

“Go for it,” said Xim, looking up from where she’d sat to meditate while I reviewed my evolutions.

“More limbs are better!” said Etja, raising all four arms like she’d just won a prize fight.

Nuralie watched and listened to the others react, but voiced no opinion.

“Evolutions for additional limbs can be tricky,” said Varrin, throwing a bucket of ice water over Etja’s enthusiasm. The mage’s arms drooped. “They can be difficult to master, especially when adapted into a combat style that has already been well-defined.” He looked me up and down critically. “I suppose that would not be an issue for you.”

“You know I just tanked a Grade 24 mountain, right?” I said, narrowing my eyes at him slightly. I was used to Varrin’s standards being unreasonably high, but I wasn’t about to let him run roughshod over *all* of my achievements.

“All of our styles are incomplete,” he said, raising a hand in a placating gesture. “None of us have a full complement of actives and intrinsics. What I mean is that if you are going to add such a significant complication to your tactics, now would be better than later.”

“You have too few tentacles as it is,” said Shog. **“If I’d known you lusted for them, I would have offered to graft some to your body.”**

“First of all,” I said, “your choice of the word ‘lusted’ makes me uncomfortable. Second, can you even do that?”

“I have no idea,” my summon said before producing a thin dagger I didn’t know he had. He ran a finger along the flat of its blade, looking over my torso as his claw scraped smoothly across it. **“I would be willing to try, though.”**

[That would be unlikely to succeed. Your mana matrix would most likely reject the foreign body parts.]

“No need to argue against it Grotto,” I said. “Already decided against undergoing any surgeries performed by Doctor Zoidberg here.” I turned back to the evolution. “So, extra limbs might be tough to use?”

“It depends on how they are acquired,” said Varrin, “and personal capability. Some minds are more flexible than others.”

[You have multiple evolutions that modify the nature of your physiology already. You would likely have an easier time adjusting to such a radical change than most.]

“Plus you’re already leaning into the c’thon vibe anyway,” said Xim. “There’s something to be said for learning magicks that resonate with your personality and interests.”

“What about wings?” I asked.

Xim squinted at me.

“You have two different evolutions offering body mods?” she asked.

“No, they’re the same evolution.”

She stood up from her lotus position.

“Show me,” she said, eyes alight with curiosity.

I shared the level 20 evolution option for my Physical Magic intrinsic.

Therianthropy: You have no fear of melding your mind and body with the inhuman and have taken the form of a beast as your own. This form can take many shapes and appearances that you may decide, but regardless of your choice, you retain all of the capabilities of your normal form. With 3 seconds of concentration, you may transform to gain the following benefits:

Your movement speed is enhanced by X%, where X is your Physical Magic skill level.

Your unarmed attacks deal bonus damage equal to your Physical Magic skill level.

Additionally, when you gain this evolution you can pick any two of the following traits, gaining their benefits while you are transformed. You may only have one instance of any given trait.

Avian. You can fly.

Equine. When you sprint, you gain an additional X% movement speed equal to your skill level.

Feline. You can balance on any mundane surface and cannot be knocked prone by mundane means.

Lupine. You may add your CHA to your unarmed attack damage.

Ursine. Your maximum lifting capacity is doubled.

Leporine. The speed at which you can dodge is increased by $X\%$, where X is your Physical Magic skill level.

Piscine. You can breathe underwater and can move safely through virtually any hazardous water condition such as strong currents or violent waves. Not only can you swim as fast as you can run, but your speed while swimming is also increased by $X\%$, where X is your Physical Magic skill level.

Draconic. Choose from among the acid, cold, fire, lightning, or poison damage types. Your unarmed attacks deal that damage type instead of kinetic.

Serpentine. You may add your WIS to kinetic damage dealt by your spells.

C'thonic. You grow two tentacles that can be used as extra arms, allowing you to wield up to four objects simultaneously.

Whenever you gain a new evolution in Physical Magic, you may pick a new trait, adding to the ones you already have.

You can remain transformed for a number of minutes equal to your skill level. After that, you return to your normal form.

You can transform a number of times equal to the number of evolutions you have in Physical Magic. You regain all transformation uses after resting for 8 hours.

