

“Hot damn,” I said, looking over the massive space.

The area was partially set up like an expo or swap meet, with fairly open regions exposed to a large central path running between them. Of course, the Delve’s Big Honkin’ Training Expo had booths several hundred times larger than one might see at their local crafts fair. I could also spot several areas that were completely walled off, possibly for skills or professions that didn’t play well with others.

At a glance, I could see dedicated space, equipment, and supplies for working on a half dozen skills directly in front of us. One was full of cloth and other textiles, including a wide selection of leather—both tanned and raw. Another was filled with an orchestra’s worth of musical instruments and had a small stage with comfy-looking chairs set before it. There was even what looked like a rudimentary machine shop, full of raw materials along with gears, springs, and various other small gizmos and trinkets that I couldn’t name because I didn’t know shit about mechanical engineering.

Intrinsic skills came in all shapes and sizes. Each one had some way to benefit a Delver. Even the skills that seemed esoteric, like Animal Husbandry, could be put to effective use inside a Delve. Outside of a Delve, skills that focused on things like Mercantile were *more* useful than something that might be superior within a Delve like Athletics. Still, there was an argument to be made that being able to procure equipment at low, low prices or amassing vast hordes of wealth were both helpful when conquering a Delve. Money might not be able to buy happiness, but it sure as hell could buy sweet gear. The point is, there was a skill to complement any mortal pursuit, and they all had value.

That being said, deeper in is where we found the *good* stuff.

Racks of armor and melee weapons that went on for hundreds of feet. An entire bowyer and archery range that covered more than a square mile. Obstacle courses that could simulate any weather condition. A combat arena the fucking size of a modern football stadium. A veritable army of magic-resistant target dummies ready to be abused by spells.

These were the training halls for people of action, more action, and who had a skewed perspective on the quantity of violence that should exist within a healthy work-life balance.

Each space was also accompanied by a library of texts covering all aspects of the attendant skill, ranging from things as simple as Baby’s First Sword to more advanced material like Bleed Effects for the Master Exsanguinator. The place was designed to

take anyone from zero to hero in any skill imaginable, and we had it all to ourselves. I was practically drooling.

But, we only had it for 30 days, and Varrin immediately killed my buzz by further shortening that timeline.

“We can’t get Delver levels from training skills,” he said. “I assume that the portal takes us to a Delve or other challenge with an obelisk.”

“Thirty days to reach level 10,” Xim muttered. “So, we’ll need to clear whatever is through the portal before that timer runs out.”

None of us had to ask what the penalty for failing the objective was. Unless the notification said otherwise, there was only ever one penalty for failure: death.

“The question is,” Varrin continued, “will it force us to undergo four Delves in a row? If so, how long will that take?”

Without any good answers to those questions, we made our way to the portal in search of clues. The gate was nearly a hundred feet tall, and we studied the engravings along its arch intently, searching for any hint as to what lay beyond. All of the carvings were representations of monsters, which gave us little information beyond the implication that what lay on the other side would be... monsters. However, there was a single line of text on the wall beside the portal, written in Celestial. Sadly, it wasn’t terribly helpful.

“Take with you only what you owned when entering,” Etja read, “and what you have crafted while inside.”

“Can’t stuff the whole alchemy lab in my inventory,” I said. “Dang.”

“Some of the raw materials alone are incredibly valuable,” said Varrin. “That lab had entire chests full of ruby chips. Pocketing those items would be more efficient if one wanted to steal.”

“Nah,” I said. “I could fit most of this stuff in the Closet.” That elicited a few curious looks.

“How fucking big is the Closet now?” asked Xim.

I opened my inventory screen and took a look.

“A little under 5 cubic miles. Half of that can be assigned as inventory.”

“That’s...” Xim tried to wrap her head around the scale, then jumped into the air to survey the training space. She had a 20-foot vertical, so she could get a much better view over the lower structures with the leap. She landed with ease and turned back to me. “I think this place is bigger.”

“Yeah, but it’s mostly empty space,” I said. “I bet I could shove all the actual stuff inside my inventory. Well, maybe not the damn colosseum, but you get the idea.”

“Regardless, it’s forbidden,” said Varrin.

“Unless I *make* a colosseum,” I said, scratching my chin.

Varrin rolled his eyes.

“What’s our plan?” he asked.

“Well, the longest that a Delve has taken us is around 3 days,” I said. “If we have to do 4 in a row, then 12 days would be a safe amount of time. On the other hand, look at all this incredible shit we have access to.”

“We could have done the Mimic Delve faster,” said Xim.

“That would have been irresponsible,” said Varrin.

“What’s irresponsible is not taking advantage of this place for as long as possible,” I argued. “Most Delves take a day or less. If we assume we can progress at our *average* Delve speed, that’d be something like 30 hours per Delve. So, 5 days.”

“With no rest in between,” Varrin grumbled.

“This place could be a honey pot,” said Nuralie. “Designed to keep us here.” Pause. “Whatever is through that portal might take the full 30 days.”

I shook my head.

“I doubt it. That Celestial person said that our intrinsic skill catalogs were ‘incomplete’. If the remedial measures are meant to help us fix our shit, we’re supposed to use this place. Besides—” I gestured broadly at the surroundings. “You think they’d go to this much effort for a trick?”

