

Mage Tank, Volume 1

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Mage Tank

An autobiographical telling of the valiant exploits of Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel, described exactly how they happened and without any frill or embellishment.

Written by: Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel, Platinum Delver

Volume: 1

Chapter 1

A tree killed me. Well, maybe that's not fair to the tree. Crashing my bicycle into the tree and bleeding internally until my organs could no longer function killed me. At least, I assume it was the bleeding. I'm not a doctor, so I don't really know. But, I don't blame the tree, or the inevitable consequences of physics colliding violently with my frail human biology. Rather, I blame the motherfucker who didn't understand bike lanes.

I didn't see the car that hit me. I heard it approach from behind, engine revving like the driver was competing for the littlest dick award. Sorry, that's body-shaming. The car was loud; the type of thing you hear screaming through the neighborhood at one a.m., the driver announcing his (or her, but let's be honest, *his*) inadequacy to the world with the thundering trumpets of the NASCAR gods.

I was firmly in the bike lane, reflectors on my helmet, bright clothes, middle of the day. The slight left curve of the road must have been too much for the driver because they drifted into my lane and swiped me. They didn't outright crash into me. Just clipped my left side so fast that my elbow turned to gravel and my tibia snapped and my hamstring tore and so, so much pain flooded my body. Bright and sudden and terrible. Then, I was careening off the road, down the grassy slope, and into the trunk of a mighty oak.

I hit the tree with my torso. A twenty mile-per-hour chest bump with an unyielding bro made of wood and bark. I heard my ribs and sternum crack more than I felt it. At that point I'd gone into enough shock that I was aware something terrible was happening to my body, but I wasn't really feeling it. I spun and ragdolled into the line of trees and came to a stop, chest and head facing up, legs and hips rolled over to the right. A nice spinal twist. Perfect for relieving tension in the glutes and lower back. Of course, I couldn't feel my glutes or lower back. All I felt was something deeply wrong inside my body, and I couldn't breathe. I stared up at the canopy, overcast sky peeking down between the branches and thinning autumn leaves. It was the type of day I loved. Crisp and cool and just a little damp.

I gasped in a breath and tried to call out, cry out, scream, make *some* sort of noise but all that came out was a pathetic, high-pitched groan. I struggled to breathe in and out, the pain beginning to blossom in my chest. I heard wetness in my breath, felt gurgling in my throat. I sputtered blood like a gut-punched anime protagonist. Punctured lung, I guess. My body began to go numb, the sounds of the forest and the wind and the cars driving by on the road forty feet away all hushed. My vision darkened. And finally, the world disappeared.

At first, I didn't believe that I had died. The experience was similar to stories I'd heard about moments before death, but there was no dark oblivion consuming my awareness, no dutiful angels, demons, or reapers coming to claim my soul. However, text formed against the black nothing reality had become, assuring me of my circumstances.

You died.

I was confused for a moment. Then, I tried to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but there was no sound. My abs didn't clench, my lungs didn't force out air, my vocal chords didn't tighten to make sound and express my delight at the humor. None of those sensations came. No sensation came at all. Nothing. I felt nothing. Physically, that is. I still felt the panic that came after the realization that my body was failing to send or receive signals. But I could see, at least. Not that there was much to see in the dark beyond those words, which shifted and reformed into new ones.

Would you like to remain dead or respawn?

(A): Life sucks, let me die.

(B): Respawn.

Life sucks, let me die? I considered the option, confused. It was like one of those antagonistic video games that tried to shame you into playing at a higher difficulty. "Normal" difficulty or "I'm a little baby who's afraid of games" difficulty, complete with an infant in a soldier outfit sucking on a pacifier.

I didn't think life sucked. Well, at one point I had but not anymore. I'd gotten my shit together. I'd gone to therapy, gotten a late-in-life mental health diagnosis, started medication, quit drinking, started exercising. I took a damn bike to work for Christ's sake. I was happy, I was engaged to a wonderful woman, I made decent money. This was a shitty time to die.

I focused on the word "Respawn". The option highlighted and the text pulsed blue, then the text swirled and reformed once again.

Respawning will start you in a new zone. Continue to respawn?

(A): Hell yeah, new content!

(B): No thanks, let me die.

