

“Grotto’s hiding something.”

Nuralie turned away from the ancient and disorganized art gallery she’d been watching intently, raising an eyeridge at my statement.

“Everyone hides things,” the loson said. Her expression was hard to read in the dim lighting, even with the enhanced eyesight my divine blessing gave me. Nuralie was the *only* person I had trouble seeing when the lights were low, and it had little to do with her black leathers or her dark sable skin and scales.

“Yeah,” I said, “but putting aside general commentary on humanity’s love of secrets, Grotto’s been pretty stingy with his advice lately.”

Nuralie paused. “Grotto hides more than others,” she admitted, then turned back to her vigil.

The rest of our party, Xim, Varrin, and Etja, all slept while me and Nuralie kept watch over the gallery. It was a strange thing to find in the depths of a platinum Delve, but everything one found within the depths of a platinum Delve was strange.

The room where our allies caught some kip was a dead end, with no other entrances or exits other than the one we guarded. We’d chosen it not just for that reason, but also because the room had only been *partially* full of the clutter of vases, wall paintings, reliefs, ancient weapons, armor, ornate stone furniture, sculptures, statues, effin’ *dolls*, and all sorts of other shit that this entire leg of the Delve was absolutely stuffed full of.

The room had looked like it belonged to my brother, whom I’d given an armchair diagnosis of third-stage hoarder to back on Earth. Compared to the rest of the place, it was practically barren.

So, we’d taken the liberty of designating it as our bedroom for the night and promptly broken everything that was inside. We’d smashed, bashed, crushed, and ground every priceless relic into smithereens. Only once no individual piece larger than my hand remained did we decide it was safe to sleep.

Because anything inside this Delve...

Anything

Could be a fucking mimic.

And these weren’t cute mimics. They weren’t silly treasure chests with a tongue hanging out or a sword with a very tail-like belt strap that purred when you reached for it. No,

these were perfect copies; completely dormant and unidentifiable until you leaned a little too close to an incredibly detailed triptych to admire its masterful brushwork. Then, it grows a pair of monstrous jaws big enough to chomp your whole head off in one go.

I'd never seen a painting try to commit murder before coming into this Delve, and now I'd seen it three times. I'd had no desire to see it, but I saw it regardless. My appreciation of art had been forever changed, and I'd be haunted by the subtle suspicion that every woodblock print I encountered from hereon out would seek to end my life in a violent manner.

Everyone else in the party didn't seem to have the same problem. *Just stay away from the art!* they'd said. I harrumphed at that. Harrumphed!

No threat, be it man, beast, or bloodthirsty amphora would keep me from engaging with the visual pleasures. I may have been a violent masochist with unresolved trauma hellbent on a quest for vengeance against a pair of dark gods, but dammit I was a sophisticated one!

All that to say, I did not like this Delve. It was like walking through the candy aisle, where *one* of the chocolates was poisoned. You could eat as many as you liked, and they were free! But one would definitely kill you... by ripping your guts out with its nine-inch fangs. The whole thing got me heated.

"Are you ok?" asked Nuralie, and I took a deep breath.

"Huh?" I said, shaking my head to clear my thoughts.

"You looked angry."

"I *am* angry," I said. "I'm angry at the injustice of this place."

"I'd ask if you want to talk about it," said Nuralie, "but I don't want to hear any more about," pause, "the exaggerated sexual features of early fertility deities."

"The place where the claws sprang out from was totally inappropriate!"

"Did I say the opposite of what I meant to say?" Pause. "Because I'm hearing *more* about the thing I didn't want to hear about."

"How do they think thoughts?" I asked, and Nuralie pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. "They don't have brains. I smashed the head right open on the one that was an uncanny valley clone of Varrin, and it turned into a puddle of slime and slid away."

"Maybe they *don't* think," said Nuralie.

“Nothing too deep,” I said, “but they must have some level of consciousness. Their actions are so complex, so premeditated. Do they know that imitating an exemplar of subtractive sculpture will draw me in, or do they copy random things until they ensnare me in their web?”

A deep voice came from behind me.

“Maybe it’s magic, Arlo,” said Varrin, and I turned to see him approaching, rubbing the sleep from one eye. He was still out of his armor, wearing only a thin pair of linen leggings, leaving his ghostly pale chest and arms exposed. Despite the basement-dweller skin tone that came naturally to Hiwardians, Varrin was as fit and well-muscled as they came. I couldn’t help but give the nearly seven-foot-tall man a quick up and down with my eyes.

“How do you get your shoulders that big?” I asked. “I’ve always wanted bigger shoulders.”

“Hush, Arlo,” came Xim’s smooth and upbeat tone. “You’re jacked, too. You can *both* be big muscly boys.”

The rose-skinned Cleric walked out from behind a pile of broken furniture, already dressed in her thick robes and chainmail, complete with a blood-red tabard that sported a dark and mind-warping symbol. It shifted and changed when you looked at it. Her old tabard hadn’t done that, but we’d all gotten a few upgrades that were flashier than our starting gear from the year before.

“Your beard’s bigger,” said Nuralie, looking between the two of us.

