

It began as a tranquil blush of iridian luster rising from the dark like a warm morning star. A crystalline structure at the center of the room caught the light and its endless facets glittered, casting trails of color across the floor. The 12-foot-high gem had replaced the dark pillar of the Delve obelisk. A warmth bloomed at its center, pulsing with the on-and-off rhythm of a firefly.

The edges of the space remained lost in inky darkness. The ceiling above became a soft sky of drifting, prismatic clouds seen through a solid dome of translucent polygons. As the meandering puffs of vapor drifted above, the reflected trails from the gemstone rolled across us like the guiding beacon of a lighthouse. Where the System hadn't identified Clockwork Alpha, an identification *did* pop up for the grand crystal.

Subject C-209, "Kaleidoscope": Extradimensional Entity, Grade 20.

Xim leaned toward me and whispered, "Friend of yours?"

"Some might find that offensive, Xim," I said. "We don't all know each other. In fact, this is the only other extradimensional entity that I've met."

"What about that thing in the in-between space when we came into the Delve?"

"Eldritch deities don't count."

The crystal rose from the ground and slowly spun in the air, the refracted beams of light moving with more urgency. I began to feel like I was in a roller skating rink. Part of me expected to be treated to the thumping beat of the 1993 hit single, What is Love. Sadly, the worldly baritone of Haddaway did not grace our ears. Instead, I felt a familiar twist in the pit of my stomach as something tried to teleport me.

You are being subjected to a non-consensual dimensional effect.

Your resistance has been overcome!

Space twisted, my vision blinked, and I was suddenly within 20 feet of the crystal. The rest of the party was spread out in even intervals around the entity, but their forms were

gray and washed out. I blinked, trying to see if it was a trick of the light, but they looked like ghosts. Now it was less of a skating rink and more of a haunted disco. I checked my interface, seeing that no one had lost any health.

“Everyone okay?” I shouted.

Each of my party members was looking around, taking in our new positioning, but no one answered. Xim turned and said something, but her voice was silent. I transformed Somnres into its throwing hammer form and strafed around the edge of “Kaleidoscope”, keeping my distance and heading toward Xim. She kept talking but made no sound. As I drew closer, I noticed that she was semi-transparent. She reached out to poke me with the tip of her scepter, but the weapon passed through me.

I gave the situation of firm “Hmm.”

[It appears we have been shifted to a realm adjacent to the others,] Grotto thought to me. I turned to find the mini-c’thon floating six feet away.

“Geez, you crept up on me,” I said. “Why didn’t you get separated?”

[Likely because I am your Bonded Familiar, an extension of your power.]

I considered the theory, then looked around to find Shog. He was across the room from me, washed out like the others.

“If this effect cares about our familiar bond,” I said, “why wouldn’t it keep my summon with me?”

[Yes, it is curious.] Grotto’s feelers undulated while he pondered. *[Shog’tuatha has not been treated like a typical summon during these encounters.]*

I furrowed my brow.

“The personal loot. I’m guessing summons don’t normally receive customized rewards from the System.”

[Indeed. Such an award is reserved for Delves.]

I scratched my chin and a flash of irritation hit me as I realized the inferno inside Clockwork had completely burned away my beard.

“The System is treating him like another Delver?” I said, wiping away some gritty residue from my chin. “Why? How does that make sense?”

I also wondered whether my beard would have lived had it not been so well-oiled. Did my precise grooming and appreciation for the scent of sandalwood and vanilla increase its flammability?

Before Grotto could respond, the crystal began to spin faster. Its surface bulged and deformed, flowing as though it had become liquid. Large mounds of the crystal dripped off its sides, creating iridescent piles that looked like molten glass. They surrounded the crystal and began transforming as soon as they hit the ground. Several shifted into grayscale, matching my party members, but the one in front of me rose up in full color.

On each side of the original entity, the mounds transformed into crystal monsters of different sizes. A dozen squat, four-legged crystal hounds stared down Etja. Three lithe golems with limbs shaped into sword, hammer, and spear faced Nuralie. Four segmented insectoids shot into the air on shimmering wings before Varrin. Xim's challenger rose beside my own, a miniature copy of Kaleidoscope, while Shog faced an orb surrounded by balls of crackling energy. Mine was a giant, its wide chest filling my vision. All were made of the same glittering material as Kaleidoscope.

"Alright," I said. "Individual challenges. I think—"

The golem rushed me.

It was a lumbering bruiser, swinging thick, club-like hands at me. It was also surprisingly fast for its size, its attacks rapidly drumming into my shield. The strikes sent painful jolts through my arm, doing small ticks of damage with every hit. It eventually raised both arms over its head for a more powerful smackdown, but I wouldn't stick around for that. I cast Shortcut and appeared twenty feet to its side, throwing a Void Hammer and using Somnres to create two mana-fueled copies.

The creature smashed down where I'd just been, limbs crushing the floor into gravel. All three of my attacks made clean hits on its side. It hadn't even tried to dodge. The hammers blasted large chunks of its crystal flesh away, but the bursts of Oblivion Orb didn't seem to do much.

