

“But first!” I said, looking around the table. “Would any of you like to hear the evolution I picked for reaching Dimensional twenty?”

“No,” said Varrin. “Fortitude, let’s go.”

“Aw,” Etja said, frowning.

“Fine, ok.” I brought up the evolution options for my Fortitude skill and shared them with the party.

While stats had to be assigned within twenty-four hours, I could sit on an evolution choice for as long as I liked—something I did often, since I relied heavily on the input from my expert allies.

“It basically comes down to ‘Do I want to practically live forever?’, ‘Do I want to literally live forever?’, or ‘Do I want to continue transforming myself into an eldritch entity until the line between man and monstrosity is so blurred that I cannot know if I am the Arlo that came to this world or a malevolent god’s twisted replica of the original?’”

Varrin had been about to take another sip from his horn of ale, but hesitated and set the vessel down on its rest. He turned to Xim.

“I think I’ll need a Cleanse for this,” he said.

Xim rolled her whole head toward him, mouth half-ajar.

“But I’m not done being drunk yet,” she said.

“Xim,” he dropped a heavy hand onto her shoulder. She slid even further down in her chair, but made no effort to adjust. “I hate to poop your party, but this *was* supposed to be a team meeting.” She scowled at him.

“You hate to do what to her what?” I asked.

“It’s that thing you say.” Varrin waved broadly at me, nearly scattering a trio of mugs off a passing waitress’ serving plate. She dodged the gesticulation. He didn’t notice her existence. “You say it when you claim that I’m ruining the mood.”

“Party pooper.”

“Hmm?”

“The phrase is ‘party pooper’. Not ‘pooping a party’. That’s a whole different kind of party. You don’t want to go to that party.”

“Ah, I see.” He turned back to Xim. “Look, most of the fun of being drunk is *getting* drunk. We can sober up for now, and then start drinking anew once we’re done discussing.”

Spoken like a proper young adult, with a healthy liver and few regrets.

“Ugh,” Xim huffed, sitting up straighter in her chair. She cast Cleanse on both herself and Varrin. Their eyes lost their lidded appearance, their expressions tightened, and the loose and relaxed postures of inebriation were replaced by Varrin’s regular prim bearing and Xim’s... Well, Xim’s posture was the same. She even slid back down in her chair and crossed her arms.

Varrin rubbed at his eyes, then fell into the far-off look of a man studying a System message.

Fortitude.

FUCK YEAH!

Your Fortitude has reached level 40 and your inhuman resilience has ascended into the realm of myth and legend. Choose one of the following evolutions and try not to regret it!

1) Prince of the Universe: You are immune to all mundane disease and sickness, cannot be subjected to any effects that force aging, and once you reach the physical age of 30, you no longer grow any older. When you take this evolution, you are cured of any genetic abnormalities that interfere with your physiological functioning, except for those with few or no deleterious effects that contribute to the unique bundle of eccentricities that make you who you are. Unless you want those gone, too. It’s *your* identity, do what you want.

2) Just a Flesh Wound: You are immune to Bleeding and (so long as you aren’t dead) can naturally regenerate from any injury, no matter how severe. Your body becomes capable of fully replacing any part of itself with your natural HP regeneration. This includes limbs, organs, entire bodily systems, and even your brain! But, if your head is destroyed, will you be the same person when it grows back?

3) Body of The Minotaur: Your cells are already being replaced by something more powerful, something *better*. Why not give that new organic matter an upgrade? Your body gains perfect physical recall. This grants a range of benefits, but we won't leave you guessing entirely. Here's one of the less obvious perks this ability enables: Every step you take is cataloged by your bones, every turn memorialized in your muscle, every climb or descent inscribed upon your skin. You intuitively remember the floor plan and location of any physical space your body has traveled through.

You are also offered the active skill: Blood of My Enemy

Blood of My Enemy

Physical

Cost: none

Requirements: FOR 40, Body of The Minotaur

Touch an entity that you or a member of your party has slain. You consume the life essence of that entity, adding X% of its maximum health to your HP regeneration for one hour, where X is equal to your FOR. This bonus does not stack if you consume multiple slain entities, but can be reset and replaced by a higher bonus if a healthier entity is consumed.

"I feel ill," said Nuralie as she studied the options. "Are all of your evolutions like this?"