“Just as I suspected,” Xim said after she finished reading. “Your evolution options are too good.” She stepped in and peered up at me. “Did you make some sort of sacrifice in the System’s name? Is *that* why you started that orphanage? For more victims?!” She stepped closer with each question, going on her tippy toes to rise toward my face once she was an inch away.

I could feel her body heat.

At some point, she'd shrugged off the blankets she was wearing to keep warm. I was suddenly very aware of her curves through her form-fitting bodysuit. I was hit by the memory of when I was adopted into the Xor'Drel tribe, and how we were all nude at the rit-

I swallowed and shook off the sudden rush of hormones.

Then I took her by the shoulders and gently pushed her away. I let my hands linger for a second longer than necessary. She had very well-developed deltoids...

"I have made zero child sacrifices," I said as my hands dropped. "The evolution looks good, but I didn't think it was *that* strong. Am I missing something?"

Xim sighed and her eyes fell.

"No," she said. "But my subracial ability makes transformations 50% stronger." She crossed her athletic arms, standing up straighter. "I haven't been offered *anything* like that." She pushed her mouth to one side and thought for a moment. "And wings are cool. I want wings."

"It doesn't say he will get wings," said Varrin. "Just that he will be able to fly."

Xim gave him a critical look.

"It's a transformation skill where he acquires a beast form and the trait that lets him fly is called 'avian'," she said. "He's gonna get wings."

"Assuming he chooses that one," said Nuralie. "Many of these traits look tempting."

"I don't have much use for the ones that buff unarmed attacks," I said, scratching my bald head.

"I literally have the intrinsic Unarmed," said Xim, reaching toward the sky as if to strangle the heavens.

"I hear your frustrations," I said, "but you can't even use Physical Magic."

Xim's attunement was Divine, which also gave her access to Spiritual and Mystical, but Dimensional and Physical were impossible for her to acquire.

"Yeah, I know," she said. A lock of her supple, silky hair had fallen into her face and she brushed it back behind a delicate ear. She locked onto me again with eyes that were as intense and focused as they were breathtaking.

My brow knitted as I tried to get a hold of my thoughts. I spent a moment trying to figure out where this sudden well of attraction had sprung from, but I had no immediate answer. Did the Delve have a subtle mind-influencing ability? No one else looked like they were suffering from sudden onset passion. My Wisdom was also huge for my level, so if something in here could breach my mental defenses we were all in some serious trouble. No, blaming the Delve felt like I was being oblivious...

Although, maybe the plants produced some sort of pheromone that had a physiological effect, rather than a psychic one!

But my Fortitude was also huge so that was pretty unlikely as well. I glanced around at the other party members, trying to see if anyone else was suddenly more attention-grabbing. Nuralie and Etja were both beautiful, but I didn't feel anything deeper for them. At least, not romantically. My gaze settled on Varrin for a bit longer. His incredible physique was striking.

He snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"Are you paying attention?" he asked, expression stern.

Yeah, that wouldn't ever be a thing. I could recognize a gorgeous man when I saw one, but I had no interest in going down that road. Again. At that very moment, at least.

"Yeah," I said, almost automatically. "Wait, that's not true. Sorry, I got distracted. Is anyone else hot?"

They all looked at me in confusion. I was standing in a Delve that was slightly warmer than a meat locker in an open leather vest and plate armor from the waist down. My chausses were also still wet from the ocean. If anything, I should have been feeling like I was about to catch the flu.

"No," Varrin answered firmly.

"Are *you*?" asked Etja. "Are you getting sick?"

I glanced at my status. I didn't have any listed debuffs or unfamiliar effects.

"No," I said. "I don't think so." I took a deep breath. Xim's Charisma had gone up to 40. Maybe it was a natural consequence of having a score that high. Unless... "Never mind. So, evolution. It's good, right?"

"Yes," said Varrin, sounding uncertain, although not with his answer.

“What are the other options?” asked Xim. She gave me a mischievous smile. “Do we even want to see them, or are they equally unfair?”

I grinned, then cleared my throat and shared the other two options.

Bulwark: A gathering of rocks floats about your person, creating three distinct fields of amalgamated stone. Whenever you are hit by an attack and have one of these fields, it coalesces into a solid mass and absorbs an amount of the attack’s damage up to your skill level. Any remaining damage is dealt to you normally. After the attack, the field is destroyed.

