

Cobbled road clacked underfoot as Alpha ran towards the ever moving fight, every movement ability he had being used in moderation to keep him moving at peak human speed with just enough reaction time to avoid ambushes of the corrupted or sudden carts of cabbages flying everywhere.

In his hand, Gamma rambled on like an unwanted narrator to every little thing with the tone of an exaggerated tourist. A barrel? It was a 'oaken cylindrical masterpiece with subpar iron banding'. A store window? It was advertising a 'hideous bonnet that a headless zombie wouldn't wear' and Alpha was oddly okay with it.

It was a sort of strange familiar rambling that broke the silence. An unending stream of noise to show support, to show Alpha wasn't alone. Still, it didn't exactly help when Gamma got excited at a ball gown dress in a window and insisted they 'pause the boss battle' to try it on for size.

"An Echo is no big deal! If it hasn't driven everyone mad or developed a plague out of nowhere, it's not really a strong Echo when all is said and done!" Gamma complained as Alpha ignored the gown.

He preferred shirts and pants, but only because it looked like a hassle to sit down with a dress that was twice his own volume. Then again, perhaps he would get more skills in combat if he had such a cumbersome outfit slowing him down?

A thought for another time.

"What can these things even do? I never saw any in the capitol," Alpha asked as he turned down a corner, seeing he was still behind the chase as destruction and confused bystanders looked around in mild shock or annoyance.

Shock from the outsiders, annoyance from the locals.

Alpha had never encountered anything that made his insides crawl like this, but Alpha had also done his best to ignore all system prompts and signs of trouble.

He only ended up in the royal knights as a squire by a series of events that started off as needing money then being spotted for his talent then simply accepting being recruited...

The sword in his hand - once a longsword, now something more a scimitar to allow Alpha to run easier - thought about it, the faintest impressives of eyes on the handle, outlines and marks on the metal that implied Gamma 'could' see. Alpha was well aware by using his own talents, Gamma used absolute mana senses to experience the world. He hoped Gamma had that power from the start or they would have been in a state of sensory deprivation until they had.

"Common powers? They infect things mostly. People are the biggest target, but I've seen tools, buildings, elements, forests, and junk all become tainted. Another common power is they all eat

each other,” Gamma said, sounding like he was having trouble recalling the exact details through years of memories.

Alpha had seen something similar from silver-headed elders and began to worry a little about this sword that felt close like a forgotten friend.

How long had he been wandering around?

Alpha watched as ahead the Echo shifted like rubber to move around a building, trying to dodge out of sight. He was more confused by how once familiar streets were rapidly realigning themselves like a jigsaw puzzle to shorten the distance between himself and the monster.

Stores he knew weren’t nearby showed up, replacing larger buildings with small ones, shifting flat roofs for awkward slanted ones to trip the monster up.

“Any weaknesses?” Alpha asked as he saw a bunch of the Echo’s followers rush him, their souls completely devoured. He swung Gamma out of reflex and his usual strength nearly tore the street up and Gamma let out a strangled cry as a wave of force erupted forward like a ripple of kinetic energy.

Alpha stared at the trench he had carved ahead of him, sending the corrupted scattering like bowling pins, knocking out the lucky ones but doing internal damage to others.

“Such destruction...” Gamma whistled.

“That was not my intent,” Alpha said quickly as he checked all his available menus but he couldn’t spot what had caused what felt like a power multiplier of nearly two to his strength.

He frowned as his energy flowed up Gamma and back into him carrying something a little more, but it was being filtered through sparse mists of Delta’s mana which briefly showed after he had attacked.

“We’re supposed to be a thing. Legendary warrior and legendary weapon, remember? Are you surprised the brats didn’t design our powers to support one another?” Gamma asked with annoyance and shook themselves out into a spear which wasn’t great for Alpha as he was more of a sword person. The spear looked basic enough with a red tassel near the spear head.

Alpha knew the spear form could do something, but Gamma wasn’t ‘letting’ him see it.

“Still, we should be doing more but this mana cloud is in the way. Let me just...” Gamma said and Alpha didn’t have time to warn him as the spear tried to absorb Delta’s mana, prodding the cloud like poking a cat who was facing away.

Like poking a cat, the result was predictable.

“Ow! Ow! Stop it! Who bit me?! Which one of you punks are pinching me?” Gamma yelled, shivering as the orange mana fought back. Alpha tried to warn him but he was close to the Echo now, its back turned to him as it fought off Ruli with barely equal strength.

Ruli was scary and amazing at the same time. Her aura was hot like brimstone but she had the core of a person that made her come off as feeling safe to be around.

Alpha got closer, raising Gamma who was saying something, but Alpha had locked on to the space where the creature’s head met its body. He was going to-

He was going to...

He blinked, gone from Durence to a dark space that felt safe, familiar, and quiet. Alpha stared ahead in a hazy room as he sat before two screens, one of which showed a game almost playing itself. A phone nearby remained silent, nobody calling or messaging.

