

After taking a moment to appreciate Shog's existence as a barely contained entity of malevolent destruction, Etja decided to go next.

"I got Wisdom to 40!" she said with a bright smile. "I put the 2 other points into Luck."

"Luck?" I said. "Why Luck?"

"I wanna see what the level 20 evolutions look like."

"Hmm, good enough for me, I suppose."

"I have several volumes you can look over," said Varrin. "They list the common evolutions for different stats."

"Shhhh," said the mage, holding up a finger. "I want it to be a surprise," she whispered. "Other than that, Divine got above 20 and Performance went from 9 all the way to 18!"

"Does Performance level when you dance with your Mirtasian Cadence while casting?" I asked.

"It does," she said, leaning in with eyebrows raised. "My Divine evolution is the most problematic, so let's talk about that one first."

"Whaddaya mean, 'problematic'?" I asked. Etja answered by sharing the evo.

Release

You understand well the state of exaltation that can be attained when you enforce your will upon the world. Bliss is not your only reward for doing so. Whenever you cast a Divine spell, you gain a number of stacks of Blessed equal to the number of evolutions you have in Divine Magic.

"Ah, I see," I said. Etja was right. The evolution was mildly concerning, and I was reminded of her connection to Orexis. Her skills and evolutions often held themes that related to the avatar. "Your last evo in Divine was called Yearning, right?"

"Yeah," she said, some of her excitement over the advancements disappearing. "Yearning rewards me when I focus. The bonuses I get related to Orexis usually involve granting me buffs when obsessing over a goal."

“That one wasn’t surprising,” I said. “After all, Orexis is your progenitor. Your abilities related to the Mirtasians are also understandable since you were modeled after Orexis’s long-lost high priestess. This ability, however...”

“It’s related to Anesis,” Varrin finished. “The *avatar* of Release.”

“I don’t think that’s strange,” said Xim. “Orexis is connected to his sister at a fundamental level. They’re two halves of the same god according to the apocrypha.” She drummed her fingers along her thigh. “She’s like Etja’s aunt in a way.”

“You only have 1 Divine active skill, right?” I said, looking at the mage. She nodded.

“Incorporate,” she said.

“Do you experience ‘exaltation’ when you use it to absorb stuff like this description says?”

“It’s not *not* fun, but I think saying that it gives me bliss is a stretch.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said Xim. “You haven’t turned into a frothing monster of consumption using the skills you got from Orexis. I doubt something like this will change your personality.”

“Why did you pick it if you’re concerned?” I asked.

“All of the evolution options were called Release,” said Etja. “They just did different things.”

“That does not follow the normal pattern,” said Varrin. “Evolutions have unique names. They are sometimes similar to one another, but never the exact same.”

“Unless they’re forced upon you by an eldritch god,” I muttered.

Etja shrugged.

“Don’t know what to tell ya’. They all had the *exact* same name.”

“You can just keep a close watch on your feelings,” I said. “If you start experiencing a ravenous desire to eat something other than cheese or blow stuff up just for the hell of it, let us know. Otherwise, let’s not worry about it too much. There’s nothing we can do about it right now.”

Etja continued to look troubled, but she nodded.

“What I find more interesting,” said Xim, “is that you can generate Blessed stacks without worshipping any deity. Blessed always has a divinity as the source of the blessings. Since you don’t worship anything, where does the Blessed come from?”

“Uhhh, maybe they come from me?”

Xim furrowed her brow, re-reading the ability.

“That has implications,” the cleric said softly.

“What kind of implications?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” she said. “I’ll have to think about it.”

With the matter settled Etja’s smile returned, washing over her features and carrying away all signs of her stress like an ocean wave erasing a child’s sand castle. She moved on to Performance.

Crowd Work

While you love to perform in more intimate venues, you’re more than capable of wowing larger groups. Whenever your performance has an audience with more than one member, you have a chance to Mesmerize any individual member. For each member Mesmerized, your chance to Mesmerize the others increases. Your chance to Mesmerize is based on your CHA and opposed by the audience member’s WIS.

“A good example of a non-combat evolution,” said Varrin.

“A little vague about its chances of success,” I added.

Nuralie tilted her head as she read the ability.

“Is mind controlling a non-hostile audience”—pause—“ethical?”

