

The next morning I awoke to an unfamiliar tingle in my senses; the senses with designated values above five, that is. The *extra* ones. I sensed some weird soul shit is what I'm saying.

Upon opening my eyes, the first thing I noted was not the source of the soul ping I was getting. Instead, it was Grotto staring at me from a distance that I would describe as close, but not intimate.

[Were you watching me sleep again?] I thought to him.

[I have been waiting for you to awaken while providing you with the six feet of personal space that you'd previously requested.]

[Still weird.] I stretched and hopped out of the bedroll, then dismissed my sparse camping gear into my inventory. [Any reason you were so eagerly anticipating my resurrection?]

Grotto rubbed his feelers together.

[I do not know what to do with myself out here.]

[Out here? You mean, outside of the Closet?]

[Correct. All of my mana-weaving supplies and projects are inside the Pocket Delve. Once you and your fellow organics began to slumber I had little to occupy my time.]

[Okay, no problem. I'll open the portal. Feel free to wake me for something like that. Then again, I might be able to figure out a way for you to open the Closet yourself at this point, but it'd take some testing.]

[I would prefer not to return to the Closet at this moment.]

I'd already started focusing on the portal but dropped my concentration in surprise.

[You what?]

[Our subordinates have endured my absence for too long. It would be a disservice to continue denying them the advantage of my presence.]

I ran that through my Grotto translation filter.

[Sure, you're always welcome to hang out.]

[I am aware. However, I have nothing to do.]

[Are you asking *me* what you should be doing?]

[It has been my experience that entities with fleeting lifespans tend to engage in continuous activity regardless of their physical surroundings. I believe this serves a dual function of both improving their personal utility while also distracting them from the everpresent march of time that will inevitably bring about their demise. You are an exemplary model for this behavior.]

I crossed my arms and waited to hear a question.

[While I could continue my efforts with mana weaving, it is an unwieldy practice for our current level of mobility and too delicate to risk in such a humid environment. Since the party benefits from my guidance which, in turn, is enhanced by the immediacy of my physical presence, I require other projects that I might engage in outside of the Pocket Delve.]

[And you can't think of a single thing to do outside of the Delve? No, never mind. That makes a lot of sense. More than 99% of your life has been spent *inside* of Delves doing things *for* Delves.]

I took a quick look around the camp and found the surrounding branches empty of bedrolls and other effects. Peeking through the canopy above, I could see that the sky held the first tinges of sunlight, though dawn had yet to fully break. I quickly located my allies down in the swamp, already awake and each doing their own thing. I couldn't remember the last time *I* was the late riser.

[Let's go observe and see if we can find you a hobby, then.] I hopped down off of the branch, letting Gracovus slow my fall so I didn't splash down and make a racket. Despite everyone getting a head start on the day, the camp was nearly silent.

[I do not believe in hobbies,] Grotto thought to me as we floated toward Varrin. *[Activities should be fruitful pursuits that provide measurable progress toward desired goals and outcomes.]*

I paused a dozen feet away and watched the big guy, who sat on his knees in a meditative pose, eyes shut. He occupied a rare patch of grass and earth that was more solid than mud, with Kazandak laid out before him. This alone wasn't unusual. Varrin had done some version of the ritual each morning since his chat with the Ravvenblaq Patriarch about communing with his blade. What was unusual was that he was the source of the weird soul itch I'd felt.

Over the last year and a half, I'd come to be very familiar with the souls of my party members. Varrin's soul was exceptionally stable and controlled. Steady and unyielding, the soul felt like it had a great weight to it, even when he went a bit berserk.

At the moment, however, his soul was a touch more erratic. Small sections along the edge would flare a few centimeters or a current in the flow around him would deviate. It was subtle and nowhere near the level of weird that the mimic had given off when it had tried to copy his soul presence. That had still been a pretty good facsimile overall, but what I was presently seeing was minuscule, comparatively.

[Here, we observe a wild Ravvenblaq engaged in a curious type of... soul training?]

[He is napping in front of his sword.]

I looked over my Bonded Familiar's soul, which looked like oil in water. It was always in motion, moving in many directions, but not with any haste. Beneath the rich platinum of the Delver levels I shared with him, his base soul was a dark green, although it had grown somewhat lighter as we'd spent time bonded. My own base layer was closer to an emerald color that matched my eyes, and I suspected that our connection was causing Grotto's soul to gradually shift in the direction of my own.