Alpha ignored it as on one of the screens, an avatar made of black elastic skin seemed to be fighting a horde of buff demon women, slaying them like a horde and a flashing experience bar continued to grow. He couldn’t see the walls or ceiling but it was like outside the immediate circle of light, there was only inky blackness.

Alpha relaxed, the numbers going up as he began to throw away items in his character’s inventory to make space for the clear upgrades.

The other screen had a guide with defined builds, clear and cut. No need to experiment or push what was already capable of beating the game. The horde began to include fire mages and murderous tailors.

Each one could have new items! Pushing his leveling to a higher level.

Alpha began to slouch, the glow of the screens washing over him as the phone remained blank in the silence.

Gamma knew this would happen.

Well, he sort of knew, but he was wise and sagely in his years so what he expected to happen usually happened except when it didn’t, which didn’t happen often due to how wise he was.

Gamma patted himself on the back. His spear form tended to make him more of a lad, eager to stab and thrust, but he was now stuck watching Alphie coming to a dead stop as the Echo’s domain washed over him.

The domain was like a field of the Echo, its range of infection. Gamma easily rebuffed it as did others, but not Alpha.

“This Echo is weak, my dude. You should have enough progress to fight it off. It’s like you haven’t done any quests at all,” Gamma said with exasperation as if Alpha could hear him in the state he was.

Infection wasn’t likely to happen to Alpha from such a weak Echo but it had enough power to strike and make Alphie’s more annoying habits take forefront. Alpha’s desire and methodology would sync up with what the Echo offered.

If you loved food, a glutton Echo could use that. If you loved art? An Echo could use that. The more extreme of an emotion, the more it could latch on. Grief and despair tended to be rather thick doorways to Echos.

Around the Echo, the orange mana flaked to gray as it was stilled. Magic had the same outcome overtime and people’s strength eventually withered before the creature. Echoes were sinkholes and Gamma found them tedious. Ignoring *where* they came from, Gamma just found they all lacked something to be likable for the most part.

To be fair, what they were missing was each other and they certainly had been busy eating each other recently, but not this one. This one was pretty sad.

The Echo turned and it sniffed the air.

“A host. A perfect host... just need to gut those little bits inside,” it said as it snapped onto Alpha’s unmoving form. It flowed around the scary woman that would fold Gamma like a napkin and slithered rapidly towards Alpha like an oil spill.

It would have taken Alpha. It would have made a terrifying new Echo with the power of Alpha behind it. A mad-laughing child with the skills of a dozen men and women. It could easily rise to the powers around it, having access to the Sister’s powers and grow rapidly. It should do that because it was rather weak.

Would have, could have, should have.

Gamma exploded with a rush of energy, his energy shearing the Echo so deeply it screamed, flowing away in panic as Gamma began to glow.

“Usually I avoid things. I really don’t want your drama or trouble,” Gamma admitted as he floated up, still gripped by Alpha. Technically, he was being ‘wielded’ by someone, so he could do some fancy stuff. The thing hissed as Gamma shifted to a new form.

"You mock me?" the Echo demanded, "you mock Tomt Tecken?" it demanded as Gamma became a golden spoon.

"No, this isn't me mocking," Gamma said honestly. "You're so ugly, your portraits hang themselves," Gamma added, voice softer and musical. "That was me mocking you," she finished. Suddenly, she twisted her form and the Echo's arm, everything from the elbow down was scooped away like ice-cream and the Echo didn't scream so much as shriek from every pore of its body.

Gamma shifted back to a sword, only able to use one attack in that form, and watched as it flailed, grasping at the stump, the flesh bubbling and stretching but refusing to heal or regrow.

"What is this?!" the monster said in fear.

Hm, fear. It had been a while since enemies showed that. Not since the good old days of Queenie.

"Rot in hell, you mangy old hag," Gamma said out of habit whenever they thought of the woman.

"Did you know that my power lets me make anything into a weapon? I can also enhance weapons to higher and higher ranks of power? Turns out if you take a spoon far enough, you can scoop out little bits of gods? Imagine what it could do to you!" Gamma said brightly as they tried to jolt Alpha out of his vulnerable state.

The Echo was about to do something when it erupted in bright blue flames from a Fire Mage who leaked so much magical power that Gamma had to blink.

"This place is weird," they said but something moving around the edges of the building suddenly lashed out, a thin tendril of the Echo, and it pierced Alpha's neck, slithering in like an eel.

"Oi!" Gamma said, alarm filling their form as Alpha's veins began to turn black.

It was like the idiot hadn't even done 10 quests!

Delta paused as she slowly put a hand to her chest, feeling something ache. She followed the bond to someone outside, but she knew it well by now.

