

There was a tug at my gut and a sensation of weightlessness as the world blinked. An instant of darkness cut off my vision, and then a field of endless stars burst to life. The pinpricks of light shimmered in the black, turned a slight shade of blue, then began to slowly move in an arc. Each left a trail of light in its wake, and soon the universe was a mass of glowing azure circles.

I was frozen, unable to move for several minutes. A chill invaded my body, and my lungs began to protest a lack of air as I couldn't even take a breath. Eventually, a pair of eyes opened before me, inches away. Had my muscles been responding, I would have flinched. My paralysis definitely saved me from letting out an undignified squeak.

The eyes studied me with irises simultaneously dark as the void around me, while also radiating vibrant, prismatic light. As we stared at one another, I began to sense that the eyes were *not* inches from my face. I had nothing to act as a frame of reference for scale, but I knew that the eyes were distant—as distant as the blue circles, which had begun to pulse and vibrate. I felt that each peering orb was vaster than an entire planet and that its scrutiny tore at the fabric of my existence.

A deep sound thundered through the universe, like the tantara of a thousand horns rumbling across an endless sky. Then, as though a camera shutter clicked, there was another stutter of absolute darkness. Then, I found myself standing in a small, metallic chamber with runes covering every inch of its surface.

My vision swam and I fell to my knees. Beside me, I heard the sound of retching and turned to find Nuralie on her hands and knees, expelling the remnants of her last meal. Oddly, the sight reminded me that I hadn't eaten since breakfast more than a day before and made me hungry, rather than disgusted.

Xim knelt to my left, eyes staring into the middle distance. Varrin leaned against a wall, helmet off and gripping his head in both hands. Grotto floated to the ground and spread out his tentacles, apparently too unstable from the teleport to stay hovering. Etja was...

Etja was totally unaffected, and she looked around at us with worry.

"Are you guys okay?" she asked.

"Fuck no," said Xim in a hushed tone.

"What sights befell my mortal eyes?" asked Varrin in a hoarse whisper.

We got some version of an answer when a system message appeared.

**You have survived the notice of a Divine being! You are granted +1 LCK!**

“It appears that we encountered some sort of deity,” I said as the others looked over the same message. Just as I began to sigh and lament the trouble that accompanied leveling Luck, we got another message.

**You have survived the notice of a Divine being! You are granted +1 LCK!**

“Does that mean there were two?” asked Xim. “Or does that mean the one we ran into was a big deal?”

I read over the notifications with creeping concern.

“Not sure we’ll ever—”

**You have survived the notice of a Divine being! You are granted +1 LCK!**

**You have survived the notice of a Divine being! You are granted +1 LCK!**

**You have survived the notice of a Divine being! You are unable to gain additional training stats to Luck.**

“Oh, shit,” said Xim. “My Luck just got pushed up to 10.”

“Me too!” said Etja.

“Mine as well,” said Varrin.

Nuralie nodded, and I began to reply but paused again.

**Your mind and body have been subjected to incredible dimensional forces. Your Dimensional Magic skill has increased to level 22!**

**Your Dimensional Magic skill has increased to level 23!**

**Your Dimensional Magic skill has increased to level 24!**

**You led your party through an encounter that was significantly above your level.**

**Your Leadershipskill has increased to level 7!**

**Your Leadershipskill has increased to level 8!**

**Your Leadershipskill has increased to level 9!**

**Your Leadershipskill has increased to level 10!**

“Skill levels on top,” I said. “We should take risky teleports more often.” I frowned after saying this, wondering whether the Leadership came from rushing the Littan camp, or surviving whatever the shit we’d just survived. The Littan encounter made more sense.

I looked at Etja. “You seemed to handle whatever that was without a problem.”

“Compared to when I was born, it wasn’t that big of a deal,” she replied with a shrug. “But it was interesting!”

I reflected on the forces involved when Orexis violently shaped her body and soul from clay. She was even a clone of the avatar for a little while before morphing into the lovable, multi-limbed caster we now knew. That was probably an uncomfortable process, now that I thought about it.

“Nearly a full level from Luck alone,” said Varrin. “My score was only 3, now I’m up to 10. I also got a handful of skill levels.”

There was another round of nods, then everyone began to study our surroundings in earnest. The stats and skill levels left me with two new evolutions to choose from, but I dismissed the notifications to get my bearings as well.

The room was small—about a hundred square feet—with cylindrical walls. Unfamiliar glyphs of varying sizes covered every surface. There was a regular pattern of large

symbols the size of my torso with the space between them filled tightly with smaller engraved runes, some tinier than my pinky nail. Aside from that, the chamber was empty.

