

We were on the fucking moon.

Or, maybe it was a space station. It could also have been a particularly large asteroid, perhaps. The latter two would have required artificial gravity, of course. Then again, my body weight felt no different than it had on the surface, so if we *were* on the moon then it probably had some artificial gravity mechanism as well.

Or the moon was really, really big. I didn't think that was the case since the planet that the continent Arzia sat upon was pretty close to us and I think I would have remembered a moon that took up three-quarters of the sky.

Or the moon could have been very dense, maybe? Would it have been easier to make a moon extra dense rather than cover it with an artificial gravity field? Maybe not, given the presence of magic fuckery in this universe. Either way, these were questions for greater minds than my own.

The point is, we were on the moon. The fucking. Moon.

The portal to phase two Delve, Deijin's Descent, had spat us out into a massive hallway that was doing its damndest to act as a botanical garden as its side hustle. It was doing a pretty good job of it, too.

The architecture of the hundred-foot-wide hallway had very little of what I'd come to recognize as traditional Delve feng shui. Instead of dark stone, the floor was made up of bright, marble tiles. The walls consisted of matching slabs of the light-colored metamorphic rock but were adorned with reliefs inset with gold, silver, and a variety of precious stones.

The ceiling, on the other hand, wasn't there. Instead, we were treated to an expansive, breathtaking view of the planet we'd all come from, set upon the black backdrop of space. We'd all stared up at it in stunned silence when we arrived, watching the clouds slowly meander across the continent of Arzia. The landmass was unmistakable, with Hiward sitting at its center in the midst of a thousand-mile gulf that stretched from the shores of the Littan Empire and Eschendur east of Hiward to the edges of Timagrin to the kingdom's west.

"Heavens above, it's beautiful," said Xim. Her amber eyes reflected the light from the planet's surface, her rose-colored features locked into an expression of awe.

"It's so grand," said Varrin. The giant of a man shifted uncomfortably. "But it also feels so..." he trailed off, looking for the right word.

“Small?” said Nuralie. Varrin nodded without turning to look at the darkly clad loson. The scaled alchemist looked pensive and slightly troubled by what she was seeing.

“Everything any of us has ever known is up there,” said Etja. She bit her lip, brow furrowing, then crossed all of her arms. “*Down* there?”

“Where I come from, they call this the overview effect,” I said. “Unexpected, overwhelming emotion when seeing your planet from space for the first time.”

I reached up to scratch my beard, but it was still missing after being scorched away during our fight with Clockwork. I frowned in irritation that my Just a Flesh Wound evolution allowed me to regenerate any missing body part, but didn't work for my hair. The description *said* that it would regenerate any missing vital organs. My beard was a *vital* aesthetic feature. It should have counted!

At least my c'thonic feather boa was still attached and in one piece. The blue, violet, and fuchsia item was immutable, so no fire could harm it. I stroked that instead as I pondered.

“Did... your people often see things from the perspective of gods?” asked Xim.

“From your point of view, I guess so,” I said with a shrug. “We were nascent space explorers. Only a handful of people went into orbit. Even fewer to the moon itself. We also had satellites that we launched much further out into the solar system. They'd take pictures and send them back.”

“It seems the Old Ones also achieved such feats,” said Varrin.

“Yeah,” I said. “From what we've discovered it seems like they were farther along technologically than Earth. Combined with the magic they had, I bet their civilization was incredible. The System alone is pretty impressive.”

“It is too bad they doomed themselves,” said Nuralie.

“The hubris of the powerful,” said Varrin. “To create a machine capable of destroying everything they'd built.”

“Maybe,” I said. “We don't really know what happened. We've no idea if everything the Operator told us was correct.”

“Regardless, they're gone,” said Varrin. “*We* are not. And we have a goal to achieve.”

“Right,” I said, tearing my eyes from the spectacle above and surveying the hall.