New content? Was I getting *Earth: the Expansion Pack*? I rolled my eyes, which did nothing because I doubt I *had* eyes at that moment, then focused on “Hell yeah, new content!” The message pulsed blue and disappeared. For a few seconds, nothing new happened, but then more text, and a countdown.

Moving to character creation room.

3...

2...

1...

Light flooded my eyes and sensation returned to my body. After a minute of disorientation, I realized that I was laying back on a soft surface, in a body that was free of broken bones or blood-filled lungs. My eyes adjusted to the light and I found myself in a dimly lit room.

I stared at a vaulted ceiling made up of dark wooden beams and densely woven straw. I sat up, realizing I was on some sort of mattress and I ran my hands over the coarse fabric of the blanket beneath me. Through its surface I felt uneven bedding, rough and dry. More straw, maybe?

I turned and set my feet on the ground with a soft thud. I was wearing what looked like an ancient pair of leather boots. I stood and looked down at myself. My pants were made of dark linen and my shirt was made of the same, but off-white. It was also very long, hanging down to my knees, with sleeves that opened wide at the wrists. It was cinched around the waist with a tattered leather belt. Overall, the getup was very similar to a wizard outfit I'd worn to the local renaissance fair, minus the wizard hat, cloak, and staff.

I moved and stretched, making sure my muscles and bones were all back to where they were supposed to be. A few deep breaths confirmed there was no blood in my lungs, but I remembered the pain. The memory was so fresh, the pain so sharp and real, and the sensation of it all disappearing without going through the slow, aching process of healing was strange.

I looked around the room, which was small, about the size of a studio apartment's living room, with a compact dirt floor beneath a loose spreading of more straw. The room was lit by a small fire crackling within a stone fireplace, along with a dozen or so tall, thin candles set about on various surfaces and shelves.

There was a shabby wooden table at the center of the room upon which a large book sat, a couple of crates in one corner, and an empty bookshelf. Otherwise, the room was empty—no furniture or decoration of any kind.

I considered whether I were dreaming. I rarely had lucid dreams though, and the moment I considered that I might be dreaming I usually snapped awake. But that didn't happen. I also tended to have to pee in my dreams. Not sure what that's about, but it was a common theme. I did not have to pee. Trying to flip a light switch sometimes helped me out of a dream. The light levels wouldn't change and I would realize it was a

dream and awaken. But, no light switch. I could put the candles out, but that didn't seem very smart or effective. I also wasn't able to read in my dreams. So, there was at least one easy way to confirm. I stepped to the center table and slid the large book to me.

It was massive, bound in dark, supple leather, with a strap through a large buckle on the front keeping the tome firmly shut. The cover was soft and smooth to the touch and it was unnaturally warm. Almost like touching the hide of a living creature rather than an inanimate object. I took a deep breath and undid the buckle, then flipped it open to the front page.

For a moment I felt a sense of relief as the text within was neat lines of ornately written symbols and letters that were alien and unfamiliar. Complete gibberish, which is what I'd expect from a dream. But, was I still unconscious on the side of the road, or was that also imagined?

As I looked more closely at the symbols, however, I realized that I *could* read them. There were words and letters, but not in English. Not in any other language that I recognized, either. Definitely not one that I'd spent several years becoming fluent in. Nonetheless, the script was fully legible. I couldn't decide whether to score that in the 'dream' column or the 'holy shit this is real!' column, so I started perusing the text.

At the top of the page was a scribbled note. It was messily written, as though the author had made it hastily.

As a newly arrived citizen of this world, you have bypassed the normal means of character customization via natural birth and have access to the following additional options while in the character creation room: Physical Appearance, Birth Sign, Bonus Item Selection.

I raised an eyebrow, then continued to the text below, written in a formal, flowing script that looked like the normal font within the book.

Welcome, Traveler, and congratulations on qualifying for the first round of testing! You are currently in the character creation room where you may assign your starting attribute points, select your first passive and active ability, and select your starting equipment. Turn the page to begin!

Below that was another note in the sloppy writing.

Before turning the page, make your additional selections. Say the name of the option out loud and you will be guided through customization.

