

“I will have a guiding light,” said Drel. “When we are in the Third, you must follow it. Do not speak to one another. If someone speaks to you, they are not real. We shall not risk confusion.”

“If you’re drinking in the landscape and see something concerning,” Xim added, “best idea is to ignore it and focus on the light.”

“We Xor’Drels will calm the region,” said Drel. “We cannot stop your minds from warping the land, but with a dozen of us, it will ebb toward a consensus. This allows we who are native to soothe the journey, and guide it toward a common vision.”

“What would happen if one of us were alone?” I asked.

“More minds, more safety,” said Drel. “Alone in the wilds, it is... difficult to find a way back out. Do not wander. Stay close, if you are able.”

“Why wouldn’t we be able to stay close?” said Ealdric.

“Distance can get confusing in the wilds,” said Xim. “Even if you feel far away, you’re still close if you can see us.”

“It’s been so long,” said Xorna, “since I’ve taken younglings on a walk.” She sounded cheerful, though it was hard to tell under the infernal armor.

“I will begin,” said Drel.

The shadowy man held his hands to the sky, beginning to whisper under his breath. Xim walked over to me as he did so.

“I’m going to bring up the rear to make sure no one falls behind,” she said. “Drel will lead, with you and Mom toward the center. Anyone who hasn’t been to the Third before will likely be nervous, or even scared. That’s going to affect the environment, but my family knows how to help pacify the lands.”

“That’s good to know,” I said.

“You may be able to help, but it can take time to get used to the Layer.”

“How could I help?”

“You’re of the tribe now,” she said, smiling. “If you relax and radiate calm, then you can also help keep things in check.”

“Sure, just remain calm. Got it.”

“Just remember that this isn’t what it’s always like down there. Cities and villages are a lot less, eh, weird.”

She patted me on the arm, then moved to the back of the group. We formed up into a line to keep the person ahead of us in easy sight.

“Should we attach ourselves together with rope?” I asked.

“It wouldn’t help, dear,” came Xorna’s voice from two spots ahead of me.

I frowned and tried to quell my nerves. Was this really the *best* way to get where we wanted to go? No, of course it wasn’t. But it was the *fastest* way, and that’s what the Ravvenblaqs wanted. The Xor’Drels were taking a visit home, so no big deal for them. For the rest of us... I just hoped everyone was good at following instructions.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and the sun began to go dim until it formed into a tiny speck in the sky. The world in all directions was cast into total darkness, though each of my allies was still visible as though the sun still shone above us. The speck that was once a life-giving star fell from the sky, and my brain struggled to comprehend the sense of size and distance to the light until it came to rest over the palm of Drel’Gethed’s outstretched hand. He held it aloft, and the darkness trembled.

Above us, a crimson eye opened where the sun had been.

When I looked up and into it, I realized the Eye was staring at me. Not in my direction, or at our group. Its gaze bore down upon me alone. I was singled out and beheld, observed to the deepest core of my being. The Eye saw everything. The individual strands of my hair, the pores of my skin, each and every microscopic piece down to the last cell. My atoms were individually examined, the physics of molecular bonds evaluated, the faint residue of my home dimension scanned. Then, the Eye went deeper.

My emotions, all of them, every nuance of feeling that had ever passed through my mind and body, carried through the Eye’s sight. Every deed I had performed, every black regret staining my soul, my shameful acts of greed and gluttony, my selfless gifts of generosity and counsel, my manipulative words, and my heartfelt affirmations, I gave freely, I took ravenously, I killed and consumed, I nurtured love and life, I was a pit of suffering, and a radiant pillar of joy. It saw me. All of me. And it did not judge me. It accepted me.

It let me know that it *knew* and that it embraced me nonetheless. I had been scoured clean by a mind beyond comprehension, my most viscous secrets a trivial blemish in which it saw beauty, my greatest accomplishments heralded, despite their cosmic insignificance. My entire universe was a speck of dust, and the Eye found me within it. It took time to see.

My private moment with the Eye ended, and the sky expanded. The Eye was not a singular being. It exploded outward into a nautilus spiral, ten thousand eyes stretching out from the central entity. Each one looked upon the landscape below, seeking, searching, watching. The entire sky to the horizon and back was the Eye, and the Eye was legion.