“Depends on who ‘they’ are,” said Xim.

“The Old Ones? The System?” I said. “When has an objective ever *lied* to try and trick us into killing ourselves?”

“It wouldn’t be lying,” said Nuralie. “The objective tells us to gain Delver levels. It did not say anything about leveling our skills. Whatever that entity told us about remedial measures is external to the objective.”

[There will be a Delve Core here as well,] Grotto chimed in. *[We are not categorically opposed to deception. Although I admit that this would be an incredible dedication of resources for a simple trap.]*

“This Delve is meant to test us, right?” I said. “If this is a trap, then what would it be testing? Our ability to pass up on a good thing? The simplest explanation is that we’re intended to train here and proceed when we feel confident in speed-running our way to level 10.”

“We could probably already do that,” said Xim.

We all stared into the portal, lost in thought until Varrin broke the silence.

“A week,” he said. “We should give ourselves at least a week to conquer whatever is through the portal.”

“I’ll take it,” I said. “Anyone else uncomfortable with that?”

“Yes,” said Nuralie. “But I am uncomfortable with many of the things we do. I won’t oppose that plan.” Everyone else agreed.

“Fantastic,” I said. “That gives us 23 days to train. Now, the first thing *I’m* going to do within this chamber of infinite wonders is...” I took a deep breath for the drama of it. “...eat dinner.”

“Yes!” said Etja. “I’m starving!”

“We also haven’t slept in two days,” said Xim.

“We passed an impressive kitchen earlier,” said Varrin. “Fully stocked.”

“Where do the ingredients come from?” I asked.

“I’ll think about that after eating them,” said Xim. She was already marching back toward the presumably infinite food source. The rest of us followed soon after, the need for sustenance winning out over our fatigue.

Etja volunteered to cook. Over dinner, we talked more about what The Operator had told us. Its claims were world-shaking, if true, but it used a *lot* of qualifiers while giving its take on the avatar problem. Ultimately, we had no way to verify its claims, and they

dealt with matters so important that we didn't want to blindly trust the enigmatic Architect. Grotto was also skeptical, although he placed a great deal of weight on The Operator's opinion. We decided that proceeding as we had so far would be best. We'd keep what The Operator told us in mind and try to confirm what we could.

None of us wanted to believe that an apocalypse was unavoidable. Maybe we couldn't destroy the System, but there had to be *something* we could do to keep the cycle from repeating, or at least to stop the avatars from rampaging. What that was exactly, none of us knew, but laying back and assuming that the world was doomed wasn't acceptable to any of us. For the moment, all that was left for us to do was progress.

After dinner, we agreed that a solid night of rest would be in everyone's best interest. Before we were willing to call it a night, however, we chose to discuss the evolution options each of us had received. Everyone in the party had hit 10 in Luck at the same time, which meant everyone had at least 1 evolution to choose. I also had a Leadership evo to pick, and Nuralie had a Divine evolution she couldn't put off for any longer.

"Why did you wait so long to pick something?" I asked. Nuralie's Divine skill was currently at 15, so she'd been sitting on the evolution choice for a while. The loson shifted uncomfortably at the question. I tried to figure out a tactful way to ask a follow-up, but Varrin saved me the effort by bluntly stating what I was thinking.

"You have some history with the churches here in Eschendur," he said. "I haven't probed before because it hasn't been my business. But, if trouble from your past is causing you to ignore evolutions, then that affects us as a party."

Nuralie sighed and sat back in her seat.

"I did not find my options appealing," she said, tapping a claw-like nail on the hardwood tabletop. "The first evolution drew strength from my conviction, which is something that I have struggled with. The second strengthened my Divine skills, of which I only have 1. The third helped me with delivering "Divine justice". I am not sure what that even means for me."

"Is there a reason you're referring to them in the past tense?" I asked.

Nuralie nodded.

"One of the options has changed. It is"—pause—"something I think I can work with."

"Changed?" asked Xim, perking up. "I didn't know the options could *change*."

I motioned for Nuralie to continue. Rather than explaining the evolution, she simply shared the System text with us.

Inquisitor

Your relentless pursuit of divine truth has enabled you to detect entities imbued with deific influence. You gain Magic Sense (divine) out to a number of feet equal to your Divine Magic skill level. This sense also reveals entities considered sacred or profane to your deity.

“Any form of magic sense is powerful,” said Varrin. “Divine magic sense may be especially useful within this Delve.”

“That’s just the appetizer,” said Xim, eyes re-reading the text. “This *reveals* entities sacred or profane to your deity. Stealthed, invisible, hidden behind a wall, buried underground. It’s not even limited to people or monsters, it’s “entities”. If something within your detection range is sacred or profane, it’s revealed. Hells, it doesn’t even specify that it’s revealed just to you. This ability might reveal it to everyone around, or at least your allies.”

“That’s similar to Arlo’s ability to reveal stealthed or invisible opponents,” said Varrin. “But it’s automatic and applies to more than just living things. It likely has the benefit of telling you whether it is profane or sacred as well. That could be immensely useful.”

