

The portal was in the ground.

Our group was gathered in a circle around the entrance to Anesis' prison, looking down at its languid surface. The gateway swirled at a slow and leisurely pace within the floor, as though it defied the chaos of the world around it—a mute and unfeeling guardian, behind which catastrophe gestated.

We'd spent the last few minutes of our brisk walk preparing ourselves. Nuralie's quick work had made twenty-five of the soul poison arrows, which she distributed between us. Xim, Varrin, Etja, and I each received two, leaving Nuralie with the other seventeen.

I'd practiced using *Thrown Weapon* with a few of the spare steel arrows I had, using Varrin as my consenting target. Though the skill worked, the projectile was far slower when thrown than it would have been if shot, even with the speed boost the skill gave. Varrin could easily avoid it, and because the arrow had little weight to it, the missile plinked off Varrin's shield pathetically when it hit, lacking the velocity it needed to deliver a penetrating blow. I wasn't going to risk wasting one of the divine arrows with the skill. We only got one shot with each.

The rest of the party wasn't any better off when it came to firing arrows. Varrin said he was a half-decent shot, but he wasn't interested in *shooting* his arrow. Nor were the rest of us non-archers.

None of us needed a bow to *stab* a motherfucker.

Nuralie had also given Etja both vials of non-divine spiritual sedative that the alchemist had, which the golem absorbed into her body and stored within her abdomen. She would crush and ingest the potions if Orexis tried to reinhabit her, and if she wasn't quick enough to do it on her own, we all knew where to aim to burst the vials if it came down to it.

I was conflicted about bringing Etja with us. On one hand, Orexis could inhabit her, denying us a party member and turning her tools against us. On the other, Etja had proven she was good in a fight for both damage and control.

In some ways, having Orexis inside a physical body might make the fight simpler for my allies, since they would have an easy, visible target to attack. This was especially true if Etja managed to take the sedatives and Orexis got saddled with whatever debuff that caused.

The scenario was probably a death sentence for Etja, but I wasn't such an idealist that I would hesitate to defend myself against her if she became possessed. At least, that's

what I told myself. Running that situation through in my mind was a very different animal from running it in real life.

So, we stood around the portal, weapons ready, with a battle plan that left a lot to be desired, while Fortune drummed his fingers along his belly.

“What are we waiting for?” asked Varrin. He began pacing around the portal’s edge, fingers flexing on his sword hilt.

“More mysterious timing?” I said, though I could tell Fortune was reading something the rest of us couldn’t see.

“I am displeased,” said Fortune’s front.

“Just a little setback,” said Left.

“This will make everything more difficult,” said Right.

Fortune dropped his hands from his gut, his mouths tightening into thin lines.

“I cannot override this portal,” he said. “I was certain that I had it figured out.”

“Override it?” said Varrin, stopping his prowling. “Can we not just jump through it like the others?”

“*You* can,” said Fortune. “*I* cannot. All of the portals inside the Delve are designed to collapse if I enter them. This is why I dismiss them.”

“But this portal is different?” I said. “Why? In fact, why is Anesis’ portal at the exact center of the very bottom of the inner cage?”

“She is an avatar embodying Release, Arlo,” said Fortune. “The world rebels at her confinement, and so she requires special treatment. Treatment that requires greater authority to override than my user designation gives me.”

“You have a user designation?” said Xim, looking up at the avatar. She’d been staring into the portal with silent intensity since we arrived, but her interest in Delve transportation gave way to Fortune’s shiny new factoid. “Is that normal for a god?”

“Is that normal for a *prisoner*?” asked Varrin.

“No,” Fortune answered. “To both. Another example of my exceptionalism.” He heaved a sigh so profound that I felt *myself* becoming depressed. “I will have to speak with Cage.”

Fortune waved a thick hand through the air, and the Delve Core's mental voice instantly returned.

{Testing communication access, repeat 11567. Testing communication access, repeat 11568. Testing comm-}

"We hear you, Cage," I said.

{Finally! Fortune! Yyyyyou... you are! You are... not pleasant! Ack! Why is that the worst thing I can say about you?!}

"Please dismiss this portal, '98," said Fortune.