I was shaken, and the System message I received startled me as though a wolf had leapt from behind a bush.

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

That's how you fucking trained Luck?

Regardless, I didn't have time to think about the implications. I tore my own eyes from the sky above to find Drel's guiding light. He'd turned to watch us, waiting for the group to recover from the shock of what we were seeing. Most of the others, aside from the Xor'Drels, were continuing to stare upwards, overwhelmed by what they saw. Lito, however, was taking stock of the environment. I looked about as well.

We were still in a rocky mountain pass, though the surface of the boulders around us were flaking and decaying, as though they were covered in old paint. One strip the size of my palm fell away, revealing a rusting, metal mesh beneath. The ground under my feet was dirt and gravel, but grates unearthed themselves as the soil sifted through their cracks. The scrubs and thin trees along the mountain above us shed their meager leaves, replaced by growing barbs, while bark fell away to reveal dark, oozing sap flowing along rib-like structures beneath.

My thoughts became solemn as I observed the dismal nature.

The others were beginning to bring their eyes back to the world around us, eventually settling on Drel's light after a moment to take in the scenery. Pale faces exchanged nervous looks, before settling into determined grimaces. Our march through the Layer began.

The path we'd been on in the First had been winding and treacherous. It frequently shifted in elevation and outright disappeared where decades of weather had overcome the work of the nameless men and women who'd carved it. Our party was able to traverse hazards that would have been impassable through normal means with a combination of physical stats and application of skills.

The path through the Third was not like this.

It went straight and true, moving at a slightly upward angle as it ascended the mountainside, then sloping gently downward as it traveled into the valley where the mana vents were in the First. As we moved, the difficulty of the hike wasn't caused by the physical challenges presented by the terrain, but by everything else.

As we climbed the first leg of the pass, my legs felt leaden and my body heavy. The air was thick and dense, making breathing difficult, and it was filled with a cloying scent of sweet flowers, which failed to mask undertones of rust, decay, and—oddly—oil and gasoline.

The scents of post-industrial society were explained when we crested the first hill. The mountainside disappeared, replaced by a chasm covered by the thin grating we tread upon. Beneath it hung massive pulleys that rotated large lengths of derailleur chains, the symbolism of which was not lost on me. The pulleys were powered by gas engines, each the size of a small house, which spat goutts of smoke and vapor.

This had to be my own mind's influence on the world.

Although we were hundreds of kilometers from the shoreline, the horizon was a churning sea of storm-ridden ocean waves. The water was dark navy, white froth dancing along the top like writhing maggots. In the water I could see broken planks and sinking sails, the remains of whatever ships had dared to traverse the enraged deep. I turned back to Drel's light, focusing on his guidance when my boot trod over something uneven and organic.

I looked down to see the grate beneath was now a shallow cage filled with the struggling bodies of men and women. Their faces stuck out from the grate and grew in number until it was near impossible to move on without stepping upon them. Covering their naked forms were hordes of palm-sized creatures covered in gray fur with numerous black, beady eyes along their backs. The mouths of the trapped moved as though they struggled to plead with us, but no sound came out.

"We could probably help them," came Xim's voice from beside me.

I turned to look at her as she stepped carefully between the faces, a carefree smile on her lips.

“We could stop and pry this open. It wouldn’t be hard with our abilities.”

I considered the people beneath us, but focused on what Drel had told us before we entered.

If someone speaks to you, they are not real.

And how *could* we speak? Though the world was filled with rumbling machines, tortured souls, and turbulent weather, there was no sound. Silence reigned, and even the grinding of my own teeth failed to resound in my skull. I ignored the Xim who had spoken, continuing to focus on Drel’s light.

“Good for you,” the not-Xim said, voice trailing into a whisper that sent hot breath along my ear. “It’s more fun when they’re smart.”

As we found ourselves in the valley, the oozing trees loomed up over us. Thick growths hung down from the branches, wriggling and set to burst. I kept a cautious eye on them, lest one rupture and send whatever contents it held upon my head. The underbrush became thick, and I caught the sight of movement from the corner of my eye. Grasping fingers moved within the dark recesses of the growth. Fingers that began creeping out, seeking our ankles.