What followed was a healthy debate over what constituted “mind control” and—even if Mesmerize were—whether an ability that kept an audience from attacking Etja was a problem. Mesmerize would also cause the affected people to treat her as an ‘ally’, but outside of combat none of us were certain of what that meant. Since the only thing that

is *forced* anyone to do was refrain from violence against our friend, we ultimately gave it a pass.

“On to Wisdom?” I asked, and Etja shared her choice.

Total Recall

You have a perfect memory, able to flawlessly recall every minute detail of your life from birth with absolute clarity. No effect can modify or erase your memories, and any false memories are immediately recognized as such. Additionally, you are immune to the Psychosis status.

“I thought that it might help me recover more knowledge from the Mirtasians,” said Etja. “But, I guess that doesn’t count as my own life. It works from when I first gained consciousness after Orexis imbued me with his soul.”

“It is still very powerful,” said Varrin. “I expect the recall will prove invaluable, and a new immunity is always a good pick.”

“Are you worried that someone might modify your memories?” I asked.

Etja bit her lip.

“I was more worried that Orexis might have already done that,” she said. “Since I was born with so much knowledge, I thought that some of it might have been made up to try and influence me.”

“Was any of it fake?”

She shook her head.

“Nope! Guess I was nervous over nothing.”

“It’s good to be certain,” I said. “I didn’t know you were worried about that.”

She flashed me another bright smile, but there was a vulnerability to it.

“I’m not anymore,” she said. This time, it was Nuralie’s turn to give the former golem a hug. After giving Etja a moment of space, we moved on to Xim.

“Charisma 40,” she said with a fist pump.

“I thought you were spreading your stats evenly between Strength, Fortitude, Wisdom, and Charisma,” I said.

“I got jealous,” she said with another fist pump, then shared her selection.

Debilitating Terror

Whenever you Fear an entity, that entity also becomes Slowed and Weakened. This Slowed status persists until the affected entity makes a successful SPD check opposed by your CHA. This Weakened status persists until the affected entity makes a successful FOR check opposed by your CHA. Additionally, you are immune to Fear.

Slowed

A Slowed entity’s movement speed is halved. If a Slowed entity would be Slowed again, they become immobilized until one or fewer instances of Slowed are affecting them.

Weakened

Whenever a Weakened entity would deal damage, that damage is halved.

“Holy shit,” I said, “that’s a lot of debuffs.”

“That evolution is scary,” said Etja. “Wait, does that mean I’m Weakened and Slowed right now?” She put on an exaggerated look of concern before flexing her arms. Then she did a quick jog around the group. “Okay, I’m safe.”

“Your Speed and Fortitude are obviously legendary,” Xim said sarcastically.

I grinned at Etja’s antics, glad to see she was back in a joking mood.

“As far as intrinsics,” said Xim, “I got a Leadership 20 evolution.”

I frowned.

“Er, no offense, but that’s the only one you got?” I asked. “Don’t you have a bunch of buffs to gaining intrinsic levels?”

She crossed her arms.

“The skills I picked for Fast Learner only get buffed up to level 20. I’d already gotten them that high. I got 6 levels to Divine, 6 levels to Blunt, 4 levels to Shields, 8 levels to Leadership, 4 levels to Light Armor, *and* 8 levels to Unarmed. So, don’t worry about my skill levels.” She shifted her weight and cocked her hip. “Leadership is the only one that made it to an evolution. The others are either working their way to 40 or 70. Basically, my skills are *too good* to keep getting the easy evos.”

“Sheesh,” I said. “Consider my worry abated.” She gave me a smug expression, but I could tell she was hamming it up.

“How did you level Leadership?” asked Nuralie. “You were not giving any orders.” Pause. “You were mostly just hitting and burning things.”

“I lead by example,” Xim said as she shared her Leadership pick.

Hear their Lamentation

Allies that deal damage to an entity affected by one or more status effects you have applied gain a number of stacks of Blessed equal to the number of evolutions you have in Leadership. (Currently 2)

“You’re a very frightening person overall,” I said.

“I know,” Xim replied, smoothing back her curly locks of obsidian-black hair with one hand. She shook it out afterward, looking cooler than the bottom of a grave in winter.

“Guess I’m up next,” I said, rubbing my hands together as I pulled up my evolution screens. “I’ve got my Wisdom 40, Strength 20, Heavy Armor 20, and Physical Magic 20.”