{|- This- The nerve of- You kick me out of local access, mute me the entire time you're traipsing around and bullying through my Delve, and *this* is how you say hello? By making demands? You're such a... ssssssuch a *big*...} Cage delivered a series of mental impressions that I interpreted as huffing. {You're a person of questionable character!}

"I ended your monster problem," said Fortune, eyes narrowing. "Now I intend to end your *god* problem. Dismiss the portal, or I will find something *else* to end."

Cage went radio silent for a moment, and then the portal at our feet began to swirl rapidly. It twisted into itself and disappeared like it had been sucked down a dimensional drain. The hole it left behind was deep and dark, but there was a subtle orange glow coming from within.

"It's not blue," I said. "Good to know I haven't gone color-blind."

{That's because Orexis has destroyed *all* of the mana-weaves. All that's left is Anesis and her divine spawn.}

"Then why isn't a wrathful god tearing the Delve to pieces?" I asked.

{Unlike Fortune, Anesis wasn't permissively brought out of stasis. She's still waking up.}

"Good," said Fortune. "I still have time to bid her good morning." The avatar hopped into the hole and disappeared within its depths.

"Normal marching order?" I said, receiving nods from the group. "Then let's get inside before Fortune decides we need some encouragement again."

I jumped into the hole, my allies close behind me. I already had *Gracovus* out, in case I needed to do any more flying tricks, uncertain of the pit's depth.

The stone of the tunnel zoomed past until the orange glow at its bottom filled my vision. I crossed the tunnel's threshold and broke out into a room that was a microcosm of the Delve above it.

Anesis' prison was a spherical chamber with a diameter around the length of a basketball court. Compared to the massive, multi-mile-wide sphere we'd just left, this one was practically fun-sized.

All along the interior of the sphere, crawling on every surface regardless of orientation, were hundreds of *people*.

They weren't monstrous, they didn't have fangs or claws or multiple rows of pointy teeth. They were haggard and worn. Spine and rib bones poked out from under pale, bruised flesh. Paper-thin skin sagged off of emaciated muscle. Their limbs were skeletal, their faces gaunt. The only inhuman thing about them was the orange glow running through their spiderweb veins, lighting their bodies up from the inside.

A thousand bloodshot eyes rolled up to look at me as I fell toward the chamber's center.

Which is where Anesis hung, suspended in the air.

The avatar was physically similar to Orexis at first glance. She was fifteen to twenty feet tall, with six limbs crossed over her chest and belly, and a long tail that wrapped around her hips and legs.

However, at the ends of her six arms were not hands. They ended in abyssal holes like Orexis' eyes. Her legs did not end in malformed hooves, but in long, slender feet that looked completely out of place with their normality. Her body was wrapped in the same tattered gray cloth that Orexis wore, her body covered in coiled, ropy muscle like her brother's, but her form was distinctly feminine.

Where Orexis had some semblance of a face, however, the front of Anesis' head was a smoking crater, leaking smog into the room.

And I was falling straight towards it.

Before I could command *Gracovus* to start slowing my descent, I felt the tug of gravity in the opposite direction. My stomach lurched as I went from falling toward the center of the chamber to falling toward its edge, back from where I emerged.

I looked up to see Varrin careening toward me, but he was watching me closely. As I fell up toward him and he fell down toward me, we twisted our bodies to avoid one another.

“This is weird,” I said as I passed by him, and heard him grunt in response.

Xim, Etja, and Nuralie glided into the room with the subtle touch of Etja’s gravity magic. Shog and Grotto hovered down after them.

Shog rotated his body so that his feet were facing Anesis at the center of the chamber, then rotated until they were facing the edge of the sphere. His tentacles twitched, and an expression crossed his cephaloid face that I think was irritation.

Meanwhile, Grotto was spinning in the air.

[I cannot tell which way is down!] Grotto thought to me in frustration, wagging his tentacles as he continued to revolve.

[Every way is down, I think.]

[That is what I am sensing, and your input is unhelpful.]

[How about this. Anesis is up, everything else is down.]

My fall, and then subsequent re-fall back to the chamber’s edge, took me on an arcing path that landed me to one side of the hole I’d entered through. Fortune was already standing there, looking ‘up’ at Anesis in the center. The crawling people, which I assumed were somehow Anesis’ divine spawn, were slowly dragging themselves away from the rotund avatar in all directions. His presence was quickly creating the only clear ground in the entire cell.