[Potential hobby number one: you could focus on our soul connection and try to figure out how we can make better use of it.]

[I have crafted a suite of analytic tools within the obelisk chamber to assist in functions dealing with our connection.]

[Sure, but how much progress have you made with those?]

[Very little,] he admitted.

[All your mental magic stuff has Spiritual elements. You could try to leverage some of that to figure it out.]

While Grotto digested that idea I turned to find Xim, but was distracted by a glimpse of movement near Varrin. I turned back and studied him for a few seconds, but couldn't see anything that had changed about either him or his environment. I noted the oddity and planned on keeping a closer eye on the man during his morning routine, then moved on toward the cleric.

Xim was also kneeling with her new scepter held in both hands. She was communing with Sam'lia, rather than a blade, and her patch of nature was more of the mud variety. Xim was unbothered, though, and had simply gone full swamp-lady and discarded all

clothes that weren't required for Eschen sensibilities, rather than deal with dirt-caked garments.

As for what Eschen sensibilities required, it didn't take much. Personally, I had on the armguard for Gracovus, a pair of linen trousers rolled up to my knees, and not a damn thing more. My brain grappled between feeling incredible freedom and having flashbacks to Grotto's Delve after fighting the Atrocidile.

Xim's soul was doing normal Xim-soul things, at least insofar as how it appeared while she was communing with a goddess from another Layer: a slow-motion inferno that pulsed with the beat of a godly heart and hungered to feed on the sins of the wicked. Very relaxing soul presence, overall.

[The untamed Xor'Drel can often be found in search of divine truth and wisdom.]

[She is napping with her scepter.]

[Isn't your attunement Divine?] I thought to him, absently grooming some more burs from my beard. Seriously, I was awake for five minutes and already finding more, where the fuck did they come from? [Could work on deepening that connection.]

[Yes, my attunement is Divine, and my patron deity is the System. There is little more that I can do to strengthen that connection.]

[Could try and get some revelations,] I offered. Grotto's tentacles groomed his feathers as he thought that over. I absently considered whether he was mirroring me.

[That is an interesting proposal. While I possess a wealth of knowledge and abilities granted by the System, they are not categorized as revelations. I am unaware of any such archetypically Divine gifts given by the System, however. Even if it were possible, I do not believe it could occur in the current phase.]

[Why not?]

[The System exists in the physical realm. While it serves as a patron for my attunement, it presently lacks appropriate access to the Divine to function in a traditionally deific manner.]

[Are you saying that the phase rollout will literally turn the System into a god? I thought all that stuff about the System being a god was a joke.]

[No, but it will allow it to harness divine energies on a much greater scale. How else do you believe it would be capable of assisting Delvers in ascending?]

[I guess I didn't really think about it. Well, seeking the divine as a hobby may need to be delayed until we get phase two things going.]

[Indeed.]

We then floated over to Etja, who was a hundred feet away from everyone else, dancing in the air. She moved gently to an unheard song, with small bursts of mana appearing around her, eyes shut tight in concentration. I could tell she was micro-casting some of her spells, but they felt different from her usual repertoire.

The caster's skills were a bit of a unique case. She had only five skill slots, but could combine any two of them together to form a new spell. She currently had fifteen combinations and was on the verge of being able to combo three at a time, giving her access to many more. At first, I thought that she had finally crossed that hurdle, but realized that what she was doing was more complex.

[Vanishingly rare and often misunderstood, the Nothosis may sometimes be seen refining her understanding of mana shaping.]

[She is... very good at that.]

[Yeah, I honestly had no idea she'd gotten this far.] A dozen small orbs appeared in the air, then burst into fragments, hissing as they dissipated. [I can't even tell which of her spells this is supposed to be, or whether it's a combination.]

[Magical Thinker does not tell you?]

[The ability doesn't trigger if I'm already familiar with the spell. Either this is something I've seen, or it isn't well-formed enough to be considered something new.]

[It cannot be new, she has no more skill slots.]

[Sure about that?] Grotto and I watched for another minute or so, but neither of us was confident enough to draw any conclusions. [Potential hobby number three: improve your mana-shaping capabilities.]

[I would need additional test subjects for that.]

I frowned and agreed that, for Grotto, that didn't seem like a solo activity. I also didn't want to break Etja's concentration, so we moved to Shog.