I did what any wise man should do and saved the best for first. I opened my notification for Wisdom 40.

When the world whispers, you listen. As the waters of truth grow murky, you see. You smell your prey when the trail goes cold and taste their fright when you find them. You feel the tensile fabric of reality, knowing when to bend it.

Orrrrr maybe your friends are responsible for keeping the crayons out of your mouth. Then again, there's a sort of *wisdom* in keeping allies around who are willing to tolerate your nonsense, so feel free to continue feeling gifted.

Choose an evolution to ensure you're fit enough to pass on your genetic lineage! Assuming you still can after all that body modification.

1) Sage Advice: Your intuition and decision-making skills are impeccable, finding the perfect solutions to even the most esoteric problems. Whenever you perceive an ally making a check involving an intrinsic skill, you can concentrate to improve their check by an amount equal to your WIS.

This ability has a number of charges equal to the number of evolutions you have in WIS. Charges have a consecutive cooldown of 24 hours.

Additionally, you are immune to Paranoia and your allies still treat you as an ally even if they are Paranoid.

Paranoia

An entity with Paranoia treats all other entities as enemies and no entities as allies for the purpose of effects that reference the allegiance of other characters. For example, an effect that states "All allies within 30 feet of you heal 30 HP" does not affect anyone because you do not treat any entity as an ally.

Additionally, a paranoid entity is never considered a willing target for any effect that requires one. Effects that require a willing target, such as Blessings, immediately end if the target becomes paranoid.

However, paranoid entities are not necessarily hostile to everyone. They may still be willing to fight alongside their comrades, but they are keenly suspicious, awaiting some inevitable betrayal.

I ignored the System's jibes and focused on the evolutions. The first one, Sage Advice, was right up my alley. Providing others with information that they may or may not have requested or had any desire to hear was something I was exceedingly good at.

The exact math for how 'checks' worked was unclear, but we knew they were heavily governed by the primary stat affecting the check. That may sound obvious, but I tried not to take anything for granted with the System. Delvers had done a lot of experimentation to make sure that was how it worked. As such, adding my substantial Wisdom score to an ally's check would be hugely beneficial.

I would presently get 3 uses of the ability, although if I were to use all 3 of them at once it would take 3 days to recover them all. Consecutive cooldowns were pretty shit since they required a single charge to complete its full cooldown before the next charge began its own.

The immunity to Paranoia was also nice, especially how it extended partially to my allies. However, it wasn't a huge draw for me. We hadn't run into much that inflicted that debuff, but things could always change.

2) Eye of the Storm: Your maximum number of Rage stacks before becoming Berserk is doubled, and your Rage stacks do not decay. You may focus for one minute to lose all stacks of Rage in order to rest.

Additionally, whenever you would gain any number of stacks of Rage, you may gain double that amount instead.

You may take the active skill Typhoon.

Typhoon

Physical

Cost: 1 stamina per stack of Rage you possess

Cooldown: None

Your strike booms with unbridled fury, causing this attack to deal an additional 5 sonic damage for each stack of Rage you possess.

If you have 10 or more stacks of Rage, then:

If this is a melee attack, this attack targets all characters in a cone out to a number of feet equal to twice the number of Rage stacks you possess. If it is a ranged attack, it targets all characters in a radius equal to half the number of Rage stacks you possess.

Characters hit by this attack are knocked prone and deafened for 1 minute.

Rage

You gain +1 damage for each stack of Rage you have. If you have more stacks of Rage than your WIS, you become Berserk for as long as your Rage stacks exceed your WIS.

Rage decays in two ways. If you fail to make a weapon attack for 6 seconds, you lose 1 stack of Rage. If your Rage stacks exceed your WIS for 6 seconds, your number of Rage stacks is reduced to an amount equal to your WIS.

This option confused me. I had no abilities that could even generate Rage stacks. It seemed like a solid choice for a Rage build, but that was more of a Varrin kind of thing. I thought over what might have caused the System to offer me this evolution and the only thing I could come up with was how I'd gone all Jason Vorhees on the Littans after taking a ballista bolt to the face and losing a big chunk of my gray matter. Still, it's not like I planned on making Terminator Arlo a recurring guest star in my life. That guy was scary.

