

Xim recoiled from the shared text, whatever desire she'd held for experiencing god-like secrets fleeing from her. Etja wore a grim expression like I'd never seen. Grotto's eyes flitted from side to side as he read and re-read the notification, seemingly undeterred by whatever force was impacting the others. When I glanced at Nuralie, she looked between the others with unease.

Varrin batted at the air, physically dismissing the shared message, then stood and staggered away from the table. He clutched at his gut and doubled over, looking like he was about to return the food the magical kitchen had gifted us. Xim got to her feet and followed, placing a hand on his back and sending a Heal into him. I turned and raised an eyebrow at Nuralie.

"What?" she said. "Your evolutions are always disturbing." Pause. "I stopped looking at them."

"Oh." I grimaced and scratched the back of my head. "Probably for the best."

[Why do you break everything?] Grotto thought, giving me an accusatory glare.

"You think I *choose* to have the System treat me like its pet monster? It's been offering me evos with horrifying implications since day 1!"

[Your presence invites disruption, regardless of culpability. And do not blame the System, it had no hand in this.]

"Sorry, what?" I'd looked away from my familiar to check on Xim and Varrin while he rebuked me for things out of my control. The big guy was standing straight again, though he was supporting himself with a hand on the metallic wall. He'd managed to keep dinner down.

[The text returns an error message when I view it. "Evolution choices have been overridden by an outside force." Some unknown entity has intervened on your behalf.]

"Saying it's on my behalf implies a positive meaning that I'm not sure I agree with."

[Nevertheless, something has interfered because it has taken note of you. No one else received such an option.]

I narrowed my eyes at the mini-c'thon, but chose not to engage further in the petty argument.

"What did everyone else see?" I asked.

“I cannot remember,” Varrin growled. He turned, one trembling hand gripping his sword hilt tightly. “Something about speaking with... something. I grow tired of being battered by the wake of domineering creatures.”

“It had a divine nature,” Xim said. “But it was so far beyond anything—” Her voice caught and she swallowed. “What did it tell you?”

“Don’t,” Etja said, fixing me with grave eyes. “Don’t speak the name.”

I thought twice about telling the others anything about the evolution as I appraised Etja. Her entire body was wound tight, looking almost like a stranger inhabited her. The thought left a sinking feeling in my gut, given her history.

“It offered me the ability to ask someone a question,” I said slowly, not looking away from Etja. “It hinted—not so subtly—that receiving an answer would be *very* dangerous. It has a one-week cooldown, sort of.”

“Sort of?” said Nuralie.

“It makes me forget the, uh, code word to use it for seven days.”

Pause. “Code word?”

“It’s a true name,” said Etja. “I couldn’t read it, but the feeling I got when trying was unmistakable.”

“True name, like it gives me power over the entity?” I asked. Etja shook her head.

“That’s so wrong, it’s dangerous. A being will always know when its true name is spoken. It doesn’t matter how far away you are, even if entire realities separate you. No spell or weave can stop it. It will know absolutely, and it will know who spoke it and where they are.”

“Maybe I skip the Luck evolution,” I said.

“And risk offending something this powerful?” asked Xim.

“If it really wanted to talk, I feel like it would just swoop in and grab me up for a conversation. Having an option to choose feels like a trap.”

[*Some magics require that a choice be offered,*] Grotto thought to us, his feelers anxiously snaking through the air. [*Many functions of the System operate under that rule, for instance.*]

"I'm getting pretty strong 'demonic pact' vibes from this," I said.

"Does it require any sort of payment?" asked Xim.

"I mean, aside from having an evolution burned into my body and soul, no." I reviewed the text again. "Wait, if I can see the true name in the description, do I even need the evolution?"

"I doubt it's demonic, but pacts with more powerful beings are real," said Xim. "It sounds like choosing the evolution is part of the pact. If there's no payment, are there restrictions?"

"Yeah. I get one question, then seven days of name amnesia."

"Then saying the name without agreeing to the rules would be like..."

