

“You think I have no ears?” said Orexis, as the hardened masses of his feet clunked along the floor toward us. He paused and held a hand up to the side of his head, patting it. “Ah, I do not, it seems,” he said as though it were the first time he considered it. “Still, I hear all that you say. I do not wish for you to struggle, as the sacrifice I want from you is minor.” He let out a grumbling breath. “For most of you, anyway.”

“What sacrifice?” I asked.

Orexis stopped in front of the line of our unconscious allies, leaning over until his face nearly touched them. He turned his head from side to side, examining each in turn.

“Too weak,” he said when he examined Lito, then turned to Xim’s mother, Xorna. “Not dense enough. This one, though,” he lingered over Varrin’s mother, Nola. “She is suitable, and unforgivable, but I have tainted her.” Finally, he placed a finger from one of his massive hands on Ealdric the Third’s chest. “Sufficient.”

He scooped Varrin’s father up.

“Stop!” Varrin cried, beginning to wrestle with Orexis’ hand. The creature prodded him away with one of his smaller limbs, almost gently. Varrin struggled against it, and Orexis eventually shoved him hard enough to knock him down and send him skidding a dozen feet along the stone floor.

“I will show you what I wish of you,” he said in his raspy, echoing voice. “You three, come.” He gestured at Xim, Nuralie, and me. “You as well,” he said to the still-prone Varrin.

He moved back toward the small, white obelisk. The members of my party exchanged glances but decided to follow. What choice did we have?

When Orexis arrived at the center of the room, he held out one of his smaller hands toward a far wall, two fingers glowing. I looked to where he pointed, and for the first time noticed there was a large, circular doorway set deep within the rock, ornately engraved with foreign, but familiar symbols. They looked like what I’d seen crawling along Grotto’s slate while we sailed for Arsenal.

Broken rock and gravel lay in piles to either side of the door, and the short stone tunnel leading to it had rough-hewn edges. The doorway had been buried, and Orexis had unearthed it. Recently, from the looks of it.

One of Orexis’ smaller fingers shone deep blue, and the other looked as though it were coated in diamond, with subtle prismatic glints within. As I watched, the door cracked

down the middle and began to open, the heavy stone slabs of each half sliding away. A swirling portal was revealed behind it.

It was a Delve portal.

Portal to Delve 9998: *The Cage*.

This is a Special-grade Delve.

Level Requirement: 1

Party Size Requirement: 5

The world beneath us rumbled threateningly, sending vibrations up and through my entire body.

“What was that?” I asked.

Orexis looked down at me with his hollow eyes, then turned to the hovering orb next to the obelisk.

“Nasro,” he said, “report on the status of The Cage.” The sphere was clearly a Delve core, now that I was close enough to get a good look. “Feel free to include my four guests.”

A voice intruded into my mind, but rather than being sinister and histrionic like Grotto, this presence was deep, cold, and mechanical.

[Report: Delve 9998, The Cage. The Cage is currently in a state of instability due to mana disruption. Mana disruption will continue so long as the void sphere installed by USER DESIGNATION: OREXIS remains in the external service matrix.

OBSERVABLE SYSTEMS STATUS REPORT:

SYSTEM UPLINK: ONLINE

PORTAL ACCESS: ONLINE

PORTAL BARRIER: ONLINE

DIMENSIONAL OFFSET: ONLINE

ENTRY PERMISSIONS: RESTRICTED, LEVEL 1 TECHNICIANS ONLY

MANA ACCUMULATION: ONLINE

MANA VENTS: ONLINE, CURRENTLY VENTING, ERUPTION IMMINENT

OTHER SYSTEMS: UNKNOWN

The Cage is currently operational. Mana disruption will cause significant overflow onto surface if continued. Would you like to hear recommended action items?]

“No, Nasro. End report,” said Orexis. He peered into the Delve portal, the edges of his non-eyes shuddering. “I cannot enter, though I desire to do so. The walls cannot be breached, as the Delve is in another realm.” His smaller hands clutched at his chest as he spoke. “I have tried many things and made many plans. Some have failed. Others may yet succeed. But for now, my labors have brought me to you four.”

Orexis stepped beside the table he'd been bent over earlier, and on its surface was what looked like a life-sized clay statue of a woman. He peered down at the figure.

Xim took a step toward Orexis, hands balled into fists.

“A void sphere?!” she said. “You're the reason for the mana vents in the mountains. You're going to destroy entire towns if you don't stop this! Make the land uninhabitable for a generation!”

Orexis caressed the side of the clay figure's face, the way he'd stroked the dead before he inhaled them.

“You desire that this does not come to pass?” he said.

Xim's eyes narrowed.

“Of course I do.”