“Varrin doesn’t have a beard,” I said.

“Yes.” Pause. “So what I said is true.”

“You’ve made a good lawyer,” I said, then looked to Xim. “Is Etja still sleeping?”

“She is. I’m starting to wonder if golems need extra rest for some reason, or if she’s just generally a sleepyhead.”

“Not a sleepyhead!” said Etja from out of sight, her normally cheery voice laced with the grit of the newly awakened. “Delving is soporific!”

Xim frowned at me.

“Ever since you gave her that thesaurus, I don’t know what she’s saying half the time.”

“It means sleep-inducing,” said Varrin. “Tending to cause sleep.”

“We’re having very different reactions,” I said. “I couldn’t sleep in here if I tried.”

“Do you even need to sleep anymore?” asked Xim. “What’s your Fortitude at?”

“Thirty-eight!” I put my hands on my hips and took my very best power pose. “Two more points, and I get a new evolution.”

A sinister voice entered my mind to give me its opinion on my build choices.

[Be sure that this new evolution does not continue your descent into becoming an unearthly amalgamation of inhuman cells and tissue,] Grotto thought to us.

The bonded Delve Core wasn’t present in the Delve with us, busying himself with projects inside my Pocket Closet to avoid us, among other things. By this point, the extra-dimensional inventory space was so vast that the only way it was still a closet was if it were a walk-in for God Himself. Despite being hidden deep within the depths of my labyrinthine fortress, divorced from this realm of reality, Grotto could still psychically communicate with us when he felt like it.

“The flavor text on *Body of Theseus* is just that, Grotto. Flavor text. My lame-o human cells are fine.”

[I am the one monitoring your bodily functions, and observing your cellular mass transform as your Fortitude continues to grow. The ability’s critical hit and debuff reduction is a powerful boon, but I grow concerned over the cost.]

“I feel fine,” I said. “And I’m monitoring those things as well, the old fashioned way,” I tapped myself on the head, “with my noggin”

[A ‘noggin’ that is now forty percent unidentifiable organic substance, homogenous in nature, but capable of fulfilling any specialized function that your body requires. Should you not be more concerned that the alien substance is affecting your thought process, especially regarding itself?]

I chewed that one over for a bit in my head. I wasn’t as flippant about it as I let on. I did have some serious concerns, but the decision had been made. I couldn’t un-evolve a stat, and I wasn’t going to let my Fortitude flag, since it was my bread-and-butter stat. Unscrambled eggs, and all that.

[Additionally,] Grotto continued, [you know that I am aware of your thoughts, and yet you continue to speak as though I am not. I am not hiding anything, for I make no effort to

convince you that I have no secrets. I have many secrets, and the secrets that I hold are unsuited for your underdeveloped minds. The truths that are contained within me would wreak havoc upon this world! Their very utterance would cause entire empires to crumble!]

I imagined Grotto waving his downy tentacles in the air as he embraced the melodrama.

“As long as it’s the Littan Empire,” said Nuralie, “feel free to tell us.”

“Are there any other empires?” I asked.

“Davah was an empire long ago,” said Varrin. “Now it’s divided into tribal regions.”

“Maybe,” said Nuralie. “No one’s seen a Davahn in decades.”

“So it’s impossible for entire empires, plural, to crumble,” I said, “since there’s only the one.”

“Yeah!” said Xim. “Tell us your secrets, Grotto! The devastation will be limited!”

[I will not.]

“Boo,” Xim jeered. Then she slumped forward as though the day had already worn her out, despite just beginning. “Ugh, so are we heading back out there, or do we just wanna use your *Get Out of Cage Free* card?”

The card had been one of our rewards for defeating the specter of Orexis within Delve 9998: *The Cage*. It had seemed like a joke item at first, but like other rewards I’d received from the System, there was a lot more to it than a dumb name.

Get Out of Cage Free Card

By activating this card, you invoke System authority to extricate you and your party from any form of imprisonment, capture, restraint, or other situation in which you find your physical presence undesirable, including a Delve where you have failed the objective, or are just plain sick of.

The mechanics of your escape will vary based on the circumstances and the System may not be capable of intervening in certain situations. System’s capacity to intervene and the methods available to it are dependent on the current phase of System rollout. Please consult your User Manual or mentor for more information.

This is a fleeting item and may only be used once.

The item had gotten us all curious about what was meant by “the current phase of System rollout,” and had given Grotto what I think was the Delve Core equivalent of a panic attack. He became intractable, refused to shed any light on the meaning of the phrase, and eventually shut himself inside the Pocket Closet, denying any request we made of him.

Since Grotto wouldn't help us, we decided to kick in the doors on as many Delves as we could, and *politely* ask any Delve Core we found to tell us what it could about the card. We were currently knocking out Delves at record speed. Literally, record speed. This was our *fifth* platinum Delve since *The Cage* one year ago, which was two more in a year than any other party had attempted and survived.

Of course, we had advantages. After helping to save a large swath of Ravvenblaq from devastation, we were given the first pick of any Delves we wanted for the next two years. A time limit we fully intended to squeeze for everything it was worth.

