made of rock.

“Excellent work,” said Varrin as he approached Shog.

He pulled a few hand towels from his inventory and handed them to the c'thon. Shog accepted the towels with a feeler, holding them out and studying them like an alien artifact.

“You’re using your saber for slashing, but it’s also effective for thrusting,” Varrin said. He held out a hand and Shog passed him the blade. Varrin demonstrated a few moves. “You’re relying too much on your feelers for power in your thrusts. You should try to strike with your entire body to put more weight behind the attacks.”

I watched the interaction, finding the master-student relationship the pair had formed satisfying. Shog had been Varrin’s primary sparring partner during training. While Varrin had managed to grind his Blades skill up to 40 like he’d wanted, Shog had grown by leaps and bounds.

Varrin continued giving pointers until the obelisk lit up and began thrumming with energy. Arcs of mana flowed out of it, soaking our bodies in new power. I felt my spirit grow denser until the flow of mana ended a few seconds later. I checked my status, finding 8 stat points ready to be distributed.

“I do not feel like I earned that,” said Nuralie.

“Yeah,” said Xim, tapping a finger on her chin in thought. “Grotto, I thought we had to ‘prime’ our mana matrix through challenge and combat for the obelisks to work. We didn’t exactly do anything here.”

*[Your training likely served the same purpose and do not forget that I reforged your mana veins to an ideal form.]* He floated around Xim, looking her up and down. *[It is also possible that you are all freaks with an absurd tolerance for mana augmentation.]*

“I like the second one better,” I said. “I was born this way.”

*[Your entire body was reshaped by Fortune while you spent millennia in stasis.]*

“That’s a sort of birth,” I argued. “Anyway, what’s that item you got, Shog?”

My summon looked up from where Varrin was demonstrating how to clean his blades using the towel. The big guy had little bottles of cleaning agent and oil set out on the ground beside them.

“**I am uncertain,**” said Shog. He reached into his beard and pulled out a grapefruit-sized orb. It was the deep-red color of the Lardigrey’s blood and covered in armored plates. The moment Shog began to look it over, his eyes went wide and he shoved it beneath his beard again. There was an audible gulping noise as the c’thon swallowed it.

“It was a tasty snack?” asked Etja.

***“The orb is a slow-release form of condensed mana.”***

“So... it was a tasty snack. For mana fiends!”

***“A good enough description.”***

I watched as Shog’s grade jumped from 12 to 13 in real time.

“Damn, that works fast,” I said.

***“No. I was already on the cusp of advancing. It will continue to release energy for several days.”***

“Terrifying,” muttered Nuralie.

Shog went back to Varrin’s caretaking instruction and I peered around the obelisk chamber.

“I reckon we don’t need any downtime,” I said.

“We should assign our stats at least,” said Xim with the vacant eyes of a person studying their menus. “I’ll just add 2 to everything I care about.”

“I will work on reaching 20 in Agility,” said Varrin as he supervised Shog.

“So you can use the bedazzled cloak of flying?” I asked.

“There are many good reasons for a melee fighter to have superior dexterity and control.” He pointed out a smudge of viscera Shog had missed. “But the cloak would be useful, yes.”

“I will finally get my Fortitude to 20,” said Nuralie, though she sounded reluctant. She gave me a defeated look. “You wore me down. The other 4 will go to Agility. I feel it will be more useful than Intelligence if we are fighting.”

“Evolution?” I asked.

She looked over her menus for a moment, then shared a prompt with the rest of us.

**Chemical Constitution: Beneficial substances you ingest are  $2(X)\%$  more effective, where  $X$  is your Fortitude.**

“Yeah, that looks good,” I said. “Just don’t develop a potion addiction.”

“Too late,” she said with a grin.

“I will become wiser,” said Etja in a solemn tone. “And more charismatic!” She did a cartwheel and ended it with a spin and a bow. “How about you, Arlo?”

I looked at my screen and was about to throw my points into Intelligence, but hesitated. Stats needed to be assigned within 24 hours of receiving them or they started to decay. However, if the Delve pushed us through the rest of the levels as quickly as it just had...

“I’m holding onto them,” I said.

“Why would you do that?” asked Xim.

“He has that dumb achievement,” said Nuralie. “Dumping.”

“Hey, it’s not dumb,” I said. “Overpowered is what it is.”

“It’s dumb because it makes me jealous.”

“I agree,” said Xim. “Totally stupid.”

“What does the achievement have to do with anything?” asked Varrin.

“The ability gives me a free stat point for every 5 I spend,” I said, ignoring the haters. “I can normally only get 1 per level since a Platinum Delve grants 8 stat points. Since stats decay, I can’t save them up. But if I were able to get 2 levels...”

“You’d have 16 stat points,” Varrin finished. “Which will give you 3 uses of Dumping for 2 levels worth of stats.” He kicked the Lardigrey corpse. “I hate you.”

“That’s what we call min-maxing,” I said, doing a little jig.

“Stop that,” said Xim. “It’s ridiculous.”

I continued to cut a rug, undeterred.

“I think what you meant to say is that I’ve got style.”

“I can teach you to dance later,” said Etja. “Since you don’t know how.”

I sucked in a breath.

“No!” I said. “Innocent Etja, they’ve corrupted you!”



“That burned more than my Judgment spell,” said Xim.

“Since we’re finished assigning stats,” said Varrin, “we should move on.”

“Agreed,” I said, spinning around and looking at our surroundings. “How do we do that? There’s no portal.”

There was a deep rumble, followed by a cascade of cracking stone. I looked up toward the noise, eyebrows crawling up my face.

The ceiling began to collapse.