Once a field is destroyed, it returns after 1 hour.

“Good for a backline mage,” said Varrin. “Bad for a tank.”

“Yeah,” I said, “that was my thought as well. It’s useful for helping against the occasional hit, but when you’re getting beat up consistently it loses a lot of appeal. It would help, but it wouldn’t be amazing. A few levels of Heavy Armor would probably result in the same net damage reduction across a fight.”

“Not a game changer,” said Xim. I nodded, then shared the last option.

Evoker: Three glowing motes of elemental energy float about your person. Whenever you deal damage with a Physical skill, you can expend one of these motes to increase the damage by an amount equal to your Physical Magic skill level. You can only expend one mote per skill use.

You gain 1 additional mote for each evolution you have in Physical Magic.

Once a mote is expended, it returns after 1 hour.

“Homing Weapon is a Physical skill,” I said. “I’d be able to use this one pretty effectively.”

Varrin grunted, then asked, “What’s your Physical Magic level?”

“It’s right at 20.”

“Then with 2 evolutions, you’d have 5 motes,” he said. “That would be 100 extra damage an hour. Substantial for a single evolution, but I do not believe it is strong enough to give up the utility that Therianthropy would provide.”

“I know we said a while ago that you needed more damage,” said Xim, “but with your recent improvements, you’ve already become a lot more threatening. Since damage isn’t your focus, this doesn’t seem like a great choice.”

“Plus I’m pumping Intelligence next, so my damage will still get better, even without it.”

With the matter settled, I looked over the traits that I could choose from. Lupine and Draconic were out. I didn’t use unarmed attacks and had no plan on pivoting to become a brawler. In fact, I had refused to take Unarmed a few times at lower levels, back when I was taking apart gangsters with my bare hands. Serpentine would make Explosion! more lethal, but the spell had a long cooldown and I had no other spells that did kinetic damage.

That left me with 7 options that were all very useful. Still, I didn’t find it to be a difficult choice. Gracorvus was great for short bursts of flight, but it was mana-intensive. I’d been leaning on flight heavily in recent encounters, so having an option that let me fly without burning through mana that I could otherwise use to teleport and delete chunks of my enemies would be a big upgrade.

I’d ‘only’ get it for 40 minutes a day, but I could fly on Gracorvus for less than 10 minutes using all of my mana. Hovering in place with the shield was literally 60 times less expensive, but mobility was a huge factor in fights. I wanted Avian.

The second choice was obvious. Maybe the System thought it was snarky to offer me the chance to become more unified with my c’thonic brethren, but I didn’t take any offense. I’d seen how effective Shog’s tentacles could be. Even Grotto made good use of his numerous feelers when crafting and mana weaving. I wanted some of that for myself.

The extra limbs would require some additional cognitive load, but my recent experiences gave me a couple of ideas for how I could potentially ‘outsource’ the mental demand.

With 3 of the evolutions decided, I moved on to my fourth and final choice: Strength 20.

1) Cleave: Your melee attacks fly with such force that they pierce, slash, or bash through the first entity they contact. When making a melee attack, you may carry the full force of the blow to an additional entity within your weapon's reach.

Strength alone could already allow for something like this if I sufficiently overpowered an enemy. Against a mass of chumps, I could already smash Somnres through 2 or 3 if I swung with everything I had, but I was interested to see how much more effective that would be with an evolution backing it up.

However, it only applied to melee attacks. My recent gains in Strength would improve my abilities in melee by a substantial amount, but my primary attack was throwing hammers. I wanted something that helped with range as well as melee.

2) You're the Juggernaut, B*h: You can effortlessly move through any object or structure with an amount of kinetic DR equal to or lower than your STR, explosively destroying a 5-foot diameter around you.**

Additionally, you may choose to ignore any forced movement effect that would move you a number of feet equal to or lower than your STR.

This one reminded me of an evolution option I was offered at Strength 10—Augean Effort—which doubled my Strength when applied to terrain or objects. I'd even made this exact joke about becoming the Juggernaut, so I assumed the System was stealing my material. Not very original, System. You should be ashamed.