I scratched my cheek, thinking about the instructions, and was surprised to find it smooth and barren. I usually sported a short beard, an appearance I'd settled on in my early twenties as my pudgy frame had left me with an ambiguous jawline. Even after getting into the habit of diet and exercise, which knocked fifty pounds off my body, I'd kept the growth. I felt naked without it. I reached up to my scalp and found that I was also bald. It was completely smooth, as though a barber had just finished with a straight razor.

"Physical appearance," I said, calling up the first of the three bonus options.

Someone cleared their throat from behind me and I jumped. I turned to find a tall, thin man sporting a broad mustache which curled up at its edges. He was sharply

dressed in a dark gray suit complete with a golden tie clip and a pocket square that matched the colorful floral pattern on his tie.

“Good morning, sir,” he said in a low baritone with a hint of gravel in it.

“Fuck, dude,” I said, “where’d you come from?”

“I apologize for startling you,” he said, smiling politely. The ends of his moustache bobbed with the expression. “I honestly have no idea where I’ve come from. My patron is in charge of my travel, from the means to the destination, and they rarely tell me where I’m going, when I’m going there, or that I’m going anywhere at all, for that matter.”

“Your patron?” I asked.

“Indeed. I believe that you require some assistance deciding on a new look.”

“Well, I don’t even know what my current look is. I’m bald, which is weird.” I took a sharp breath. “Listen, do you know what’s going on here?”

He raised a precisely plucked eyebrow.

“We are choosing your appearance, sir.”

“No. I mean, we are, but I’m asking about all of this.” I gestured broadly at the room. The well-dressed man took a look around, frowning in disapproval at what he saw.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“Ah.” I paused to consider what I was even asking. “I died. And now I’m here. Am I still dead? Did I actually die? Are you dead? Is this the afterlife?”

He tilted his head and his brow furrowed.

“I am not dead,” he said slowly. “As for you, I would not presume to know. You appear to be alive. The dead that I have encountered do not tend to speak. They are inclined to lay there doing nothing more than being dead.”

“I see.”

He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

“If it pleases you, sir, I bill by the minute and as you are not the one incurring charges for my services I would prefer to proceed with our appointment. I’d hate to appear as though I’m padding the time sheets, so to speak.”

“Oh. Ok, sure.”

“Very good.” He snapped his fingers and a full-length mirror sprouted out of the ground, making me hop back in surprise. I took a second to recompose myself, and cleared my throat.

“Mirror from nowhere,” I said. “That’s cool. No big deal.”

I took a look at my reflection and found a much younger version of myself looking back. Gone were the creeping wrinkles around my forehead and eyes, and my skin held the softness of youth. My hairline, still barely visible despite the clean shave, was also better. Not that I had been balding, but my forehead had definitely grown as I’d gotten older. I was still an adult, but looked like I was going into my freshman year of college.

Beyond the obvious age difference, I could see a well-muscled chest pressing against my linen shirt. I reached up and ran my hands over it, then down across my abdomen. I felt my shoulders and flexed a bicep. I was buff. Not bodybuilder buff, but as well muscled as I’d gotten during a two-year strength training phase in my twenties.

Beyond that, the layer of fat that had hidden my bulk during the time I spent lifting was gone. I could feel the outlines of a serious six pack beneath the linen.

“If you’re done fondling yourself, sir,” said the well-dressed man. The tailor? Was I also buying dress clothes? He stood just behind me, looking at me in the mirror.

“Perhaps we should start with the hair. Do you have any preferences?”

“Um, I like it short, I guess. But not too short. Finger length?”

“Curly, straight, thick, thin, coarse?” he asked.

“I was always a bit curly. Just, I’m fine with what I had before if that’s possible.”

My hair was one of the few parts of my body I’d been satisfied with.

“Very good.” He plucked a brush out of thin air and ran it over my scalp. A few seconds later I had a short, well groomed head of hair with a clean fade along the sides. It was my natural color, so dark brown that it was nearly black. “How’s that?”

“That’s great.” It was my standard post-haircut reply, even if I didn’t like the barber’s work, but this looked good. Plus, I wasn’t too picky.

“Facial hair?” he asked.

“How about a full beard? Maybe on the longer side. And can you make it thick? My old one was a bit patchy. And it was going gray. So, no gray?”