Aside from the marble adorned with a dragon's hoard of wealth, there were rows of leafy plants growing in irrigated troughs down the length of the hall. Hundreds of wall sconces bore vegetation with long, hanging vines and fronds. Some flowered in vibrant blooms of orange and violet.

"Overall, this is definitely the prettiest Delve we've run across," I said.

"It's still too damned cold," Xim grumbled. She was wearing her mega-stretch onesie, her chainmail, doublet, and tabard having been lost during our fight with the mountainous Delve remnant, The Pit.

"The fact that we failed to pack an extra set of armor for you is proving to have been a major oversight," I said.

Nuralie pulled a few of her thick, brown-and-green blankets from her inventory and handed them over. Xim accepted them thankfully and wrapped them around her shoulders. Personally, the chill in the Delve was also getting to me. I was still soaked through from getting dunked during the fight, despite hours having passed. That is, hours from *our* perspective. We had no idea how much time may have gone by since we traversed the second swirling, silver portal. The first one had blipped away a couple of months' worth of time at the least. I shivered and decided I would be better served removing the clothes and armor to let them dry. There was no sign of enemies so far.

As I started to strip, a tapping noise came from above, like metal on glass. A ripple crossed the otherwise clear view of the planet. I looked up to find Shog poking at an invisible barrier above with one of his long claws. He also had his rapier out, gripped in the stolen mousy hand of Yaretzi at the end of a feathered, black-and-green tentacle. He was about to stab at the barrier.

"Shog, no!" I shouted.

My summon turned to look down at me, his beard of tentacles undulating. I was only a little jealous that his own beard counted as a part of his body. Even his feathers came back when his health regenerated. Life wasn't fair.

"**Why?**" he asked.

"The moon where I'm from doesn't have an atmosphere."

He stared at me blankly with his large, black eyes.

“If there’s no atmosphere outside,” I continued, “then if that barrier is breached, it’ll suck the atmosphere that’s inside here”—I pointed at the ground with both fingers—“out there.” I pointed up at the planet. “Violently.”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure how violent the decompression would be. I remembered some factoid about how the way it was portrayed in movies was exaggerated, but getting the point across to the c’thon took precedence over my factual accuracy. Suffocation would have been a shit way to go out, especially after everything we’d already survived.

Shog looked up at the transparent barrier again, then hovered back down toward the ground.

[I find it unlikely that any power we possess could disable a barrier keeping a facility such as this contained.]

I looked to my left shoulder where my familiar, Grotto, hugged onto me with his tentacles. The Delve Core’s c’thonic eyes were lidded as though the little octo were drowsy.

“Good morning,” I said to him. “Done processing after our fusion event?”

[Yes. The emotional context transferred through our soul connection was overwhelming,] he thought to me with surprising forthrightness. I raised an eyebrow at his lack of snark. The fact that he failed to condemn any of my recent life choices was also impressive.

“Shog had some trouble with that as well.”

“I experienced what Slayer calls empathy,” my summon added. ***“I did not like it.”***

[I am aware. Part of what made the matter difficult to digest was the dichotomy between the mental state of an uncaring predator against the overly sensitive nature of our shared host.]

“Overly sensitive?” I said. “I don’t think—”

[Your front of emotional immaturity is a vacuous attempt to shield yourself from the potential loss of those you care for. You also distance yourself from those around you in order to avoid the potential sting of betrayal.]

“Thanks for sharing that with the group,” I said.

“Since when is Grotto so in tune with human emotion?” asked Xim.

“He’s always had an uncomfortable level of insight into my mental state.” I tossed my breastplate into my inventory and started pulling off my doublet.

[Your longing for connection while keeping yourself isolated from opportunities to do so causes your anxieties to trickle down to myself. You need to address this mental vulnerability for our shared benefit.]

“Do you charge by the hour?” I asked, draping the doublet over a bush to dry. “Because I didn’t sign up for this therapy session.” My upper body was left in only my blue, c’thonic leather vest. My chest hair was once again exposed for all the world to see, as was proper.