"Right. Like any agreement without a contract," I finished. "You'd be depending on the good faith of the other party not to screw you, while they'd be watching for you to try and cheat them as well."

"I was going to say it was like dueling without agreeing not to kill each other first, but sure."

"It doesn't say that it won't try to kill me."

"It's probably implied," said Xim.

"I like my terms to be *express*, but I get it. No way to cheese my way around the evo if I want to contact this thing."

"Did you use cheese as a verb?" asked Xim. "Why?"

"It means to use an exploit or find an easy way to do something that's supposed to be hard."

"What does that translate to cheese?" she asked.

"Probably because cheese is delicious," said Etja.

"There's no reason to decide right now," said Varrin. "We are weary, and have been through a lot these past few days."

"Yeah, let's break for the night," I said. "If it's even night right now. We can reconvene in the morning."

There was a round of fatigued assent, and we found our way to a suite of personal rooms. Unlike most of what I'd seen within Delves, the furniture was well-kept, rather than decaying or reduced to dust. We each had our own chamber and I fell asleep on a bed that was likely older than civilization.

Sleep did us a lot of good, but did not bring any clarity as to the evolution. Reluctant to waste any more time in the training hall than we had already, I made the executive decision to procrastinate making a choice. We all laid out our plans for the upcoming 22-and-a-half days.

"I'll use the sections for spell training and work on my shaping," said Etja. "My Dimensional 20 evolution makes shaping for AOE's twice as effective, but I want to test it out before using it in a fight. I've also got some work to do on minefield, pipe, and funnel."

"What are minefield, pipe, and funnel?" I asked.

"They're shapes!" she said. "For mana-shaping."

I cocked my head to one side.

"You have categorized shape archetypes?"

"I made them up myself, but yes."

"That's a damn good idea. Probably makes training them a lot more effective than just pumping mana into a spell and hoping it works out."

"Yep!"

"I will spend a few days making as many potions as I can," said Nuralie. "Getting everyone a stock of health and mana potions will speed up training. I went through many products during our assault on the Littans, so I need to replenish those as well."

"Ohhh, endless mana for spell training," said Etja, clasping her hands together in glee. I was glad she was back to being jubilant and excited, rather than a dour harbinger of eldritch disaster.

“That *is* very thoughtful and exceptionally helpful,” I said. “What about after making potions?”

“I found a chamber flooded with divine mana,” she said. “There are panels with different runes that can be swapped in and out. I do not know what many of them mean, but there are symbols that I recognize for Geul, Hyrach, and Deijin.” Pause. “I will work on fully forming my revelation.”

“I can help with that,” said Xim. “I haven’t been able to use it much, but I have a Theology evolution that grants me a lot more sensitivity toward other people’s revelations. I can probably help direct your training. I also have a lot of experience with communion.” She smiled at Nuralie. “If you want my assistance, that is.”

“I—” Pause. “I would appreciate that very much.”

“Working on anything else, Xim?” I asked.

“Oh yeah!” Xim said like a 1,000-gallon pitcher of red sugar water busting through a brick wall. “My Divine is at 37, my Shields is at 19, and my Light Armor is at 18. I bet I can get all those to the next evolution break point.”

“Damn,” I said. “That’s a lot. Going from 37 to 40 is supposed to take awhile.”

Xim shrugged.

“I have a bunch of buffs to leveling my intrinsic skills.”

“Hmm. Speaking of buffs, I think I’ll finally use that human racial trait that gives +100% to crafting skill progression.”

“Which crafting skill?” asked Xim. “Beard Trimming?”

“That’d be part of Barbering & Cosmetology, but no.”

“Is it Antics?” asked Etja.

“Wisecracks?” said Xim.

“Fatherly Humor?” offered Nuralie.

“Those are all part of Performance. Again, no. It’s—”

[Arbitrary Side-Tangents of Dubious Utility?]

I huffed and glowered at Grotto.

“Perhaps it is Consorting with Evil,” offered Varrin.

You could hear a pin drop.

“Humor isn’t your strong suit, Varrin,” said Xim.