“Obscure mystic symbols and no doors,” said Xim. “We must be in the right place.”

“You okay, Grotto?” I asked. The mini-c’thon was still spread out on the floor, and he slowly tilted his frame back to look up at me. Then he turned and looked over the walls.

*[Teleports are not supposed to be like that,]* he thought to us.

“At least this one didn’t try to kill us.”

*[I am not so sure. This Delve is a test, intended to be insurmountable by a level 10 without any other advantages. That may have been the first challenge.]*

Xim snorted, then asked, “What kind of challenge was *that* supposed to be?”

*[Endurance? Willpower? Strength of mind? Individuals who had coasted by on raw talent would have been crushed. That required experience interacting with something greater than oneself. Or, the ability to handle such an encounter, at least.]*

“You don’t know for sure?” I asked.

*[This is outside my realm. I have no knowledge of what is inside these challenge Delves. Even if I had seen the prior iterations, each generation is presented with new obstacles. Designing such tests is one of the purposes served by the Architects.]*

“Hmm. Alright,” I said. “Let’s stop dwelling on it and try to figure this shit out.” I gestured at the walls.

“Just remembering those eyes gives me a headache,” said Varrin.

“It gives me *something*,” said Xim. She grinned. “I kind of like it though.”

She seemed to like it a lot, in fact.

“Any insight into the runes, Grotto?” I asked.

The core looked over the walls again. The motion was awkward with him splayed out. He ingested them slowly, scanning the full perimeter.

*[No.]*

“That’s all you got?”

[*These symbols have no relationship to the weaves I am familiar with.*]

“They look familiar to *me*,” said Etja. I glanced at her, eyebrows raised.

“Really? Part of your inherited knowledge?”

She gave me a nod, then ran a hand over the runes. She eventually stopped at one of several nexus points, where the smaller symbols all converged on one of their larger brethren. She sent it a pulse of mana and the energy spread out through the engravings for about a foot in each direction, filling the sigils with a gentle light. Etja tapped her foot in consideration, then reached out and placed all four of her hands on the large rune and pushed a wave of mana into it.

The light spread throughout the room as Etja poured mana into the walls. It was only after the room was filled with a soft blue glow that I realized there’d previously been no discernable light source. Once the runes were completely filled and stable, Etja took a step back.

“Welp, out of mana now.”

“Between Nullifying the Littan ward and this, makes sense,” I said.

“Oh, I used a lot of my mana in the Littan camp to Nullify their ward, but it all regenerated by the time we got here. I put a full mana bar into this.”

“Eh? You’ve got Fast Recharge, so to get all your mana back without any other regen takes five hours.”

“You are correct, Mister Party Leader,” she said with a smile.

“So either that teleport took five hours,” said Xim, “or something else filled her mana up for her.”

“I don’t have any overload or mana toxicity debuffs. I don’t *feel* like someone put a potion in my belly, either.”

“Even with one of Nuralie’s potions,” I said, “that’d take around forty minutes to refresh your pool. That’s still a lot longer than it felt like we were stuck in that in-between place.” I took a deep breath. “Again, probably best not to dwell on it. Any idea what the next step is?”

“Party Leader places their hand here,” said Etja, pointing at the rune she’d been touching.

I stepped forward and touched the rune without giving myself the chance to consider all of the different ways it might lead to unknown and potentially terrible consequences. The runes on the walls flared, then began shifting to merge. After a minute of the symbols mingling, they formed into a row of new shapes that lacked the intricate linework of weaves and looked more like letters.

Looking at the letters made me feel like my brain was being stuffed full of concepts to the point where it gave me sensory overload. It was like pure, absolute truth was being delivered to me, but my mind was so overwhelmed with its majesty that I had no capacity left to comprehend what it was saying. I looked away once my vision blurred and there were suddenly two of everything. The knowledge I'd gained from the experience drained out of me.

"This is worse than looking at your grimoires," I said to Xim. She managed to peer into the glorious symbols for several seconds longer than myself, but eventually averted her gaze as well. Where my experience left me somewhat disturbed, her face told of a very different story. She bit one of her fingers, cheeks flushed.

"Is this an erotic experience for you?" I asked.

"I got a level in Divine just from looking," she said through heavy breaths.

That wasn't a denial.

"I'm happy you're enjoying yourself."

"This is Celestial!" said Etja.

"Language of the divine," said Varrin. "Not too surprising, but tells us that whoever made this place could harness words of power."