This Juggernaut evolution was more specific than Augean Effort but less versatile. It was probably more powerful at destroying objects. Finding a wall or door that had more than 22 DR would mean I was encountering some extraordinary materials, or at least those with some heavy mana weaves. This would let me break walls with such ease I'd probably find myself turning to the camera and talking to the audience. Plus, the forced movement reduction would have been great in my fight with Tavio.

However, Varrin had an evolution that multiplied his damage against mundane objects by 10, and his damage against magical objects by 2. Juggernaut wasn't limited to mundane materials and the effect being based on DR likely made it more effective against magically enhanced barriers, but the overlap made it less useful for the party.

It was better not to make evolution choices based solely on the dynamics of the specific party you were with. It was always possible that one would find themselves fighting with a different group, where such decisions hindered teamwork, but the immediate party was always a factor. Our party was also about as tight-knit and functional as a party could be, so I didn't see myself with a different group unless it was a single-mission type of deal. Overall, I wasn't a big fan of this one.

3) Flurry of Blows: Each attack you make deals additional damage equal to your STR times the number of previous attacks you've made in the last 6 seconds.

You may take the active skill Impale.

Impale

Physical

Cost: 10 stamina

Cooldown: None

Make a weapon attack. If this attack hits, you may instantly repeat the attack against the same target. The second attack does not repeat.

Impale was cool, but not worth my final active slot. A double-strike ability was great for damage, but as Xim said, that wasn't my focus. At first glance, the evolution didn't look amazing either. However, after considering it for a moment I realized that it *might* be completely broken for my build.

I wasn't Speed-focused, so I wasn't a traditional multi-attacker, but I had Somnres. Somnres had an ability that this evolution could enhance substantially.

Whenever you make a thrown weapon attack with Somnres you may create up to X copies, where X is your INT divided by 10. Each copy costs 2 mana to create. These copies possess all qualities imbued into Somnres at the moment the copies are created.

My Intelligence was 33, which let me summon 3 copies of Somnres. I would bring the stat to 40 with my next level, letting me summon 4 copies. Along with the original hammer, I'd be able to hurl 5 hammers with a single throw. That was 5 attacks.

That meant the second hammer would do 22 bonus damage, the third would do 44, the fourth would do 66, and the fifth hammer would hit for 88 bonus damage. Across all five hammers, that was 220 extra damage.

While damage was difficult to calculate—it wasn't like we had damage numbers pop up or DPS listed on our skills—my guesstimate for my raw hammer throw was in the neighborhood of 60. They had a shit ton of optional effects that could buff that number, such as layering Oblivion Orb onto the attack, and had fantastic armor penetration. That number felt low, but it did more work than it sounded, especially against well-defended targets.

Now slap an extra 88 damage on top. Now we were getting somewhere.

And what would happen if I used my shiny new tentacles to throw *even more hammers* at the same time?

Between the options I liked Flurry of Blows the best. While damage wasn't my focus, the evolution was a much bigger buff than Cleave, and Juggernaut wasn't terribly useful for the party.

With all of that said and done, I went ahead and confirmed all four choices. Sage Advice to grant a huge buff to intrinsic skill checks made by my allies, Standard Bearer to improve my auras and make allies immune to Fear, Therianthropy for flight and feelers, and Flurry of Blows for a big boost in damage output. I also slotted the active that was offered by Standard Bearer, Aura of Perseverance, to grant my nearby allies a solid chunk of Shielding.

I felt big. I felt strong. I felt as mysterious as the dark side of the moon. Maybe we'd fight some Huns later.

After our evolution interlocution—probably the longest one we'd ever had—we rested for a few hours to ensure our resources were topped off and to give ourselves a mental break. The boss rush hadn't taken that long. By my account, it had only been around brunch time when we'd finished, but we were still worn out from the post-adrenaline dump.

Naps were had, we got our heads on straight, and we moved out to take on the Delve, more powerful than ever. We had no idea how long we'd been gone, but from our perspective, more than three weeks had gone by. That was a long time to be stuck with the same 7 people, completely removed from society. We were ready to make quick work of the place and get back to our lives.

One. Month. Later.

"I fucking hate this place."