“Do you need a hug?” asked Etja, arms spread wide.

I paused to consider.

“You know what? Yeah, I think I do.”

The former golem walked over and gave me a warm hug. It was nice. No one could hug like Etja. Literally. She had four arms. She opened up toward Grotto next, gesturing for him to come in for an embrace. The core’s tentacles twitched and he floated off to study the plants.

“Give him time,” I said, patting Etja on the shoulder. She went and hugged Nuralie instead. The loson stiffened at first, then returned the hug with less enthusiasm.

Xim placed a hand on her hip.

“I love a good cuddle as much as the next gal,” the cleric said, “but we should probably figure out what we’re supposed to be doing here.”

“Escape,” said Varrin, staring off at one of his notification screens. “That is the only objective listed.”

“Straightforward,” I said. “No gods to slay. No arcane technology to repair.”

“No fungus to exterminate,” said Xim.

“Ugh, don’t remind me about the mycology Delve.”

“Perhaps,” said Varrin. “We do not know what will be involved with escape. Any number of tasks may be required of us.”

“True,” I said. I took another look around the hallway filled with resplendent decor and lush flora. “This doesn’t look like a boss arena and nothing has tried to kill us so far. I don’t see any baddies and I don’t think any are hiding in the plants.” I looked at Grotto, who was still floating over the vegetation, peering into the blossoms with interest. “Are there any monsters hiding in the plants?”

[None that I can see. Although, subterranean fiends are a commonly used tactic. An area is prepared to appear uninfested, causing the Delves to drop their guard and making them easy prey.]

“Hmm. Well, the risk of molemen aside, I say that we take the time to choose evolutions and go over our advancements.”

“Seconded!” said Etja. “All in favor?”

A round of “aye”s followed.

“We should take turns while keeping a lookout for trouble,” I said. “Varrin, how about you go first.”

“I placed all my points into Speed, raising it to 32,” he said, then spent a few minutes looking over his evolutions. “I have three intrinsics that reached evolution points. Spiritual Magic 20, Physical Magic 20, and Tactics 20.”

He then shared the System screens for the evolutions he chose, starting with Spiritual Magic.

Projection

You can step out of your body, becoming an incorporeal spirit, complete with spiritual manifestations of your equipment with all of its effects and abilities. You can make weapon attacks and activate skills while incorporeal in this way, but cannot otherwise physically interact with objects. If your weapon attacks would deal physical damage, they deal that much spectral damage instead.

You must spend 1 stamina for every foot traversed while in this form, but the first X feet of movement are free, where X is your level in Spiritual Magic. If your stamina is reduced to 0, you are immobilized.

Your physical body stays in place while in this form and is considered unconscious, though it can remain standing. You can choose to return to your

physical body at any time or have your physical body teleport to your projection's location, whereby you reinhabit it.

This ability has a cooldown of 1 minute unless you spend 30 stamina to use it sooner.

“Good for dealing Spectral damage,” I said as I reviewed the evo. “And it'll let you skip through deadly obstacles since it makes you incorporeal.”

“And lay the hurt on something while it can't hit you back,” said Xim, swinging her scepter.

“Takes a lot of stamina,” I added.

“Once my Speed reaches 40, I'll focus on getting my Fortitude up more,” the big guy replied. “Having any sort of teleport is a boon. It is considered essential by many theorists.”

He then showed his Physical evolution, which was a lot less fancy.

Restrictor Belt 2

So long as you have spent no mana in the last 20 minutes, your weapon attacks gain +1 damage per every 2 levels of Physical Magic.

“Doubling down on the zero-mana build,” I said.

“When added to Restrictor Belt 1, it is 16 points of added damage,” he said. “Still a small bonus, but it will continue to escalate as I acquire the higher evolutions. Eventually, it will account for a significant portion of my damage output.”

He moved on to Tactics.

Allied Engagement

Allies who make attacks against an entity you have damaged in the last 10 seconds deal bonus damage to that entity equal to your level in Tactics.

