

We walked across the surface of the sea behind the languid steps of Zenithar Zura, but the water formed a channel that swept us to the shore in under ten seconds. No one spoke, and as I set foot on the dark sand of the beach I looked back over my shoulder at the scene behind us.

The waters that had so violently churned and frothed as battleship-wide tentacles rent the Littan vessels had calmed. The only evidence of the devastation was scattered planks, barrels, other broken ship parts, and destroyed cargo. There were no cries of pain or pleas for help, no voices to be heard at all. Not even a floating corpse to be seen, as though the crews had simply vanished like they had when I was taken to the Second Layer.

I reflected on the experience, a bitter taste in the back of my throat rising. I'd adjusted to the violence necessary for Delving with ease. Slaying monsters and beasts that attacked on sight was an easy moral choice. Even the part of me that wanted to respect the creatures that I hunted by making use of their bodies was satisfied when the Delves took in their mana and essence. What I'd just witnessed, what I'd just been a part of, wasn't the violence of Delving. It was the violence of war. I found it to be more... difficult to process.

For Yaretzi, I felt nothing. The absence of any emotion over killing the Littan bothered me more than the act of deleting half his brain had. The level 3s that I'd slain weighed more heavily on me, especially after hearing what the surviving Littan Delves had to say.

I didn't regret my actions, but I found flaws in my justifications. I couldn't pretend that what I'd done was virtuous. I doubted it had even been necessary. No. Those Littans had been a threat, a very *minor* threat, and I'd eliminated it. Yaretzi had me down to the dregs of my HP by the time Varrin had shown up, so it was possible the level 3's could have swung the balance in his favor. It was also possible that they would have abandoned their leader much as the other Delves had as soon as it was shown that the level 17 was no longer in total control of the situation. There may have been a way to avoid doing what I'd done.

If I were placed back in the situation, I'd probably make the same choice. I wanted to make sure I understood where that line was in my head, though. At what point did I reclassify an aggressor from being as dangerous as an angry toddler—like the mundane soldiers—to being something dangerous enough to kill? I wasn't sure there was a good answer to that.

Either way, the fates of those Delvers may have already been sealed. For me, though, killing a person minutes before their demise or decades before wasn't much of a difference. Everyone died at some point, and a person's temporal relationship to that universal law of mortality wasn't a valid way to reduce culpability. It was still murder. The fact that Zura decimated the whole fleet shortly afterward didn't change the equation for me.

While I wanted to carefully consider how I made those types of life and death decisions, I ultimately let the emotion of the deaths roll away from me. At the end of the day, they had been enemy combatants trying to capture or kill my party, not misguided children in need of a scolding. They'd made their choices. I'd made mine. I didn't feel *good* about it, but I wasn't going to lose any sleep over it either.

We walked across the beach and through the outskirts of the city of Geulangal. The town was Eschendur's largest port, but we never set foot inside its walls. The docks were empty of any people. Cargo ships bobbed in the water, unused and in varying states of disrepair. The buildings around were abandoned, the roads untraveled. It was a ghost town.

While our silent caravan made its way past the city, I distracted myself by going through a wave of notifications I'd been ignoring since my fight with Yaretzi had ended.

Your party has slain Yaretzi of Seaward: Delver, Level 17!

Your party receives no System-issued rewards for this victory.

Your Dimensional Magic skill has increased to level 21!

Your Mystical Magic skill has increased to level 11!

Your Mystical Magic skill has increased to level 12!

Your Physical Magic skill has increased to level 12!

Your Physical Magic skill has increased to level 13!

Your Blunt skill has increased to level 22!

Your Shields skill has increased to level 21!

Your Heavy Armor skill has increased to level 12!

Your Heavy Armor skill has increased to level 13!

Your Leadership skill has increased to level 2!

Your Leadership skill has increased to level 3!

Your Leadership skill has increased to level 4!

Your Leadership skill has increased to level 5!

Your Leadership skill has increased to level 6!