“Then we may grant each other's desire,” said Orexis. “I want only to free my sister. This Delve, this cage, exists to keep her imprisoned. Alongside others, as well. You will enter the Delve. You will free Anesis, as you call her. After this task is done, I will remove the void sphere.”

Varrin cast a glance between Orexis and his father in the beast's hand.

“That's what this is all about?” he said, voice trembling. “You've been trying to gather a *party*?”

“Many years, many seasons, many days, and many plans,” said Orexis. “There is no “this” or “all”, only variations of several.”

“Sorry,” I said, “those were all words that made sense individually but I didn’t follow the overall meaning when you put them together in that order.”

Orexis peered at me, close enough that I could see a mote of dust getting sucked into one of his abyssal eye sockets.

“You are one of many things. I have prepared all that I can think to prepare. At the moment, I have prepared *you*. Tomorrow, I will prepare another, as my thoughts are plenty and will spring forth in ever greater numbers.”

I wondered how long he’d been at this. There were too many questions I wanted answered, but I tried to focus on the immediate problem.

“We free your sister,” I said, “then you turn off whatever this void sphere thing is. No mana eruption.”

“Yes.”

“And you let everyone here go.”

“Everyone alive when you return will be set free.”

“That’s not the sort of qualifier I like to let slide,” I said. “You won’t kill anyone while we’re inside.”

“I accept this,” he said.

I racked my brain for a second, trying to find the loopholes. There were a fuckton, honestly, but I wanted to get as many concessions as I could.

“You won’t kill anyone *before* we go in, either.”

“I will kill only one before you go in.”

“That’s,” I hesitated. “Why are you being so specific about that?”

“One must die, for your fifth to join you,” he said.

I glanced at the doll on the table, then to Varrin’s father in Orexis’ grip. I didn’t like how this looked.

“We don’t need a fifth,” I said. “I’m... I’m much stronger than a normal level one. Even for a platinum. I’m as good as two members. You don’t have to do whatever you’re going to do.”

“If you are so strong, then it is of even greater importance that I do this.” He lifted Varrin’s father above the obelisk. Ealdric had begun to regain consciousness, looking around the room in confusion. “I will need to make sure that you obey.”

Orexis took Ealdric in both hands, then brought the platinum Delver’s chest down on the top of the obelisk, skewering him through with its pointed tip.

There was no cry from Ealdric. He died too quickly. Just a muted grunt and a wet rattle as a final breath left his lungs. Blood poured down the obelisk, and Ealdric’s body immediately began to wither and shrink in a process that I quickly recognized. His flesh shrank until there was nothing left behind but a skeleton of black bones in broken armor. He’d been absorbed by the Delve.

Varrin staggered back, falling into a seated position on the ground, eyes wide in horror at the sight.

“Nasro, report on the obelisk,” said Orexis.

[Obelisk: Delve 0102, The Calvani Caverns. Classification: Primordial Creation Obelisk. Obelisk charge sufficient for Creation procedure. Obelisk charge sufficient for level 1 assignment. Mana density sufficient for platinum level distribution. There are currently no valid targets for distribution.]

“How many level one assignments can be made?” said Orexis.

[There is currently sufficient charge for 1 level 1 platinum assignment after the expenditure from a Creation procedure.]

“Only one?” Orexis’ voice was calm, but the monstrous features of his face trembled.

[The primordial Creation obelisk is a prototype that requires greater resources than later versions.]

Orexis let out a guttural bark, then turned back to the clay woman.

“Such inefficiency... No matter, one will suffice for now. We will acquire more if it is needed.” Orexis held his smaller pair of glowing hands out over the figure on the table, then cupped those hands within the palms of his larger set. All ten inner fingers glowed, forming a muddy brown hue.

As I watched, nothing else seemed to happen, but my gut tingled. I felt a tiny flare of the oppressive feeling Orexis' soul engendered, but it was no longer ravenous and consuming. I took a chance and opened my soul-sight a fraction. It was still enough for Orexis' soul to dominate the room, but I could also see something happening within it.

A strange series of eddies swirled and churned within the black. They coursed into a twisting channel that formed around Orexis' four hands, then flowed out to encompass and suffuse the life-sized clay figure. A set of Orexis' fingers twitched blue, and ropes of mana crawled through the sculpture, so potent that I could feel them through my aura. They then branched out into a veiny network.

At the same time, I felt something else occur, deeper within the earthen sculpture. A distinct *presence*. It fell just outside of my perception and was gone as soon as it was sensed.

"To give life is not my nature," said Orexis, voice intoning like a sermon. "My nature is to take and to bend the world around my will. With this nature, I demand a wish be granted. I am now two. I shall become three."

Orexis' voice moved beyond sound alone, and the next words he spoke sent translucent ripples cascading out through the air.