The true c'thon was, to no one's surprise, studying the art of the blade. He was the farthest from camp by several hundred feet and had single-handedly clear-cut an area the size of a small park. Vines, limbs, and entire small trees littered the ground and

floated in the swampy waters. There were no dead and dismembered critters, though, but the mystery of the missing prey was solved when I caught sight of some... leftovers in his beard.

[Occasionally, the swamp contains a predator that is foreign to the environment, released into the wild by irresponsible summoners. In this instance, we can observe a Grade 12 c'thon in possession of a disturbing amount of martial prowess decimating the local flora and fauna.]

[Why have you not dismissed him yet?]

I shrugged.

[Just wanted to hang out with Shog some. I'm also *very* interested in seeing how good he can get with those swords. Varrin said he might train him.]

[You do realize that c'thons are merciless killers who would ravage this world in search of any potent source of mana, slaughtering and consuming anyone who stands in their way?]

[Yeah, but Shog's alright.]

[The fiend is restrained by its misplaced respect for you, but should that leash slip, the death that results will be limited only by its power. Power that you seek to increase.]

[I thought you'd be happy that I was making use of the tools at my disposal.]

[What? Of course, I am. Strengthen the beast until it alone can destabilize nations, then set it loose on those who resist us! I am only encouraging you to be careful not to lose control near any of our own interests.]

[Glad we cleared that up. So, potential hobby number four: learn how to use a weapon.]

Grotto held up his feelers, furling and unfurling them, perhaps imagining the feel of a lethal tool within them. Eventually, he squinted at a rock, which rose into the air and shot over at Shog. My summon raised his saber and intercepted the projectile without looking in our direction, then kept hacking away at a bush.

[While I am more physically powerful than a mundane human, this form is ill-suited for Strength-based combat styles.]

[You can always adapt a new form, right? You made that little c'thon body pretty easily.]

[Adapting a form that is as physically potent as Shog would require that I consume resources and mana in a similar manner. It would be tiresome. This body subsists on ambient mana alone and is otherwise convenient for my daily tasks.]

[Cute, too.]

[The disarming effect has utility, yes.]

I considered taking Grotto to find Nuralie, but I had no idea where either of our Geulons were at the moment. I assumed she and Zura were off having a private discussion, so I decided not to traipse around the swamp and butt in. We began heading back toward the main camp area instead.

[Does any of that strike your fancy?]

[I believe I may need to diversify the way I engage in violence.]

The old me would have probably found fault with that sentiment, but in the world I now lived in, broadening your lethal skillset was just solid advice.

[Probably a good idea. Mental attacks aren't always a good matchup. You could always try out some other types of spells. Maybe get better at throwing rocks with your brain.]

[I was created with the skills that I possess. I have never been offered any more. It was never necessary to learn.]

[You probably know better than anyone that the System can be mysteriously selective in what it offers people. Deciding that you *want* new skills may be enough to nudge the System into showing you a few options. Otherwise, there are ways around having a skill directly presented to you. That's what Sam'lia and I did with my Gravity Anchor skill.]

[I do not believe I would need to go so far as forging something new. The System catalogs countless existing skills. I may be able to gain limited access to the library, given my status as a Bonded Familiar. In the meantime, I will direct the others to provide me with more substantive instruction in their relevant abilities, while also attempting to exploit our soul connection more effectively.]

[You were a Delve Core watching Delvers for like a bajillion years. How did you not pick up a bunch of knowledge about skills?]

[I did. However, there is a difference between knowledge and practice. Do not allow the illusion of competence earned from books to prevent you from seeking the guidance of experts.]

I paused and appraised the Delve Core, reevaluating my impression of him.

[You know, that's good advice.]

[It is. Now, I must begin crafting several user requests.]

Grotto didn't go anywhere, he just narrowed his eyes and began staring at invisible System screens. Zura and Nuralie appeared from nowhere, and Zura clapped her hands together.

"Now that we've had our rest," said the Zenithar, "I believe we will be able to pick up the pace today."

While we ran, I reviewed my Character screen for the first time in a while, trying to see where my biggest gaps were. Some may find this interesting, while others may only be concerned with the tales of my heroic deeds and ass-kickery. Those who have no interest in the character screen may skip ahead to the beginning of the next chapter without fear of missing anything. For those who stick around, I have provided condensed descriptions of skills and abilities.

Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel

Age: 1 (Physical Age 19. Actual Age: 36)

Delver Level: 6

Delve Record: Platinum 6

Special Delves Completed: 1

Vitals:

Health: 1220

Health Regeneration: 568/hour

Stamina: 400

Stamina Regeneration: 80/hour

Mana: 325

Mana Regeneration: 65/hour

Racial Bonuses and Birth Sign:

Race: Human

Subrace: Extradimensional Entity

Racial Bonus: +100% Crafting skill progression

Subracial Bonus: +100% Dimensional skill progression, +50% Dimensional resistance

Birth Sign: The Traveler

Birth Sign Bonuses:

Spectacular Vernacular: Learn languages real good

That's a Lot of Stats!: Earn stats through training up to 10.

Divinity:

Revelation of the Eye's Sight: Grants See ability

Revelation of the Eye's Reveal: Grants Reveal ability

Stats:

Strength 10

Agility 10

Speed 10

Fortitude 40

Intelligence 21

Wisdom 26

Charisma 10

Luck 6

Stat Evolutions:

Strength 10: Nimean Weapon - Add Oblivion Orb to STR attacks

Agility 10: Point Blank - Better hammer throws in melee

Speed 10: Rapid Blocks - Block with double Speed

Fortitude 10: I Can Do This All Day - Double HP and SP regen

Fortitude 10 (Super): We Can Do This All Day - Allies regen health or stam when you take damage

Fortitude 20: Body of Theseus - Crit & stat effect reduction, but maybe also turning into homogenous flesh monstrosity?

Fortitude 40: Just a Flesh Wound - Immune to Bleeding, can regen missing body parts

Intelligence 10: Magical Thinker - See a spell? Know the spell.

Intelligence 20: Coordinated Thinker - Double INT for spatial and dimensional comprehension.

Wisdom 10: Fast Recharge - Double mana regen

Wisdom 20: Where's Nuralie? - Concentrate to reveal stealthed enemies. When used with See can also reveal invisible/ illusion enemies.

Charisma 10: Center of Attention - Better taunts

Active Skills (8/10):

Dispel: Get rid of some magical reality

Explosion!: Explode some of reality

Oblivion Orb: Delete some of reality

Shortcut: Teleport around some reality

Homing Weapon: Throw an enemy-seeking hammer and it comes back reality

Life Warden: Take damage in place of an ally reality

Dimensional Summon: SHOG'TUATHA! REALITY

Gravity Anchor: Become immovable, suck everything in real hard reality.

Passive Skills (3/4):

Archmage: +25% Mana, +25% Mana Regen, +10 to effective intrinsic when casting

Bonded Familiar: GROTTTO!

Who Needs a Cleric? (Aura): Healing aura, locate allies, expands range for buffs

Intrinsic Skills (8/10):

Blunt 22

Dimensional Magic 21

Dungeoneering 20

Mystical Magic 12

Physical Magic 13

Shields 21

Heavy Armor 13

Leadership 6

Intrinsic Skill Evolutions:

Dimensional 10: Pocket Closet - Pocket Dimension

Dimensional 20: Checkpoint - Make waypoints and long-range portals

Dungeoneering 10: Additional Pylons - Cheaper to build Delve shit

Dungeoneering 20: Engineered Terror - Scarier Delve shit

Mystical 10: Mana-shaping efficiency - what it says on the label

Physical 10: More! MORE!!! - Phys skill cooldowns reduced

Blunt 10: Hammer Throw - Speed and distance of thrown hammers mega better

Blunt 20: Hammerang - Can throw hammers in silly ways

Shields 10: Megablock - Block even more dmg

Shields 20: UNSELECTED (Sinful Arlo)

Heavy Armor 10: UNSELECTED (Indecisive Arlo)

Attunement:

Dimensional

Languages:

English

Hiwardian

Loward

Imperial

Notable Achievements:

Dumping - spend 5 stats get 1 free!

Exposure Therapy: Poison - 25% poison res

I Don't Attack You, You Attack Me - Sometimes stuns mean people

Strength of Xor'Drel - Harder to fear

This is Bullshit! - Easier to taunt strong people

Notable Equipment:

Ring of Healing - double health regen

Traveler's Amulet - jack shit atm

Rocket Man's C'thonic Feather Boa of the Cat's Pajamas - Sexier, more renown

Outlaw's C'thonic Leather Vest of the Dirty Muffin Toy - Scarier, some stam regen

Somnres (War Hammer) - Summonable, copies itself, and shapeshifts

Gracorvus (Shield) - flies, floats, modular, atrocildile roar