Oblivion Orb was a dimensional attack, so—if this thing got massive dimensional resistance from the extradimensional entity racial bonus like myself—that made sense. I caught Somnres as it returned, then lobbed another triple hammer throw without layering on the spell.

The crystal golem ran at me, once again not trying to dodge and taking all three hammers on its front. Crystal chunks sprayed from its chest as it came in swinging.

Mighty arms cut through the air with a fierce *whoosh!* It was an impressive display of force, a vicious threat to many a foe. Ones without any mobility, that is.

I cast Shortcut again.

This enemy wasn't complicated. It was big, strong, fast, and tough. It was also dumb, predictable, and had no ranged options. Its core was soon blasted into pieces by my hammer throws and its entire body collapsed into a pile of shards. The shards melted back into a liquid form and flowed across the ground to rejoin the central structure.

I turned to check on my allies, hoping each of them had an answer for the gimmick they themselves faced.

Etja floated in the air, her body moving to an unheard rhythm as she lobbed spells at the swarm of hounds while moving like a graceful ballerina. The hounds had a vertical leap that could easily reach her, but she'd created a minefield of small orbs powered by her Mystic Blast ability. Her typical attacks were powered by Disintegrate combined with Mystic Blast, but the annihilating beam primarily dealt dimensional damage. The current form of the spell dealt mystical force damage, which was much more effective against the creatures.

The orbs of force detonated on contact, sending out sprays of crystalline chips from each hound as it flew toward her. Etja deftly altered their paths using Siphon, gently guiding their trajectories to either side of her as she twirled and moved. She finished off an injured hound with a focused beam that exploded it on contact.

No problems with the swarm enemy for Etja. I was probably the weakest party member against that lineup since I lacked any spammable AOE's. Nuralie might also struggle if these enemies were immune to poison. Even so, I doubted either of us would struggle.

Meanwhile, Nuralie ran circles around the three thin, Agility-type golems. Each one represented a different type of physical damage: piercing, blunt, and slashing. Beyond that, each weapon also glowed with mana, which I suspected represented three different types of magic damage. They were, perhaps, designed to test the robustness of one's defense. Each strike would hit with a different combination of kinetic damage layered with magic.

Nuralie's answer to that was simply to not get hit.

The reflections from the central crystal cast beams of brilliant light around the room in a spinning pattern. However, the room was otherwise dark and wrapped in shadow. Nuralie's body was nearly invisible as she teleported around the beams of light, disappearing into the dark on one side to reappear within the gloom on the other. The

three fighters continually spun to find her, but the moment one of them approached she disappeared. She kept her bow drawn and aimed at one of the lithe enemies the entire time.

Nuralie wasn't leaning on her concoctions this fight, she was using an ability I hadn't seen in a while.

Hunger Shot: Take aim at a target and charge this skill for any length of time. Upon firing, you make one ranged weapon attack against the target for every five seconds this skill was charged. These attacks occur in rapid succession. All bonuses applied to this skill, your attack, your weapon, or your ammo, apply to each attack made this way, regardless of whether the bonus is restricted to a single attack or projectile.

Nuralie did bonus damage when aiming, got a buff to her Strength when drawing a bow to add extra force to the attack, and—while she wasn't *leaning* on her potions—her eyes had the wide-eyed gleam of a strong stimulant.

She unleashed her first attack and her arrow disappeared. Four copies appeared inside the blade-wielding elite and its torso exploded into clouds of shimmering powder. Before its body had even hit the ground, Nuralie aimed at the spear-golem, then melted away into the shadows.

Varrin, meanwhile, had seen his flying enemies and answered by pulling out the glorious Bedazzled Cloak of the Aeronaut.

Bedazzled Cloak of the Aeronaut

Requirements:

AGL 20, SPD 20

Effects:

Allows the user to fly at their normal movement speed. Allows the user to perform any action while airborne as though they were on the ground.

Varrin had reached the Agility requirement with his last level, and the gem-studded cloak we'd looted from Yaretzi sparkled fabulously in the room's rainbow light. With the enemy's flight advantage neutralized, the big guy used his usual maneuver of hacking shit to pieces. He could even move in the air as though his feet were on the ground, allowing him to utilize all of his footwork and leverage. They didn't stand a chance as he whirled through them, each one exploding on contact with his glittering presence.

While Varrin annihilated the flyers like an Italian plumber roided out on star power, Xim faced a wave of crystal bullets fired from the mini-Kaleidoscope. They shot with machine-gun speed, but the cleric had activated her Clockwork Gear shield and the attacks rammed into the bulwark. The projectiles crashed against it like a torrent of sparkling rain.

Each wave of bullets triggered the shield's thorns ability, and bursts of flame assaulted the mini-Kaleidoscope, although the crystalline entity didn't seem to suffer much from the elemental attacks. Xim was mostly protected by the stream of Shielding the item gave, but she wasn't willing to stand around and let the thorns' chip damage kill her opponent.