"Mionis Siaderius veyna Siaderus. You are Etja, seeker of my second half."

Orexis' desolate eyes narrowed until they were thin slits, and the soul wrapping the effigy detached from Orexis, becoming the doll's own. Its edges were harsh and violent ripples ran through the liquid-like substance, causing it to flutter like torn cloth in the wind.

Orexis continued to embrace the fledgling entity with his soul, calming the raging spirit. He massaged and coaxed it into a solid, flowing form, his eyes pressing nearly shut as he did so.

"Nasro, begin the Creation procedure," Orexis said, his voice strained. Whatever the nature of the thing he was creating, it was taking a lot out of him.

[As you command. Creation and level distribution will be combined for efficiency.]

The sigils on Nasro's orb flared to life, alongside the runes running down the primordial creation obelisk. Tendrils of mana reached out from the obelisk, splitting out into thousands of fine threads that pierced the doll. The sculpture began to reshape itself.

Two new pairs of arms emerged from the clay, mimicking the half-god's own. The face stretched and elongated into a snout until the feminine features were lost completely, and the ropes of mana Orexis had forced inside the doll spiderwebbed into a network of veins. I experienced a nauseating sense of overstimulation as my aura felt the mana connect to a framework that was indecipherable to me, while my soul-sight watched the black energy dig deep within the sculpture's transformed flesh.

They were bonding.

[This is well outside of my predictions for how the day would go,] came Grotto's voice in my mind. I couldn't help but flinch at his sudden presence.

[Grotto! What happened? Are you ok?]

[Whatever overloaded your mind was passed onto me through our connection. It seems I was... less equipped to mitigate the experience than yourself.]

[Well I'm glad you're alright now. You are alright, right?]

[I am still recovering, but we do not have time to discuss my status. I need you to open the entrance to the Closet so that I may exit. Close it behind me once I am outside. We cannot risk exposing our own Delve.]

[What? Why? The situation out here is pretty fucked. You're safer inside.]

[It is a necessary risk. This noxious vermin is attempting to exploit the System's rules.]

[What can you even do to Orexis?]

*[No, not Orexis. Core 0102. This blighted Creation procedure will override the System's level restrictions, and I require local access to Delve 0102 which I cannot establish while cut off within the Closet. There's no time to explain further. I must **end** him.]*

I focused on opening the Pocket Closet and dumped mana into the ability to mana-shape it.

I didn't like the idea of Grotto exposing himself. Not just for his sake, but for my own as well. If he got a tenth of the smackdown as the rest of the team, he'd be annihilated. That would lead to a very unpleasant experience for me through our *Shared Fate* ability. I didn't know *how* bad it would be, but the ability's description didn't inspire me to experiment. Regardless, there was no time for hesitation. Like Grotto said, it was a risk, but I was willing to take the chance. This was a holy quest of *vengeance*, after all.

Grotto seemed like the kind of guy that could bring some of that to the table.

I used as much mana as I could, going well beyond what I'd tried during my meager practice. Luckily, Orexis was consumed by his task, and ten seconds later the portal opened.

Grotto floated out, and the little Delve core looked rough. His feathers were ruffled, one eye was held shut, and he listed to the side as he moved. I snapped the door shut behind him.

[System access requested. Target: Delve Core 0102.]

Override code required.

[Override code 001: Preservation of Delve System.]

[Override code 023: Aberrant Delve Core behavior.]

[Override code 998: Target is pissing me off.]

Evaluating...

Acquiring targeted core...

Delve Core 0102 not found!

Refreshing Delve Core connection.

Delve Core 0102 has disconnected itself from the System.

Override code 023 accepted to reestablish link.

Link reestablished!

The runes on Nasro blinked a few times, and the orb spun toward Grotto.

Accessing Delve Core 0102 memory cache... successful.

Evaluating target core actions... aberrant behavior confirmed.

Override code 001 accepted. Granting USER DESIGNATION: GROTTO System access to Delve Core 0102.

Updating permissions...

Override code 998 accepted.

Administrative control assigned.

[Core 1156,] Nasro subvocalized, [you are not authorized to interfere with the operation of Delve 0102, The Calvani Caverns. Discontinue your actions.]

*[Request denied. **Terminate** Core 0102.]*

Nasro's sigils blazed, flames and sparks leaping off of the core. The mana-fueled fire spat and hissed, the metallic form of Nasro screeching in protest.

[Grotto... the System... is malfunctioning... shutdown procedures... required... my actions are not... my actions are... my act-]

With a final, violent spray of molten metal, Nasro clanked to the floor. The light of his runes, scorched and deformed, died.

The web of tendrils emanating from the obelisk faltered, and Orexis's eyes shot open.