You have defeated a Delver more than ten levels above your own. You have earned the *This is Bullshit!* achievement!

This is Bullshit!: While your opponents blame exploits, unbalanced mechanics, or a laggy rural broadband connection, everyone else knows the truth: they sucked! How else could you have won? Skill? Please. You now inspire greater rage in your superior foes.

Distraction attempts you make against enemies who do not perceive you as a significant threat are twice as effective.

You have survived being targeted by a deific skill! You are granted +1 LCK!

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

That was a *lot* of intrinsic skill levels. More than half of the amount I'd gotten by training with Khigra for three months straight. I'd never seen so many at once.

The biggest jump was to Leadership, which was a skill I'd picked up recently and hadn't focused on.

Leadership is your ability to effectively coordinate, organize, and inspire those around you, as well as determine who is best suited for any given task.

Unlike other intrinsics, which listed concrete bonuses from leveling the base skill, Leadership's benefits were ambiguous, at best. There were, however, many examples of the skill providing escalating party buffs with its evolutions. That was right up my alley. It was no surprise that it advanced the most since skills under 10 were far easier to level, but it was still an enormous climb for one fight.

The achievement was nice, although it didn't seem anywhere near as potent as some of my others. Time would tell whether it made much of a difference, but having more tools to antagonize dangerous foes and keep their attention away from the rest of the party was always welcome.

As far as the buffs to Luck, it had been a while since I'd seen my training ability come back into play. Luck was the only stat that I had left under 10, despite the party's best efforts at figuring out a way to level it that didn't place us in the path of omnipotent beings that could slaughter us with a glance. I was more than happy to get a couple of fresh points. The first point was from being targeted by Thunderdome. As for the second, I wasn't positive who or what the divine being was that noticed me. I suspected it might be Geul since the spell that Zura had used was called Geul's Embrace and she was essentially the deity's high priestess.

Our walk past the city had the vibe of a funeral march and I was reluctant to be the first to break the silence, but my curiosity overrode whatever sense of decorum I possessed. I turned to Etja.

"Did you get a bunch of skill levels and a point to Luck?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"I did!" Etja whisper-shouted. Her attempt at matching my volume failed pretty spectacularly. "Everything I have went up by 1! My Dimensional Magic is at 20 now, but I haven't looked over the evolution options. I'm glad *something* finally got me another point of Luck. I was really sick of playing cards."

"I also received several skill levels," said Nuralie, appearing beside us. "The Luck as well." Pause. "I enjoyed the dice games, though."

"My favorite was the arena," I said. "We all still have room to improve the stat, so we can keep gambling. Who knows? Maybe we just didn't gamble *hard* enough. As for the divinity that noticed us, do you think it was from Zura's spell? Geul herself looking down upon us?"

Nuralie tilted her head in consideration.

“That is... complicated,” she said.

“How so?”

Her features tensed as she struggled over something internally, then looked at Zura’s back for a long moment.

“We can speak on it another time,” she said. “I think you are correct, more or less.”

“Don’t let *me* stymie any theological discussion,” Zura said from ahead of us, still looking forward. The butt of her halberd clinked against the stone road with every step. “I’m familiar with your story, Nuralie Vyxmeldo’a.”

Nuralie tensed at the words, and Zura stopped and turned.

“Worry not,” said the Zenithar. “It’s no business of mine to share your history, but if my presence is an impediment to your—Pause—dialogue, then know that there is little you could say that I’ve not heard before. Part of being a Zenithar is accepting that there are many ways for one to revel in the divine.”

I looked between the two losons, somewhat lost.

“My thoughts on doctrine hold no weight,” Nuralie said. “It is unimportant, Zenithar. Please, continue.” She gestured back at the road.

“No weight?” said Zura, looking surprised. “Why would that be?”

“I hold no rank,” said Nuralie, as though she were stating the obvious.