The active skill was cool, but I only had 2 more slots open and, again, I didn't generate Rage. I moved on, doing my best to manage my supreme disappointment.

3) Bastion of Solace: Other entities may no longer apply buffs or debuffs to you. You may no longer apply buffs or debuffs to other entities.

After the first two evos I was glad to find one that was short and simple, and gee gosh was it a potent ability. The shenanigans! The exploits! The *immunities!*

However, the ability had the biggest BUT I had ever seen. I couldn't get buffs from my allies. I couldn't *give* buffs to my allies. A significant portion of my build was granting bonuses to my allies. Further, shared bonuses were quickly becoming central to our party's style. It would break a lot of our synergy, and that was too big of a downside for me. From the very beginning, I'd wanted to be able to empower those who fought beside me. This evolution was a solo player's dream, but it wasn't *my* dream.

This really left me with Sage Advice as my one viable option. The only time I'd felt more pigeonholed by an evolution choice was when an eldritch god decided my Luck evolution was going to be a series of chats and literally left me with no other option. Instead, I'd taken the secret option and simply hadn't accepted the evolution, partially because I was being deliberately recalcitrant.

Before I accepted Sage Advice, I decided to take a look at my other evolutions. Technically I'd gotten to my Wisdom evolution *after* my intrinsic skills leveled. I'd never seen an evolution offered that would be as useless as Eye of the Storm, so I went looking to see if I'd been offered some way to generate Rage with my other evos. As it turned out, my Heavy Armor skill did just that.

1) Berserker: Whenever you are hit by an attack (whether or not it deals damage), you gain 1 stack of Rage.

I couldn't argue that it was a bad evolution. I did get hit a lot, and this would make me an absolute beast against swarms and speedsters. The way I saw it, this was effectively a paired evolution. If I took Berserker, I'd want to take Eye of the Storm to complement it. It was kind of tempting, but I took the time to look over my other Heavy Armor options before I gave it any serious consideration.

2) Thorns: While wearing heavy armor, whenever you are hit by or block an attack, the attacker takes kinetic damage equal to your Heavy Armor skill level. Ranged attackers only take half this value.

The System graciously offered me an evolution that would have been super cool, had I taken the Reactive Shielding evolution to Shields. I hadn't, and I didn't want to take this evolution for the same reasons. It wasn't a lot of damage on its own and it didn't do a

thing to improve my status as the most handsome immovable object on the block. Neither did Berserker for that matter. These were Heavy Armor evolutions, so where were the defensive options?

3) Standard Bearer

While wearing heavy armor, the range of your auras is increased by a number of feet equal to your Heavy Armor skill level. Additionally, allies within any of your auras cannot be feared as long as you are conscious and not feared.

You may take the active skill Aura of Perseverance.

Aura of Perseverance

Physical

Cost: 20 stamina + 1 stamina per second

Cooldown: None

You create an aura around you with a radius in feet equal to your Physical Magic skill level. Allies within this aura gain Shielding equal to your STR + CHA when this skill is activated. While the ally remains within range, this Shielding regenerates at a rate equal to its maximum value over 6 seconds.

Ah, there it was, and it had it all. It was an aura buff. It offered an active skill that was an aura. It gave immunity to my allies. By the gods, the aura even gave Shielding!

Now, it wasn't a *lot* of Shielding for the moment. My Strength and Charisma weren't nearly as chunky as my Wisdom and Fortitude, but it would give me a good excuse to get more swole. I also wasn't running into the limits of my stamina in most fights, so having another spender for my green juice would be good. I thought that the skill was worthy of one of my remaining 2 slots.

I did a quick search for the keyword Rage in my other evos but didn't see it listed anywhere else. I decided to choose Sage Advice for Wisdom, allowing me to massively boost the skill checks of my allies, and Standard Bearer for Heavy Armor, because it was just all sorts of sexy. I held off on hitting confirm until I'd finished giving all my

evolutions their proper consideration. It was always possible that a strong combo could pop up. That wasn't something I normally considered since I didn't usually get four fucking evolutions at the same time.

I read through Strength, seeing some simple and interesting choices, then made sure to closely read my options for Physical Magic. I paused, blinked, and read one of the options a few more times before I decided to get some input from the party.

"Sooo," I said, dragging out the word. "How would y'all feel if I, say, grew some tentacles?"