"Only most of them," I said. "What do you think?"

"I-" Pause. "I do not know. Many people would rejoice at being offered... endless life. I do not think that I would like it."

"I'm in that same boat," I said, then considered. "I'm at least on the pier where that boat is docked."

"Prince of the Universe," said Varrin. "Does the name suggest something beyond what the ability states? That's a lofty title."

"I doubt it," I said. "Some of my evolutions have alternate headings, even when an identical evolution exists with a normal name. Usually crappy pop culture references from Earth, but these ones are ok; I like Queen."

"I assume that's the name of one of those references," said Varrin, "and not your proclamation of affection for the king's late wife."

"You assume correctly."

He studied the screen a little longer.

"This first evolution is the same as the evolution called Immortality, with minor language differences. Many high-level Delves aspire toward Immortality, building their Fortitude in the hopes of receiving the option. I think it is a poor choice, however."

"Really?" I said. "Eternal youth doesn't fit with your quest for ultimate strength?"

"Who wants to live forever?" asked Xim.

"Another good track," I said. She raised an eyebrow.

"Delves already live long lives," said Varrin. "Delves with high Fortitude, even longer. If your goal is to reach Fortitude one-hundred, then you will already be gifted with incredible longevity."

"How incredible?" I asked.

"Patriarch Bluewren has a Fortitude of one hundred. The man is close to one-hundred-and-forty years old, but appears to be in his mid-forties."

"So that's a triple life span," I said.

"No. Bluewren was one of the oldest Hiwardian slaves to become a Delver during the rebellion. He was nearly thirty when the Creation Delve was discovered, and didn't reach a Fortitude of one-hundred until he was in his sixties."

"He's physically aged fifteen years in a century?"

"Yes. However, because aging continually slows the closer you get to Fortitude one-hundred, much of that physical aging may have occurred during the time he spent with a lower score."

"What, there are no portraits of the guy in his sixties? Take a look and guesstimate how much he's aged since getting a top score?"

“Have you seen noble portraits?” said Xim. “Flattering, to say the least. Who knows what he’d have really looked like.”

“Then, if we take a conservative estimate,” I said, “and assume that half of that aging has occurred since he got to Fortitude one-hundred, then that’s seven-ish years of aging in eighty years. More than a ten times multiplier on life span. You’re saying that I could live to be eight-hundred years old? A thousand?”

“No one has had the opportunity to live that long,” said Varrin. “It’s untested, but perhaps.”

“Wow.” I sat back and stared at the table, studying the grain of the wood as I tried to wrap my head around living for a millenia. “I could still get cancer, though.”

“Delvers rarely suffer from mundane maladies,” said Varrin. “But, again, the higher end of Delver lifespans is untested. It is possible to develop a condition of old age that ends your life prematurely. For now, most Delvers who perish do so violently.”

“Victims of our high-risk lifestyle,” I muttered. “What about Just a Flesh Wound? I already have *resistance* to bleeding from Body of Theseus, but only to the extra bleeding caused by crits.”

“Plus,” Xim added, “Theseus will eventually make you immune to critical damage. Period. Immune to crits, immune to Bleeding. With that combo, you’d be the bane of half of all Physical builds.”

“Half?” I said. “There’s gotta’ be more variety than that.”

“There is,” said Xim. “But crits plus Bleeding is *very* popular.”

“With Delvers. I’m more worried about monsters. *High-grade* monsters, specifically.”

“High-grade monsters like to rip your arms off,” Xim countered, waving a hand over the table as though gesturing at some unseen and mutilated body. She paused for a second after she did so, then furrowed her brow. “We need to visit the tribe. I miss making easy visuals.”

“Both of those are true,” I said. “Dismemberment as an occupational hazard, and the need to visit the Third Layer. I still haven’t had my orientation. But as far as Flesh Wound goes, being able to regenerate limbs and organs is the real bonus. Bleeding immunity is more of a side-dish for me, since I already have some protection from it.”

“Just don’t lose your head,” said Nuralie.

“Maybe I could pick it back up and hold it onto my neck until it re-attached.”

“I... kind of want to see that now,” said Xim. Nuralie blinked at her.

“And then,” said Varrin with a heavy sigh, “there’s The Body of The Minotaur.”

“You should take that one,” said Etja. I turned and looked at her, confused.