Now that the floor was visible, I could see what was left of Cage’s mana-weaves. All of the runes and sigils had been gouged away, the mystery material of the Delve bearing deep scores and grooves cut into the surface again and again until the weave had been destroyed.

The damage took the familiar pattern of claw marks and was repeated across every inch of the sphere’s interior surface that I could see. Orexis’ specter must have been working on this non-stop since he fled Etja’s body hours ago. Considering what was hidden behind the masses of starved flesh, there must have been thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of the destroyed runes and sigils.

I looked up to check on Grotto and the others. The Delve core had figured himself out and was now hovering down to us, though his flight was still a bit wobbly. Shog descended more rapidly, passing Grotto by and touching down next to me. We were quickly joined by everyone else.

“This room is confusing,” said Shog’tuatha. ***“My feet feel like they are where my head should be.”***

[I believe I am having the same experience while lacking the requisite body parts.]

“Welcome to the *true* inner cage,” said Fortune, eyes still locked onto Anesis.

“Where’s Orexis?” asked Varrin, sword at the ready.

“Hiding,” said Fortune. “Come, Yearning. Reveal yourself. Or do you not *wish* to greet your old friend?”

Orexis’ voice rasped into my ears as though he were on either side of me, an inch away.

“You have never been our friend.” The tone of the half-god was airy, and hissing, though unmistakable. A shadowy form emerged over Anesis’ shoulder, the black pit of Orexis’ soul bathing me with its sickening thirst. “Nor have we ever wanted you to be.”

A shudder ran through my body, and I could hear a sharp intake of breath from Etja.

“Lucky for you then, that I’ve never cared what you want,” replied Fortune’s front.

“Sometimes I care,” said Left.

“Only when it suits me,” said Right.

Orexis’ specter emerged more fully from behind Anesis, his body no larger than a normal man’s. Though the specter was only a soul fragment, the entity had taken on the physical form of the half-god who’d birthed it. A pitch-dark replica of the six-armed horror.

Anesis’ tail uncurled from around her legs, and one of her hands twitched. The emaciated divine spawn ceased their struggle to escape Fortune’s presence, turning back to peer at us. One even reached out a bony arm and began pulling itself back toward us.

“Do any of you have any punchy spells?” Fortune asked. “Something with fire, or concussive force.”

“Yeah,” both me and Xim said at the same time.

Xim gave me a smirk, an expression that reminded me that it would take more than unseen terrors whispering into her ear to shake the Third Layer denizen.

“Arlo has more mana,” she said.

“Arlo it is then,” said Fortune. “Please cast your spell in the midst of some of these divine spawn.”

I looked around, noticing that more and more of the creatures had begun slinking back toward us.

“Uh, any preferences?” I said.

“Take your pick,” said Fortune.

“And they’re definitely *not* people, right? They look... a lot more human than the others.”

“Be assured that these beings are as vile as any you have encountered. I suspect they will be easier to deal with, however.”

“Alright. Cover your ears, I guess.”

I brought up my hand to snap my fingers.

“Very appropriate advice!” said Fortune.

I snapped, casting *Explosion!* without a chant, and detonating a pile of the spawn crawling over one another to get closer.

Then, the entire room exploded.

The creatures at the epicenter of my detonation were blasted into chunks, which scattered out around the room. The thin network of glowing orange veins inside each chunk grew brighter, escalating in intensity as it landed amidst more shambling mounds of the monsters. Then, the *chunks* exploded.

A chain reaction of deadly eruptions cascaded across the entire surface of the sphere. The monsters were so tightly packed that each explosive chunk of the last monster found a new monster to turn into chunks, which then soared through the room to find new monsters to chunk.

Organs, muscle, skin, bone, anything blasted away from one of the creatures turned into an unholy hand grenade, and the world became a single, endless detonation that propagated outward from my initial blast. It was surreal, horrifying, and, I gotta be honest, fucking cool as hell, especially when it made its way to the monsters above us. I was looking *up* at the devastation, but my perspective told me I was looking *down* at it.

Everyone on team Arlo had their hands over their ears, the booming sounds amplified by the enclosed space, but Fortune crossed his arms, smiling up at Orexis. The specter watched the event with disinterest.

Finally, the remaining few bits of the last monsters to be exploded, themselves exploded, popping like late kernels in a bag of microwave popcorn. Once the booming ceased, the air was filled with the rank smell of burnt flesh, but very little smoke. The room was also quite a bit dimmer, although the corpses still gave off a weak orange light.