“Of course,” he said, producing a comb and running it across my face. As I watched, the beard hairs sprang into existence, running down to my collar bone. It was already shaped, cut shorter on the sides and cleanly trimmed at the base so it didn’t look bushy or wild. The tailor pulled out a bottle of oil and began massaging some of it in. It smelled like peppermint and wood chips.

“Any preference for color?” he asked.

“Hmm, I’m fine with it the way it is.”

“Eyebrows?”

For the first time I noticed that those were missing as well.

“Just what I had before is fine. I mean, I had one hair on my right brow that always grew way longer than the others so if you can fix that, please do.”

He nodded and produced a thin brush with a long handle, almost like a toothbrush, and ran it along my brow. Voila, I had eyebrows again.

“Any preference for skin tone?”

“What are my options?” I asked.

“Anything you like. Fair, olive, tanned, any shade of brown, orange, blue, green, chartreuse, the sky is the limit.”

“Wow, ok. Just what I had before but give me a bit of a tan I suppose.”

“Very good.” He tapped me on the temple and my pale skin turned a few shades darker. “That about right?”

“Yeah, that’s great. Don’t want to look like I live in a tanning booth.”

“A wise choice. Eye color?”

“Oh, definitely green. Like a piercing green.”

He ran a hand in front of my face and my irises turned emerald.

“Hell yeah, that’s cool.”

“Any other physical features you’d like to change? Height, finger width, the size of your feet or the size of any other parts?”

I turned and looked at him.

“I can make... anything bigger?”

“Or smaller, if you so choose.”

Needless to say I saw no reason to make anything on my body any bigger than it was already, as everything was certainly big enough and I had no personal insecurities or feelings of inadequacy. I opted to gain a couple inches in height, making me a member of the over-six-foot club, but otherwise I was perfectly happy with my proportions.

“Are you fine with your previous body hair?”

“Sure, but I guess get rid of my back hair, never was a fan of that.” I’d been a somewhat hairy dude, and the feeling of my chest hair growing back tickled under my shirt.

The tailor plucked at my garments, wrinkling his nose.

“I would love to do something about these clothes, but I’m afraid that is restricted.”

“Restricted? How come?”

He shrugged.

“I am but the lowly servant. I don’t make those sorts of decisions. Are you happy with your current look? Anything else you’d like to change?”

“No, I think this covers it. Thanks.”

“Of course.” He stepped back and looked me up and down, then smiled.

“Conservative, but classy. I think it suits you well.”

“Thanks,” I said, wondering what he meant by conservative.

“Very well. If that is all, then I shall take my leave.”

“Alright, have a good one,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand, but he’d already disappeared. I stood there awkwardly, then let my hand drop. I took a moment

to run my fingers through my glorious new beard, then checked the handwritten note for the next option. “Birth sign!”

A translucent blue window appeared in front of me, covered in text. Oddly, the first bit of text was in the same sloppy handwriting as the book notes.

As an extra-dimensional entity you have access to a unique sign. I suggest you take it.

Extra-dimensional entity? What the fuck did that mean?

Chapter 2

The text for the ‘unique’ extra-dimensional entity sign was also in the same messy handwriting.

Unique Sign: The Traveler. Travelers go places and do things, bla bla bla, putting something here because there’s a minimum text requirement for the description.

Bonuses:

(1) Spectacular Vernacular: You have an eidetic memory for languages and an intuitive grasp of grammar. You learn new languages and dialects at incredible speed.

(2) That’s a Lot of Stats!: You can gain bonus attribute points through training up to a maximum score of ten in each attribute.

The bonuses looked good, but I was suspicious of the author’s motives. Who was this person? Were they responsible for my ‘respawn’? Did they really have my best interests at heart? My mind turned to classic tales of mercurial gods making playthings out of mortals. Still, I couldn’t see how either of those options could burden me with a monkey’s-paw-style curse of some sort.

I was curious about the That’s a Lot of Stats! bonus, as well. Was ten a high number, or was it trivial? How much of an advantage was it to gain stat points that way? I looked over the other options.

They ranged from quicker skill advancement, to extra mana, to the ability to turn invisible for one minute per day—very tempting—and one even offered an increase to the potency of poisons and mind-affecting spells and abilities. Pretty standard RPG fare.