“Ah,” said Zura. “You mean that your thoughts hold no weight in an *official* capacity?” Nuralie nodded. “I try to give weight to the opinions of all followers of the Eschenden,” Zura continued. “If you would feel more comfortable speaking while holding a title, I am happy to appoint you as a Deacon.”

“I-” Nuralie hesitated. “Right here?”

“Why not?” said Zura. “I may appoint you Deacon of any of the three churches in my capacity as Zenithar. If you wished for something more advanced from Deijin or Hyrach you would need someone else, though.” She shrugged.

“A Deacon must have a revelation,” said Nuralie.

“You have one, do you not?”

“It is”—Pause—“incomplete.”

Zura considered.

“You received insight into a truth of the world, correct?”

“There were many who did not believe so.”

“It is not a matter of believing,” said the Zenithar. “I sense your revelation as clearly as I sense his.” She gestured at me. “Or hers.” She gestured at Xim. “No one in the Church can doubt that you have one. If they refuse to heed the wisdom you have been granted, that is their own folly to grapple with.”

“But there is no manifestation,” said Nuralie. A bit of frustration was creeping into her voice, which was a rare thing for the loson. “I cannot use what has been given to me.”

“Receiving a gift and knowing what to do with it are different things,” said Zura. “With every passing year, I find new understanding in my own revelations. They are not static things, to be mastered and wielded. They breathe and change as you and I do. A revelator who claims to fully understand their gift is farther from the path than one who has received no insight at all.”

The Zenithar watched Nuralie process her guidance. The conversation was also generating a few questions of my own, but I didn’t want to interrupt.

“Even if I wished to become a Deacon,” said Nuralie, “because of my revelation, I cannot choose a church.”

The Zenithar paused and blinked.

“What an odd way to phrase that,” she said. “Not that you have trouble choosing, but that you *cannot*. I spoke with your village priest after you became stranded in Hiward and he told me a little about the revelation you received. I do not doubt that his heart was in the right place, but I think that his explanation may have been... biased. I would love to hear how *you* would describe it.”

Nuralie shifted uncomfortably but didn’t speak.

“We can talk privately later if you wish,” said Zura. “Or not at all, if that is what you desire. If you do not accept a position as Deacon, however, it will be more difficult for your allies to traverse Eschendur. You know that outsiders may not wander without escort, and escorts must be ordained. Any escort that would be provided to you would be less”—Pause—“*understanding* of the tasks you wish to undertake.”

“How much do you know about why we’re here?” I asked. “Because it feels like a lot.”

“My insight is vast and mysterious, aided by the gods themselves!” said Zura, raising her arms to the sky dramatically. She looked me over, then gave me a wink. “Umi-Doo sent me a missive,” she said, dropping her arms, halberd thudding into the ground.

“Oh, that makes sense,” I said.

“I thought I might receive special dispensation,” said Nuralie. “To serve as their escort.”

“That is a messy solution,” said Zura. “Special dispensation carries with it many restrictions. You would need to submit a specific itinerary detailing where you will be traveling and why. Do you wish to have your every move scrutinized and documented?”

“That is... not ideal.”

Zura took a deep breath and let out the longest sigh I’d ever seen anyone give.

“There is *one* title that I might grant for your circumstance,” said the Zenithar. “It is a neutral position, unaffiliated with any one of the churches, and carries with it *more* rights and privileges than an ordinary Deacon. It is normally reserved for times of crisis and handed out only to those of significant skill and personal power. A third-stage revelator has been the requirement in the past, but that is not a strict prerequisite.

“It would appear to me that we *are* in a time of crisis,” Zura continued. “Littans encroach on our borders and, if what you have told Umi-Doo is true, powerful beings will soon threaten all of creation, Eschendur included. As for the second requirement, while you may not be a third-stage revelator, that guidance was written *before* the Creation Delve was discovered. I expect you would fare well in a contest against one in the third stage using your strength as a Delver alone.”

“What is the title?” asked Nuralie. Zura leaned in slightly, and the two of them paused in unison before she answered.

“Inquisitor.”