“What was the purpose of that display, Fortune? Those creatures have no value to me.”

“Your sister,” said Fortune, “with all her power, birthed monstrosities so weak, that a level one Delver could annihilate them all with a single spell.”

“She is sleeping!” Orexis shrieked, one ghostly arm hugging Anesis around the neck. “Those creatures are the flakes of dead skin shed from her dreams! They are nothing!”

“You insult your own sister, Orexis,” said Fortune somberly. “Even the excrement of a sleeping god’s nightmare should quake the ground! Nations should tremble at the very thought! Anesis is a powerful avatar. You both are, especially together! So, why is she so weak?” Fortune spread his hands and looked around. “This place robs her of her power, Orexis. Even with all the mana-weaves within this chamber destroyed, the cage beyond it presses down on her. The outer cage presses down on top of that. She will never be whole while inside.”

“Fortune,” Orexis said in a low snarl, “I *wish* for you to speak plainly. I am here to free my sister, am I not? Why do you tell me what I already know?”

“Because you are acting like a fool!” roared all three of Fortune’s faces. The specter flinched, hiding more of itself behind Anesis.

“But, it’s alright,” said Fortune’s front. “I am here, and I will fix the mess you’ve made.”

“I do not *want* you to fix anything,” said Orexis. “I have destroyed the wards. My sister awakens without your help!”

“And when she awakens fully, her presence will destroy this dimensional pocket,” said Fortune. “She will destroy it while two more layers of mana-weaves work to suppress her. What do you believe will happen to her then?”

The specter considered the question for a moment.

“She will live,” it grumbled.

“But how long will it take her to return to you?” said Fortune. “The *real* you?” Fortune held up a hand in a halting gesture. “Allow me to make a suggestion. Allow *me* to take Anesis out of here.”

“You?”

“Yes. I will take her outside of this horrid place, and you will be reunited with her in the flesh! And, in doing so, I will ensure she does not bring down the foundation of the very house in which she stands.”

“How?” said Orexis. “You are restricted in here as much as she. What power do you wield that she cannot?”

“I have access to the System’s portal network.”

The specter perked up, leaning out from behind Anesis. The half-god of Release twitched again, and her lower pair of arms unwrapped themselves from her belly. The Delve shuddered.

“How do you have access?” asked Orexis.

“There is no time,” said Fortune. “I will tell you later. For now, I need you to consent to allow me to take Anesis out of here.”

“You wish me to give away dominion,” said Orexis, tilting his head down in thought.

“Temporarily. I cannot move her on my own, and by the time she is awake and caught up, well...”

The Delve shuddered again.

“Uh,” I began, uncertain if I liked what I was hearing. “Fortune, what are you-”

Fortune waved a hand at me in a dismissing gesture, and something caught in my throat. My question was cut off in a fit of choking. Varrin looked between Fortune and me, changing his stance to keep Fortune in his line of sight.

“Fine,” said Orexis. “You may take Anesis outside of this Delve to the land known as Hiward. No more!”

“And I graciously accept your limited dominion, freely given.”

There was a blast of air, and Fortune was beside Anesis, who was now twitching with greater frequency. Fortune grasped the half-god by the waist, hugging the taller woman to his body. A flash of light filled the room, and a portal opened behind the pair.

Then, Fortune reached up and flicked Orexis' specter off of Anesis' shoulder.

"Farewell, Arlo and company!" Fortune said, giving us a wave. "Good luck with your fight!"

"Wait, Fortune!" said the specter, tumbling through the air. "I wish to rejoin my essence!"

"No room for passengers, I'm afraid," said Fortune, stepping backward into the portal. The bodies of Fortune and Anesis blinked out of existence, leaving only a faint afterimage behind.

My entire group stood, stunned, as the afterimages faded.

I coughed, clearing the gunk from my throat.

"Did we... just get scammed?" I croaked.

{WHAT in the ever living FUCK just happened?} Cage's voice filled our minds. {Where's Fortune? Where's Anesis?! Why did Fortune have portal access?!}

As we struggled to process the events that just unfolded, the specter of Orexis righted himself, then turned his eyes from where his sister was moments before, to us.

Even as a soul fragment, the creature still had Orexis' features.

His bottomless, empty eyes *shuddered*.