I shrugged and decided to trust the author of the notes for now. At the very least, quickly learning new languages was useful. I got the feeling I wouldn't meet too many native English speakers in whatever this 'new zone' was. I could already read the language that the big book was in, so I had a head start, but who knew if that was the mother tongue of these lands. I selected *The Traveler*, got a confirmation message, and the window disappeared.

"Bonus Item Selection!"

A new window popped up, once again scribbled by the mysterious author.

You died and all your shit is gone. Too bad, now you're poor. Lucky for you I'm feeling generous, so you can pick one item from the following list:

(1) 50 Hiwardian golden notes: Cold, hard, Hiwardian currency, the most widely accepted in your new region. Better buy a fancy purse to carry it all in;

(2) Ring of Healing: While wearing this ring you're granted +100% to your health regeneration. Heal those nasty paper cuts faster;

(3) Big-Ass Hammer: A six-foot-long war maul that weighs as much as a one-handed battle hammer, but still hurts as much as a full-sized war maul when you smack someone with it;

(4) Infinity Quiver: A quiver of steel-tipped arrows that never runs out of ammo. No, you can't dump it out endlessly and fill up the ocean or become a war merchant with a cost-basis of zero and ruin the economy or any other weird exploit you're thinking of. You need an arrow, you get an arrow, that's it;

(5) Edgelord Wakizashi: A wakizashi with a steel blade that will upgrade into higher quality materials after slaying a certain number of your enemies with it. It also gains bonus damage if you're brooding.

I was beginning to become a bit concerned about the item descriptions. Why were they all so snarky?

I spent a few minutes looking over the choices. The weapons seemed nice, but without knowing what I had gotten myself into I didn't feel confident in choosing one. If life outside this room was in any way similar to my Earth life, I wouldn't have much use for a melee weapon or a quiver of arrows.

The style of the room I was in and the choices I was being given led me to suspect I was wandering into some sort of medieval fantasy combat scenario, but it's possible all that window dressing was setting me up to make biased assumptions that I would pay for later. As for the currency, I didn't have any idea what it was worth. Would one golden note get me a bag of rice, a year's supply of rice, or an entire rice farm?

Maybe rice wasn't the best expression of buying power.

I picked the Ring of Healing, because healing twice as fast as normal sounded good no matter what situation I was in. Fix a broken bone in three weeks instead of six? Works for me. Maybe it'll help with indigestion too.

After making my decision the ring appeared in front of me and hovered in the air until I grabbed it. It was a simple golden band with three small rubies set into it. I slipped the ring on and it fit perfectly, but I didn't feel any surge of power or sudden sense of wellbeing.

Having gone through all my 'bonus' options, I went back to the big book and turned the page.

A translucent blue window appeared over the book with text written in the normal decorative font.

You do not have a name, please input your name.

I was shit at names, but I ran a few options through my head, eventually settling on one I liked. "Arlo". Arlo wasn't my real name, but I'd always liked it, so might as well. The name automatically appeared on the screen, and I promptly ignored the implication that some mind-reading AI or entity was monitoring my thoughts.

I considered whether I should come up with a surname but there wasn't any way to know if that was what the screen wanted. Maybe I would be assigned a last name, or maybe I'd keep my old one. I'd hate to enter a name into the window like it was my first and last name only to end up having the text I entered count only as my first name and be in the uncomfortable situation of having two names as my first name. I'd never been a fan of compound names, and if that meant I didn't get a last name I wasn't too worried about it. I'd rather be a Cher than a Mary-Kate. The screen updated with my new name along with a host of other information.

Name: Arlo

Age: 0 (physical age 18. Actual age 35)

Delver Level: 0

Special Delves Completed: 0

Health: 23

Health Regeneration: 4/hour

Stamina: 20

Stamina Regeneration: 2/hour

Mana: 40

Mana Regeneration: 4/hour

Race: Human

Subrace: Extradimensional Entity

Racial Bonus: Adaptable

Adaptable: Adaptable races possess a high capacity for modifying their environments and developing technologies to suit their needs. +100% to crafting skill progression.

Subracial Bonus: From the Beyond

From the Beyond: Your mind and body have been subjected to incredible dimensional forces and your soul has been irrevocably altered. This experience has earned you Dimensional Attunement. You've earned +10 to the Dimensional Magic skill. You gain +100% to Dimensional Magic skill progression. You gain 50% resistance to non-consensual dimensional effects. You gain the active ability Shortcut.