"Alpha," she said and rushed to her entrance, stopping at the edge as she stretched her sense to the trouble brewing beyond. She couldn't see much up the stairs but her mana had stretched further, stronger in the forest, thinner in the town.

Alpha was there but he was dimming like a lightbulb going out. Shadows crept over his being, suffocating the bonds between Alpha and Delta.

It was like a beautiful painting being tarred over with someone using their hands, erasing what made Alpha himself and replacing it with a thin offensive imitation.

“Alpha!” she cried as the feeling of losing someone became a real possibility. She could rush out her contracts but they wouldn’t make it in time. Alpha was only being sustained by something else, a familiar ‘feeling’ that stopped Alpha crumbling into the influence of the Echo.

The power was doing something but it wasn’t ‘good’ at it, as if it didn’t overly concern itself with helping people normally.

“Let him go!” she demanded, banging the barrier with her fists. The shockwave travelled across the forest and town like a sonar and she saw briefly... everything.

A flash of an image appeared to her, Alpha with veins so black it looked sickly, his eyes turning black, his already thin body becoming wasted under the Echo, his calm but kind soul churning into something inhuman.

Delta dropped her fists to her side as someone assaulted her student. Hurt him. Violated Alpha’s body.

Alpha’s image looked over at her as if able to also see her.

A glistening trail fell down once cheek, gray as if filled with ash.

The Echo had made Alpha cry.

Delta raised a hand and pushed on the barrier. She merged fully into her Dungeon mode and mana swirled around her like a storm as the air crackled, the walls of the Dungeon inhaling and exhaling like a living being.

“Move.” she warned, voice tight and spiderwebs cracked across the barrier of her entrance.

Nu and Prim were saying something, warning her of something, of being known as an abomination. Delta knew this would only bring her trouble. Her fingers spread out, allowing her to feel the barrier once more.

But what sort of teacher would she be if she didn’t absolutely destroy the predator preying on her students? As she dug into the barrier, her fingers grasping the ‘glass’ keeping her in, she could admire the work that went into it.

A mixture of Sister and Brother, the energies mingling in a swirling manner like a spinning lock to prevent the Dungeon from figuring out the password.

It was, however, designed for the Dungeons that came before Delta. Delta simply grasped the spinning lock and guessed the password.

“One, two, three, four,” she said and to her utter shock, the thing popped off its mana array and the barrier collapsed before her. Delta decided not to shake her head at the password.

Either it was clever in simplicity or stupid in its complexity.

It wasn't just numbers. It was the very concepts of the number, able to separate the numbers into groups, but also the numbers needed to have meaning to the password. Delta simply had herself and others on her mind.

Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta. One, two, three, and four. Most Dungeons wouldn't have important things to match the password until they were at least level 40, grouping their floors in tens. But by then, natural Dungeon development would make the idea of escaping so repulsive that they wouldn't try.

She flexed and took a step up the stairs. Nothing stopped her.

Delta took another step and nothing stopped her.

Something should have, every inch of her cried out at this fact, but nothing stopped her now. All around her, a torrent of her mana rushed out and Delta rode the wave with a determined look.

Nu stared as Delta left the Dungeon space, using a tunnel of Mana like a lifeline to sustain her actions. In response, he turned from his preferred form of a screen with floating hands to that blasted human form once more, assuming control of the Dungeon with Prim sliding into his advisor role.

“No, take me back! I don't want your stuff! It stinks of edge!” Prim cried out and Nu shot her an annoyed look.

“Delta just turned us into the biggest targets of the world to save one idiot kid and all you can do is complain of my setup?” Nu demanded and Prim thought about it.

“The fact you're surprised this happened says more of you than it does of me,” she responded bluntly and Nu had to bite his tongue to stop a rude word coming out.

“Is there any benefit? Any good news?” he asked and Prim shifted to a green window to show a notification.

‘The Dungeon of Delta has broken its boundaries and escaped its limits. This Dungeon is now an Abomin- Error. Goddess detected. This is now the Church of Delta. Praise by her name. All faith converted into mana. All donations turned into resources. Church tax is automatically deducted. Church of Delta has a high grade Dungeon to test the faithful. Contained. Aware. Working as intended.’

“How does that work? We’re still a Dungeon with no barrier,” Nu said slowly.

‘The church will act as a barrier. This is no different than allowing pocket spaces or domains of gods inside their buildings for purposes. Saints can be appointed, church doctrines can be appoint- error. Doctrine of Delta found. ‘Be Kind, be Ready’

This was followed by what clearly was a symbol of the ‘church’, a sigil with the radiance of the sun, the center taken up by a triangle that looked chaotic and unpredictable, the inner layers of orange but around the edge were symbols that Nu represented himself, Prim, Delta, and Alpha.

“I just want to watch idiots fall into a pit and break their necks,” Nu sighed.

‘Churches still do that. They just call it something like ‘divine punishment’ or something’
Prim said, trying to cheer him up.

It didn’t help.