She closed the distance with a deliberate march, slowed by her shield's effect. Once close, she struck the crystal with a lightning-quick shield bash, interrupting its onslaught. The crystal wobbled in the air, stunned by the bash, and Xim followed up with a powerful swing of her scepter.

The woman currently had enough Strength to bench press a sedan, so a full-on wallop was *not* to be taken lightly. The mini-Kaleidoscope, stunned as it was, had no answer. That put the entity at the epicenter of an unmitigated disaster, and a large chunk of its body was annihilated. *Then* a beam of crimson light instantly followed the strike, crashing down from above and igniting the entity in blood-red flame. To top it off, Xim's visage morphed into her beast form, and her features twisted as she unleashed a silent roar.

The crystal—still on fire—fucking ran away.

I hadn't known that a creature made of gemstones and fuckery could experience terror, but it was a pleasant discovery. It only made it a few meters before the divine fire melted it into slag, which flowed back to the central crystal. I turned to check on our final member, Shog.

Shog had eaten his opponent.

His feathers were scorched in places and a layer of frost covered a couple of tentacles, but he was happily shoving a final handful of crystal fragments behind his 'beard'. I couldn't *hear* the tooth-destroying crunch that ensued, but I could imagine it.

"Is that the meta?" I wondered aloud. "*Eat* the enemy so its essence doesn't return to the center part?"

[*Shog is not a role model.*]

Once we'd each defeated our opponents, Kaleidoscope's body rippled and reformed to its original shape. It began to spin faster and then started shedding new masses of crystal. I sighed.

"This enemy is annoying," I said. "Let me guess, we each have to fight every version of the crystal monsters."

As I spoke, a dozen shimmering piles began growing sets of four legs in front of me.

I sighed and prepared to do the fight six times in a row when I noticed Nuralie fire a shot into the side of the main crystal. She was now facing the flying creatures, which dive-bombed at her with gleaming talons, but she teleported out of their path and fired another arrow at the center crystal. Then, the arrows exploded, taking a large chunk out of Kaleidoscope-prime.

Kaleidoscope froze in place, and then each of its sides glowed in sequence. The broken crystal liquified then reversed course and flowed back into the cracks and holes, repairing the damage. The crystal began spinning again, its surface unblemished.

After a moment of annoyance, I realized that each of Kaleidoscope's glowing sides had been facing one of the party members. It looked suspiciously like a hint for boss mechanics. I puzzled over whether that was a natural property of the creature or something that had been added. It was called *Subject C-209*, so maybe it had been intentionally designed to serve this purpose.

By this point, I was under assault by a horde of shiny, ankle-biting doggos. I cast a quick Shortcut to kite them, then locked eyes with Nuralie and gave her a nod. She nodded in return and I hucked my hammer at the center crystal with a triple throw. The three hammers smashed into its side, creating a shower of prismatic fragments. At the same time, Nuralie fired another exploding arrow which detonated with my hammer strikes.

Kaleidoscope paused and its faces glowed in sequence. This time, however, only *one* side of the entity repaired itself. Each member of the party had been keeping an eye on everyone else during their fights, knowing better than to get wholly distracted by their

individual combats. After Nuralie and I made our simultaneous attacks, everyone else caught on quickly.

We ignored the adds and attacked the boss.

Explosive arrows, duplicating hammers, focused beams of force, infernal scepter strikes, and a whole lot of sword attacks mercilessly plowed into Kaleidoscope.

Its minions tried desperately to interrupt our assault, but there was nothing they could do. Nuralie shadow jumped, Etja kept them at bay with her minefields as she flew, Varrin and Shog simply killed everything within ten feet with their arcing sword swings, and I just tanked the damage because I didn't want to spend the mana on Shortcut. My health regen was ten times faster than my mana regen, and that was *without* spending half my mana regen every hour to keep Shog summoned.

In the end, Kaleidoscope was an enemy that had been designed to test for weak links. The problem was that none of us were weak. We all had answers for each enemy type presented.

Additionally, it was a puzzle boss and we had an alchemist hopped up on homebrewed stimulants with 33 Intelligence and a Target Analysis skill. Nuralie also got bonus effects when taking drugs she made herself *and* a buff to beneficial substances she ingested from her recent Fortitude evo.

Normally this would result in a host of negative side effects, but she even had a passive that allowed her to ignore detrimental effects from shit she brewed herself. It was a pretty awesome combination.

However, to be clear, I am *not* advocating for anyone to organize their lives around the consumption of mind-altering substances.

Stay in school.

Say no to drugs.

Unless you're a master alchemist with virtual immunity to toxicity and addiction. Then you can do whatever the fuck you want.

I downed potions for all three resources while we waited on our stats and loot, and everyone else made sure they had recovery going for all three as well. We had no idea what we were going to face to take us to level 10, but none of us felt like being conservative. Varrin's stamina was low, Xim's mana was around 40%, and everyone

else had spent a decent chunk of mana or stamina. We were all nearly full on HP, however, so I felt pretty good going into the next fight.

Yep.

Pretty good.

Overflowing with confidence, even.

No challenge was too big for us to handle.