"First," I said, pointing at Varrin, "putting the question of what the hell that means on the back burner, but you have my curiosity. Second," I said, pointing at Etja, "what's it say?"

"With Celestial, a lot of nuance gets lost in translation," she said. "Normal language can't express the ideas with the same clarity and precision, so keep that in mind." She stepped away from the wall and reviewed the text further.

"Welcome," Etja read. "You have proven yourselves worthy of undergoing the trial. Based on my understanding of the—" She paused and furrowed her brow. "Based on my understanding of the 'tethered' world, this is a laudable achievement. Do not rejoice, however. Your path is incomplete and the risks to your lives are, uh... the risks to your lives are manifold."

“If any of your number had failed to appear within this chamber, know that they would have perished for lacking conviction. This is but the beginning. The challenges do not change—or, they don’t get easier. It means both. The challenges do not change if the number of party members is ‘reduced’.” Etja stopped and squinted. “This one is tricky... Um, ‘cherish’ your allies, for their survival is your own.

“While this Delve has been created to test you, it has not been created to ‘slaughter’ talented individuals needlessly. You will each be evaluated, and remedial measures may be offered to ensure that you have reaped the appropriate rewards from the System before continuing the trial.

“To begin, place your hands on the... the nodes? The confluences?” Etja looked frustrated with translating the final word until five luminous rings appeared on the wall. “The glowy circles!” she said triumphantly.

We all exchanged a few looks. As a group, we were apprehensive but determined. Without discussion, we each touched the rings.

A gentle vibration ran through my body, leaving me with skittering goosebumps. The process took only a second, and then the text changed.

“All party members are at Delver level 6,” Etja said, reading the new script. “Suggested Delver level: 10. Incomplete active, passive, and intrinsic skill catalogs. Equipment evaluation...” Etja paused as her eyes ran ahead. She turned to look at me. “It says everyone is adequate but it suggests a few upgrades, especially your armor.”

“No surprises there,” I said, feeling the holes in my steel breastplate beneath the discount-camo blankets strapped to my body.

“It says that it’s *really* bad.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“It harps on it a lot,” she continued without pause or hesitation. “It says it’s surprising you even made it here without dying.” I gave her a blank stare in reply. “It just makes it seem really important that you do something about it.”

“Fucking hell, can we move on? What am I supposed to do, carve a new breastplate out of the damn walls?”

“She’s just telling you what it says, Arlo,” said Xim. “Don’t get mad about it.”

“Never shoot the messenger,” said Varrin. “It’s bad tactics.”

"I'm not mad at *her!*" I said, waving an arm in frustration. "This Celestial thing is being a dick!"

"It's right, though," Xim countered.

"I didn't say it wasn't!"

"Anyway," Etja said. She cleared her throat and continued. "Remedial measures are strongly encouraged. Would you like to initiate remedial measures? Yes/No." She turned and gave me a questioning look.

"Anyone opposed?" I asked, putting aside my irritation.

"It's a Delve," said Varrin. "Whatever these remedial measures are, they won't be a handout."

"Yeah," said Xim. "It might teleport us to four Delves in a row or something."

"Is that a problem?" I asked.

Varrin held out a hand and gently made a fist.

"Our skills," he said, looking forlorn. "When will we level our skills?"

"While killing shit," said Xim. "Let's go!"

"Yeah, I'm with Xim," I said. "Unless you want to stand here and train until we've each got 200 total intrinsic levels."

"No," he said, hanging his head. "Let's move forward."

"Right." I turned back to Etja. "We'll do what it suggests."

Etja smiled and looked back to the text. She stood there for a while, and then her smile faded.

"It doesn't say how to accept it," she said.

"I mean..." I stroked my beard as I thought. I decided to go with the simplest potential solution. "Oh great and mysterious being of Deijin's Descent, we acknowledge that we suck and accept your offer of remedial measures."

Gears began clicking and the hiss of sliding metal sounded as a large panel of the wall slid into the ground. It revealed a wide doorway leading to a dimly lit tunnel.



“Delves need more variety in their architecture,” I said, studying the plain, rectangular hallway. “Nonetheless, tally-ho!” I marched forward into the dark, with the party close behind.

At the other end, we found a massive and incredibly well-equipped training facility. The scale alone was breathtaking, stretching for miles in every direction and with a ceiling as high as a modern skyscraper. On the far side of the facility was a large portal, surrounded by an archway. Carvings of countless monsters were set into the arch, with forms varying from supreme beauty to something that made you want to delete your eyeballs. As we entered, we got a notification.

**Reach level 10 in 30 days or less.**