Birth Sign: The Traveler

Birth Sign Bonuses: Spectacular Vernacular, That's a Lot of Stats!

Divine Favor: For better or worse you have garnered the attention of a divine being. This divine being is currently your patron and has granted you a series of

perks. Continue to garner their favor to be granted additional rewards. Anger your patron and suffer the consequences.

Divine Perks: Respawn, Customized Physical Appearance, Unique Birth Sign, Bonus Item Selection, Carryover Stats.

Carryover Stats: Your achievements from a past life have earned you bonus attribute points to certain stats.

Huzzah! More plates, more dates! Your focus on strength training during a previous life has earned you +1 STR.

Huzzah! You can touch your toes! Your focus on flexibility training during a previous life has earned you +1 AGI.

Huzzah! Half marathons are for half asses! Your focus on long-distance running during a previous life has earned you +1 SPD.

Huzzah! Smile through the pain! Your experience of significant physical injury during a previous life has earned you +1 FOR.

Huzzah! How many degrees do you have?! Your focus on academic learning during a previous life has earned you +4 INT.

Huzzah! Everyone needs therapy! Your focus on self-reflection and cognitive behavioral therapy during a previous life has earned you +3 WIS.

Huzzah! This guy's got jokes! Your focus on concealing your feelings of inadequacy through humor during a previous life has earned you +2 CHA.

Huzzah! Don't look behind you! A divine being is watching you, and has interceded on your behalf in a previous life. This has earned you +1 LCK.

Stats:

Strength 2

Agility 2

Speed 2

Fortitude 2

Intelligence 5

Wisdom 4

Charisma 3

Luck 2

You have 10 attribute points to distribute. You must spend these points before leaving the Character Creation room, or they will be lost. Select a stat to see additional details.

Active Abilities (1/10):

Shortcut

Dimensional

Cost: 10 mana

Requirements: Dimensional Magic 10

Travel through the cracks between dimensions and teleport to a place you can see within a number of feet equal to 10x your Dimensional Magic skill level.

Passive Abilities (0/4):

None

Intrinsic Abilities (1/10) [Locked - Cannot acquire new intrinsic skills]:

Dimensional Magic 10

Attunement:

Dimensional

Languages:

English

Hiwardian

Loward

There was a decent amount of information here, but most of it left me with more questions than answers. The entry for my age was unusual. I had, in fact, lost seventeen years in physical age. I remembered reading about how the brain didn't fully mature until twenty-four or so, but maybe that was bullshit. Was my brain still 35? I still had all my memories, so maybe. It didn't have much impact on me at the moment, so I moved on.

What were Delver levels? Was that like character levels? I tried to bring up more detail by focusing on it, but nothing happened. I looked at my health, stamina, and mana. I was more magically inclined than anything else from the looks of it. Also, according to my math my health would fully recover in under six hours.

Did that mean I could recover from *any* injury in an afternoon? Forget healing a broken bone in three weeks, this speed of healing was superhuman.

I moved past the racial bonuses to crafting and dimensional magic. Other than confirming that magic was, in fact, a thing here, it didn't tell me much, though I did shudder when I saw that my soul had been irrevocably altered. That sounded ominous.

The active skill, *Shortcut*, sounded good. Escape, repositioning, crossing the street without waiting on the crosswalk, it had a lot of utility. The skill said that I could teleport to a place I could *see*. If so, transparent barriers wouldn't stop me. I could find a jewelry store and pop in through the glass without setting off any alarms. Not that I'd ever been predisposed to stealing, but it's good to consider these types of things. You know, just in case.

The parts that talked about a divine presence and its favor were the most concerning to me. Was the divine entity the one leaving me the notes? What did I have to do to garner their favor, and what sort of consequences were there for angering them? It made me deeply uncomfortable.

The carryover stats were interesting and gave me some insight about what sorts of activities each stat influenced, or what activities I could undertake to train them using my birth sign. Physical training was probably the easiest, but studying, meditation, and mindfulness were also concrete activities.

I'd gotten Charisma for being funny. Or, at least, trying to be funny. So telling jokes helped. Maybe there were some open mic nights that I could hit up.

Luck gave me nothing to work with, aside from reminding me that some god was involved with whatever was going on here.