“We were joking?”

“Wait, what evil am I consorting with?” I asked.

“Shog is objectively evil,” he replied.

“I think of him as a morally gray, secondary protagonist.”

“He eats people,” said Xim.

“They’re *bad* people, though.”

[He would consume anyone in this room without hesitation if he did not view you as a superior predator.]

“Grotto has also been responsible for countless deaths,” Varrin added.

[Those were acts taken as part of my duties as a Delve Core. Those people knew what they would face when they entered my Delve.]

“First time we met,” said Xim, “you tried to mind-control us into getting our organs scooped out by a psychopath.”

Grotto’s feelers twisted.

[I was coerced.]

“It’s Smithing!” I said, trying to re-rail the conversation.

“Good choice!” said Etja. “You can make new armor for yourself. The Celestial voice was super-concerned about your—”

“I know what it said,” I grumbled.

“What about you, Varrin?” Etja asked.

“Blades,” said Xim, Nuralie, and I at the same time. Varrin crossed his arms and looked affronted.

“You didn’t even give me a chance to respond.” I gave him some side-eye.

“What are you planning to work on, Varrin?” I asked, monotone.

He fidgeted, tapping a finger on his bicep.

“Blades,” he said. “I think I can get it to the level 40 evolution if I focus on it exclusively.”

“Aaaanyway,” I said. “I can summon Shog tomorrow if you want a sparring partner. I should still have sixteen hours on the cooldown. Let me check.” I brought up Dimensional Summon and took a look. “Or the cooldown has already reset. Geez, how long were we in that portal?”

“You could summon Shog and we can ask him,” said Xim.

“Are you suggesting that I Consort with Evil to uncover hidden truths?” I grinned, already casting the spell. A portal tore open the universe, and a mass of feelers, muscular limbs, and a body-fat percentage that would make any professional body builder envious floated out.

“Slayer, I am glad to see you did not perish. That nest of mice was more impressive than I expected.”

“Thanks, Shog. Glad that you’re okay as well. See, guys? Would someone who’s evil care so much about my well-being?”

“Shog, why are you glad Arlo’s alive?” asked Xim.

“Had he passed on, demoness, it would be more difficult to acquire Delvers to consume.” He pulled out his rapier and saber, his stolen Littan hands flexing along their grips at the end of two long feelers. ***“The power I gained by feasting on the gaudy one was unparalleled.”***

She gave me a fierce ‘see-what-I-mean?’ expression, then turned back to the c’thon.

“Still not a demon.”

“As you say, demoness.” Xim’s mouth made a line thinner than Bible paper.

“How long has it been since I dismissed you, Shog?” I asked.

“I have seen 71 sunrises since our last battle together.”

My eyes went wide as I blanched.

“More than *two months*?!”

[*Are the days on your planet longer or shorter than those here?*] asked Grotto. I nodded enthusiastically, hoping that Shog’s planet had a faster rotation.

“I believe they are longer. If so, it is not by much.”

You could hear a *lighter* pin drop.

“I’m just... I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“They probably think we’re dead,” said Xim, as calm as someone reporting on the weather. Slightly overcast with a chance of widespread destruction. Not too hot, though.

“Like so many other things, this changes nothing,” said Varrin. “We are not powerful enough that our presence in Arzia would deter the avatars from causing further damage, and our party cannot afford to further antagonize the Littans. What we have already done in Eschendur will bring down a great deal of political scrutiny. Our absence will not be missed, and we have been given time for the Littans to forget about us.”

Varrin’s appraisal was a touch callous, but he was right. We were teetering on the edge of being an Eschen military asset. He also reminded me that, despite our meteoric growth, we weren’t very important on a global scale.

“Then we need to work on *becoming* powerful enough to deter the avatars,” said Xim.

“Which will also make us more resistant to political bullshit,” I added. “We have our work cut out for us. If no one else has anything to add, we should start milking this place for everything we can.”

“Yeah!” said Etja, pumping a fist into the air. “Then we can use that milk to cheese our way to greatness!”