“Team up boss gun,” I said. “Always a good choice.”

We golf clapped, then moved to Nuralie. She'd raised Intelligence to 40, snagging her second keystone stat evolution. She placed her 2 leftover points into Speed, bringing it to 12. For intrinsics, her evos were in Spiritual, Physical, and Divine.

Her Intelligence evolution added some new flair to her build.

Weak Spot

With six seconds of focused observation, you can deduce the weakest point on any entity. Once an entity's weak point has been identified, your Intelligence improves your chance of scoring a critical strike against that Entity. This bonus is in addition to any other stat that improves your chance of scoring a critical strike.

“Pivoting into crits?” I asked.

“I needed more burst,” she said. Pause. “And I already have that crit evolution from Luck. Might as well.”

“Synergy!” said Etja.

We moved on to Spiritual.

Haunting Poisons

Whenever an entity suffers damage from Spiritual Toxicity you apply, that entity takes an additional amount of Psychic damage equal to your level in Spiritual Magic. This effect may only occur once every 10 seconds per entity.

“Poisons that corrupt your soul *and* your mind,” I said.

“I have been experimenting more with the poison we used against the specter,” said Nuralie. “I believe that I can diversify my damage further into Spiritual.”

Next up was Physical.

Plague Doctor

Whenever you apply a stack of Bleeding to a character, you apply an additional stack. The Toxicity of all poisons you inflict is increased by an amount equal to your level in Physical Magic. You can take the active skill Mad Experiment.

Mad Experiment

Physical

Cost: Variable

Cooldown: 1 minute

You utilize another creature as a test subject for your biological research. You can increase a target's stacks of Bleeding up to double the current amount by spending 2 stamina per added stack, and you can increase their toxicity up to double their current amount by spending 1 mana per 2 toxicity added.

“Good for your poisons,” I said, “But, Bleeding?”

“Arrows make people bleed,” she replied. “The active skill will also combine well with Varrin's build.”

“Teamwork makes the dream work and the dream is that they fucking die,” I said with a sigh, reciting a slogan I'd long ago abandoned for being too long.

Next was Nuralie's evolution to Divine Magic.

Lightbringer

You bring light into the darkest places. You gain darkvision and Evil Sense out to a number of feet equal to your Divine Magic skill level. Additionally, whenever you hit with an attack against a hostile character, you gain shielding for 1 minute

equal to your Divine Magic skill level, or twice that much if the target is profane to your deity. This shielding can only be granted once per target per minute.

“An ironic skill for your build,” I said, “considering you *are* the thing in the shadows.”

“It gives shielding,” she said as though that were her sole consideration for taking the evolution.

“How many ‘sense’ skills do you have now?” asked Varrin.

“Sense life out to 42 feet, Divine Magic sense out to 23 feet, which also detects things profane and sacred to the Eschen triad, and now sense evil out to 23 feet.”

“Hot damn,” I said, thinking back to the moleman threat that might have been lurking under our very feet. “Sense anything nearby?”

Nuralie focused for a second.

“Plants,” she said.

“Are they *evil* plants?”

“No.” Pause. “Nor are they sacred or profane.”

“Are any of *us* secretly evil?” I asked.

Nuralie took a long, hard look at Grotto and then a longer, harder look at Shog. Shog returned the stare while sharpening one of his greatswords with a pair of tentacles and oiling the other with his hands, talons clinking against the blade.

“No?” she said.

“Not very reassuring.”

“I do not think it was a secret.”

“Fair enough,” I said, looking warily at my summon.

Shog pulled out a large hunk of what looked like Pit flesh with another, unoccupied tentacle and started snacking as he worked on the massive pair of swords. His vicious beak crunched away at the rocky skin of his meal. I also noticed that his Grade had gone up to 16. I swallowed, clearing my suddenly dry throat. I thought I caught Shog giving me a sinister wink, but it could have been my imagination.

“Heh,” I chirped. “Who’s up next?”