Xorna paused in her stride, glancing at the unnaturally long digits beginning to impede us. She waved a hand at the sides of the path, and bright, spring flowers sprang into existence, entangling the fingers. The vibrant blooms dragged the fingers back into the brush, and no more came forth. Xorna nodded, then continued her march, and the treeline itself withdrew from her, widening and clearing the path.

When we reached the next incline, I managed to regain some of my composure. The land around us was impossible and nonsensical. If this was a landscape composed of our thoughts and fears, then its danger only existed so long as we gave it the power to do so. We’d also followed Drel’s rules, and no harm had yet befallen our company. I turned inward and began to feel out the world with my passive aura. I emptied my mind and sought to enter a meditative state, allowing myself to follow Drel’s light without thought.

The metal grating began to melt away into the dirt and rock that I expected. Chains dangling from tree limbs morphed into vines, and the errant internal combustion engine sprouting from the stone was revealed to be pareidolia, the truth of its form shown when

examined closely: An oddly structured bit of rock. The Eye watched me from above, and I felt its connection strengthen.

Through my aura, I felt the presence of my eleven companions. Xim radiated calm and wellness and connecting to her bolstered my tranquility. Drel was the guidance that revealed the path and Xorna was the bulwark that kept the nightmare from swallowing the road that Drel created. I brought all three into my aura, weaving the sensation of regeneration and healing from my passive with their own contributions. Then, I touched on the others.

Cole felt trapped, suffocated by fleshy ropes that tangled his legs, threatening to bind his movements. Xorna's presence unraveled the bonds, allowing him to move freely.

Ember was falling behind, convinced that she could no longer catch up even as she marched less than three feet from her allies. Drel's guidance revealed that her path was true.

Ashe's body was wracked with pain, eaten from the inside by the same disease that had taken her father. My aura regenerated the decrepit flesh and cleansed the sickness.

Ealdric shrank away into nothing, Nola was judged for failure, Varrin was consumed by guilt. Xim calmed their minds, Xorna pushed back the alien emotions, I healed the psychic wounds, and Drel showed them how to move forward. The four of us acted in harmony and symbiosis.

Nuralie and Lito were both trapped in isolation, having lost everything that gave them warmth. Home, family, the closeness of good friends. I linked all twelve of us, the Eye guiding my power, revealing to them the presence of stalwart companions. Old bonds that would rekindle, new bonds that would grow rich over time.

I turned to view the world anew, seeing it not as a nightmare hellscape, but as a flowing structure of organic beauty. Bent bones and warped flesh became massive seashells and verdant plants. Dark and twisted treelines became placid groves, while the tortured souls beneath us became peaceful spirits of the past, wishing us a better life than they had. It was all set under the crimson light of the Eye above, and though it was not a picturesque view of earthly beauty, it was still beautiful, in its own, alien way.

I brought this vision to the others, the Eye helping me to show them the lands as I saw them, and the silence around us broke. There was a gasp from Ashe as she received the view, others pausing and rubbing their eyes at the shift in scenery. It was a ripple that went through the group, followed by an uneasy relief, and we made our final ascent toward the cave, and the *Calvani Caverns* within.

When the cave was in sight, the Eye called to me, and I saw it turn down to the cave itself. It was watching something within, something it deemed worthy of notice. I studied the cave mouth as it grew closer, but it was shrouded in darkness so deep my enhanced sight couldn't penetrate it. We walked through the opening, and my eyes adjusted to show me a dim view of carved stone and leveled floor. There was a tunnel that went deeper, and in its depths was pure, pitch black.

Something shifted in that darkness, and I felt a pressure weigh down on me. A pair of perfectly round shapes opened in the gloom, even darker than the air around them, impossibly. Within the circles was not the absence of light, but a void that consumed reality. A presence that annihilated anything it contacted, even space and time itself. This was what the Eye was watching.

Drel halted in the middle of the chamber, the twelve of us gathered around. I tore my eyes from the tunnel, thinking to warn Drel, but how would I? I had been commanded not to speak. My words would be disregarded, or worse, I would be seen as an imposter. I bit my tongue as Drel began the process of bringing us back into the First layer.

I would warn them the moment after we crossed.