“Guess that title from Zenithar Zura is coming in handy, after all,” I said. “What *is* your deity, by the way? You said that you wouldn’t choose one of the three churches. Wouldn’t this ability require you to pick between Deijin, Hyrach, or Geul?”

“I-” Nuralie hesitated. “No. My revelation, the reason it has caused me... difficulties... is because it granted me a vision of the three gods of the Eschenden as one being.”

“One being?” I asked. “Like a trinity type of deal? They’re three different things, distinct from one another, equally divine, but ultimately part of the same god?”

Nuralie's eyes widened and she looked at me in bewilderment.

“What?” I asked. “Am I way off base?”

“No,” she said. “I just did not expect you to have such a profound understanding of my situation.”

“You’re not exactly a theologian,” said Xim, also looking at me skeptically.

“I was raised in a tradition that believed in that concept, so it’s not that weird to me.”

“I see,” said Nuralie. “But, yes. Deijin, Hyrach, and Geul are each part of a greater whole. This idea is inconsistent with the teachings of the Eschenden.” Pause. “The entire structure of the Church is based on the idea that they are separate beings working in unison.”

“And some church authorities gave you shit for figuring it out?” I asked.

“That is one way to say it.”

“Hmm, I would say “fuck those people”, but since your entire nation is theocratic, I can see why that’s not the best response.”

“Indeed.” Nuralie crossed her arms, looking uncomfortable with the discussion.

“Regardless of the religious implications,” said Varrin, “the evolution is excellent.”

“If it works with all three Eschen gods, then it’s even stronger,” said Xim.

“Assuming that it works that way,” said Nuralie. “I have not been very devout during my time in Hiward.”

Xim reached over and placed her hand on Nuralie’s.

“We all stray,” she said. “Once we return, our faith is stronger for it.”

Nuralie's eyes darted to her, then back to the table. She swallowed, then sat up straight in her chair. She shifted her gaze between a few invisible screens, then let out a breath.

“I accepted it,” she said. “Now I would prefer that we move on to”—pause—“someone else.”

I rapped a knuckle on the table.

“I’ve got a Leadership evolution,” I said. “The first two options take work and I don’t like them. The third option, however, is objectively perfect.” I shared the screen with the party.

Auradin

The effects of your auras on allies are 1% stronger per level of Leadership.

“More health regen?” said Xim. “I won’t complain.”

“Right?” I said. “Who Needs a Cleric? is really strong at low level, but the bonus to regen it gives is linear, while health grows exponentially with Fortitude. This will help it keep up while giving me an excuse to pick up a second aura if I see one I like.”

“I assume this is another aura ability mentioned in that book Umi-Doo gave you?” asked Varrin.

“Yes, it is,” I said. “Feel free to apologize for insulting my choice of an aura passive when we first met.”

“You never apologized?” asked Xim, giving Varrin a motherly glare. “That aura saved our lives in The Toxic Grotto!”

“I apologized,” said Varrin.

“When?” I asked.

“I apologized generally,” he said. “For my behavior during the Creation Delve.”

Xim shook her head in disappointment.

“I think you need to look Arlo in the eye,” she said, “and tell him that auras are the greatest.”

“That *would* go a long way to restoring our friendship,” I said, placing my hands behind my head and relaxing back in my chair.

“I’m too tired for this,” said Varrin. “But, fine.” He locked me with a murderous stare. “Auras are the greatest, my dearest friend Arlo.”

“Kind of feel like I need to sleep with one eye open from now on, but thanks.”

“Luck!” shouted Xim, startling me. “I got the one that makes me hit sometimes when I would have missed.”

“Like that ring we found?” I asked.

“Yeah, but it’s better because it’s not a gaudy ring and doesn’t have charges or take up an item slot.”

“Mine are all crit related,” said Varrin. “I’m taking the one that gives me a 10% chance to deal double damage with melee attacks.”

“Same,” said Nuralie. “For ranged attacks, though.”

“I got crits for spells!” said Etja. “What about you, Arlo?”

I pulled up my evolutions for the execrated stat of Luck, having ignored them so far out of principle.

“Let’s see,” I said as I reviewed the first option.

1) Divine Favor of Ju'Ro'Qi, The Dread Star of Heaven: Speak the Dread Star’s true name and be seen. Ask one question and be answered. Should you survive the Dread Star’s truth, forget its name for seven days.

I drummed my fingers on the table.

“Just what I always wanted,” I said. “Some cryptic bullshit.”

I put my thoughts about the portentous text on hold and moved down to the next option.

2) Divine Favor of Ju'Ro'Qi, The Dread Star of Heaven: Speak the Dread Star’s true name and be seen. Ask one question and be answered. Should you survive the Dread Star’s truth, forget its name for seven days.

I froze, beginning to realize that something was deeply wrong with my evolution choices. I looked at the third option and was met with exactly what I expected.

3) Divine Favor of Ju'Ro'Qi, The Dread Star of Heaven: Speak the...

I stared at the three identical choices and then showed the text to my party members.

An eerie chill filled the air as they read, and I started to appreciate *how* fucked up the options were when Varrin began weeping blood.