“You like *that* one?”

“Yeah! It’s like it was made for you!”

“That’s what worries me. It’s like the System wants to turn me into some weird flesh, uh...”

Etja tilted her head to one side.

“Golem?” she said.

“That’s not where I was going,” I lied. “I mean, it’s what I was going to say, but I didn’t mean it like... I just meant, it’s as though the System is encouraging me to abandon my humanity as rapidly as possible.”

Etja turned back to her cheese platter and poked at some gouda.

“I’m not human,” she said, her normal enthusiasm lost. “I get along fine.” She flicked the cheese with her finger and it plopped off of the plate. I didn’t know what to say to that. “I can see why someone who *is* human may not want to be reshaped by some kind of super-powerful being.” She smiled at me, but it felt frail. “At least you’d be getting to choose what happens.”

Nuralie watched Etja, her expression neutral, but I knew the loson was worried. She’d taken up a lot of, for lack of a better word, parental duties when the golem first joined the party. Teaching her how to dress, how to use utensils, keeping up with her location and making sure she was safe, and that she wasn’t being swindled or otherwise having her naivete taken advantage of. There was a bond there, and I suspected Nuralie felt like Etja was still under her wing.

“Awkward,” said Xim. The Cleric reached across the table and patted the back of Etja’s hand. “We love you just the way you are, Etja.”

“Thanks,” she said, but her smile was gone. She picked the gouda back up and tossed the entire piece into her mouth. I should probably have done something similar with my foot.

“Flesh Wound is a good choice,” said Varrin, “*Any* immunity is a boon, and regeneration is always useful. This third one, The Body of The Minotaur, has advantages. When combined with the aspect of your Dimensional Thinker perk that grants an intuitive understanding of spatial relationships, you’d be able to understand *and* memorize the layout of any physical space you’ve been without effort. You’d never get lost, mazes and complex Delves would prove no obstacle, and your recon would be incredible.”

He looked up at me intently until I returned his stare, then held my gaze, drawing my thoughts away from Etja.

“However,” he said.

“However,” I repeated, making it clear I was paying close attention.

“This active skill, Blood of My Enemy, is dangerous.”

“How so?”

“There are...” his jaw tightened, “*some* who would believe it profane. And *most* would take a very dim view of you, if you used it on another person.”

I was assaulted by a memory of flesh and blood withering to blackened bone, and Grotto pulling another corpse toward the obelisk. Would this skill do the same thing that my obelisk did to members of the Artemix group? That Orexis did to Varrin’s father? I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be in a party with someone whose main skill reminded me of the violent murder of my dad. A murder that I witnessed.

And let’s be honest, if I took Body of The Minotaur, I was *going* to slot Blood of My Enemy. And if I slotted Blood of My Enemy, it was *going* to become one of my main skills. The health regen was too good, especially for someone whose build revolved around fast regen. And the spell was *free*.

But, the cost of the spell, the real cost, would be both social and psychological. Could Varrin work with me if I drained bodies like that? Would I be tempted to show less mercy to those I fought if I was low on health and wanted a sip of their vital juices? At what point would consuming the remains of those I slew become rote, with other people reduced to potential corpses in my eyes?

Was this a road I was already walking down, by letting Grotto continue to build the Pocket Delve?

If this were a game, and I was playing some kind of vampiric death mage, I’d have taken it in a heartbeat. My name was Esquire Arlo, however, not darkelorde69. I didn’t

want the spell, not because I didn't like it, but because I liked it *too* much. I had an honest moment with myself, and accepted that I'd eventually make a terrible choice if I possessed it. If I was truly going to live a thousand years, that only made the mistake more likely.

"I'm taking Just a Flesh Wound," I said in a rush and chose the regeneration evolution before I could think about The Body of The Minotaur any longer.

The choice was confirmed, and bleeding immunity was added to my resistances.

I'd been expecting this conversation to be fun, if not a little dark. Instead, I was left feeling shaken. From my blunder with Etja to realizing how easy it would have been for me to lean into my darker impulses, it called into question some of the things I believed about myself.

Still, there was a voice in my head that told me I'd made a foolish choice by giving up that skill.

...That voice was Grotto.

[I cannot believe you've chosen to hamstring yourself out of some misguided lust for paragonism!]