Everyone in the party also had my *That's a Lot of Stats!* ability. The ability let us train to earn stat points up to a max of ten in each attribute, which was normally impossible for Delvers, who relied solely on Delves to earn stat points.

We'd gone full training montage after *The Cage*, and stacked points as fast as our minds and bodies could handle, with Varrin acting as our drill sergeant. He kept his foot on the gas pedal until we almost broke, let off just enough for us to catch our breath, and then pressed down even harder.

I didn't even need to train half the time, since I'd already earned a lot of my training points, but he worked me as hard as everyone else until I wondered who the real party leader was. Although we all still had some stats that hadn't yet hit the cap of ten—looking at you, Luck—by the time we were tackling our second platinum Delve, our party was completely overpowered for our level.

We dominated Delve after Delve, which was beginning to cause some powerful people to ask some difficult questions. Nonetheless, we pursued our goal relentlessly, eschewing subtlety in favor of power leveling, and trying to unravel the mystery of the card.

So far, the leveling was going great, but the investigation had been a bust.

“Not using the card, Xim,” I said. “A priceless magical artifact with unknowable power isn’t worth sacrificing to skip a few mimics.”

“But, but, they’re *art* mimics!” she said, walking up and gripping me by the arms. She peered up at me, her amber eyes glistening with fake tears. “Isn’t that right? You *hate* art mimics!”

“Eh, at this point I think I’ve gotten over it.” I heard Nuralie choke a bit. “Besides, the mystery of the card is why we’re here. It’d be a shame to waste it.”

“Half the reason,” Xim said, releasing me and stepping back, her pleading facade wiped away in an instant. “We’re also learning more about Delves in general.”

“And I thought we were here to grow more powerful,” said Varrin, who’d begun to don his armor. It was impressive that he could put on the heavy, frozen-steel plate without assistance, but the armorsmiths of Hiward had better designs than the ones of medieval Earth. That, and an auto-equip manaweave. He pulled at the cuff of a gauntlet, fitting it tightly over his hand, then looked up. “I didn’t realize you both considered this a research mission.”

“The card is one-*third* of the reason we’re here?” I said.

“Money,” said Nuralie. “Chips. Essences. Gear.” Pause. “Loot.”

I counted those off on my fingers.

“One... *eighth* of the reason we’re here?”

“Call it ten percent,” said Varrin. “Etja, are you ready to move?”

“Yep!” said Etja, walking out from behind the broken stack of furniture that she and Xim had made their fort for the night. The golem-turned-Delver was fully dressed in light-blue robes, the exposed skin of her neck and arms already transformed into the crimson chiton that she used in place of armor.

She’d continued to refine her appearance over the last year, her features now indistinguishable from human, although her clay-red skin tone made her stand out in Hiward. That, and the fact that she had four arms.

“Ready to kick ass and smoke grass!”

“Etja,” I said, “I taught you that phrase with the understanding that you’d only use it when appropriate.”

“When is it appropriate?” asked Xim. “Who smokes grass?”

“The Hyrachon,” said Nuralie. Pause. “It stinks.”

“I thought it meant that I was excited to do something,” said Etja, waving her hand in the air like a showman. “Kind of like when you say ‘I’m ready to rock out with my co-!’”

“Nope!” I interrupted. “I’m having regrets about our lessons.”

Etja dropped her hand and pouted a bit.

“Then which one should I use?” she asked.

“Um, how about,” I cleared my throat and dropped my voice an octave, “Spoon!”

There was a moment of silence for my dignity.

“What do utensils have to do with anything?” asked Xim. “Is that a Shog thing?”

“What?” I said, “No, why would it be?”

“Because he ate that c’thon that tried to eat *him*, then stole one of his tentacles. The one that made cutlery.” Xim squatted a bit and did her best Shog impression. “***C’thons do not need tools to consume, so I devoured that heathen and his brothers such that their heresy would not spread to the impressionable broodlings.***”

“I don’t remember that,” I said. “I only remember that he grafted a new tentacle to his body because ***‘the c’thon it belonged to was tasty, and I like the smell.’***”

“Shog says a lot of things,” said Varrin. “I doubt most of it is true. Also, Xim just made that last one up.”

“Why would you ruin my joke like that, Varrin?” Xim asked. “I could have gotten him to confront Shog about it. Start subtly testing whether his summon is haunted by a sudden urge to craft the finest silverware.”

“So, I *shouldn’t* say spoon?” said Etja.

“Every morning,” Varrin grumbled, looking up at the ceiling. “These conversations. Every. Morning.”

“You could try ‘Hulk smash!’” I said. “Or, ‘Plus Ultra!’” I ran a hand through my beard, happy to find it free of gore for once. I was doing exceptionally well on the Arlo hygiene

scale this Delve. “You know what, maybe try out a few of your own. I’m sure you’ll get something.”

“Ok!” said Etja, clapping her hands, then lifting her upper arms into the air, hands balled into fists. “Let’s hunt some mimic!”

That one *still* sounded a bit familiar, but I let it slide.

And hunt mimic we did.