The stat values felt... underwhelming. Didn't games with these types of systems usually start out in the teens, or even the hundreds? Everything being single digit made

me feel underpowered, but I had no frame of reference. I assumed that I was at least in an OK place.

I also had ten stats to distribute. Assuming that each stat started at one, I already had fourteen points spread out across stats from my carryovers. So, ten more stats was about seventy-one percent more stat points than I'd already been given, and a little less than a forty-eight percent total increase to my stats. I paused over doing that math so quickly in my head. I knew I wasn't that good at math. More mysteries.

I selected Strength to see more detail, then made my way down the list.

Strength

Pick heavy things up, put them back down. Strength determines how heavy you can lift and how many random guys give you awkward compliments before asking about your protein intake. If you want to be a brawler, wear heavy armor, or be accused of steroid use, then Strength is the stat for you!

That wasn't very helpful. Strength makes you stronger. Great. It also garners the attention of men. That was fine, I enjoyed compliments. But how much stronger would one point of Strength make me? I moved on to Agility.

Agility

Backflips and handstands always impress at parties and staying limber is one of the best ways to slow the ever-increasing torment your body plagues you with in old age. Hide in the shadows, round-house kick your foes, and nail your kids from

across the room with the Disciplinary House-Shoe by investing in this must-have stat!

Also more or less what I would expect. I'd never been very flexible, so there was an opportunity for some personal growth there. I kept going down the list.

Speed

Not just for athletes! Speed not only determines how well you can keep up with track stars or run away from mounted bandits and stray dogs, it also enhances how quickly you think, react, or decide what to have for lunch! Wanna go fast? Then Speed is key!

The descriptions were beginning to make me question my assumptions about the medieval fantasy impression I'd been getting. These were references to modern day life. Was this world some sort of hybrid?

Fortitude

It doesn't matter if the enemy hits you when you just won't die. If you're a petty mortal who fears death or a twisted masochist who wants to experience the limits of the human mind's capacity for pain (without suffering life-altering injuries), then live long and prosper with Fortitude.

DISCLAIMER: Fortitude may help you heal from physical trauma, but it will also curse you with the burden of watching all your friends and loved ones die before you.

Dark. Did...Fortitude make you immortal? Or was life so dangerous that you'd be the only one who wouldn't die an early, violent death?

Intelligence

Push up your glasses and practice saying "actually", because you're about to be the smartest person in the room! Your trivia team will love you and your classmates will hate you as you ameliorate your crippling insecurity by proving that you can memorize facts and learn new spells on the first pass. Intelligence isn't just a stat, it's an entire personality!

Easy memorization was good, but I felt like this description was a personal jab, especially since this was my highest base stat. I didn't even like trivia, and I got along fine with my classmates!

Wisdom

When should you act, and when should you refrain? When should you follow the herd, and when should you take the road less traveled? Wisdom gives you insight into life's mysteries, helps you decide the best course of action in any situation, and provides both mental resilience and a wellspring of mana. Know yourself and you shall know the universe.

This was the only stat with a serious description.

Charisma

Charming compliments, rousing speeches, and looking good. Charisma lets you know what to say and how to act in order to get what you want, whether it's a discount on a used car or the autocratic power over a nation. Become an adored sex symbol, a terrifying warlord, or that clerk at the grocery store who's not too bright, but who everyone seems to like, and you like them too because they're kind of cute and they always ask about how your dog is doing.

This description had to be talking about a girl at my local Kroger named Ashley. I stopped in *one time* with my pug Dozer and she never forgot. It was really endearing.

Luck

Fools assume they have some sort of control over their lives, but you know the truth: the universe is random and your destiny is dictated by circumstance. Tragedies strike down saints and monsters get rich off random picks on the stock market. Luck may not have always been on your side, but it damn well better be now! Load the dice of creation in your favor and stumble your way into power, fame, or a life-time supply of free chicken tenders.

Talk about pessimistic. It was almost like the author was trying to scare me away from putting points here.

I took a deep breath and concentrated on the numbers. I could distribute my points evenly, making me a jack of all trades, but I didn't think that was a good idea. I had the perk from my birth sign that let me train stats up to a maximum score of ten.

Any points I spent on stats below that threshold were giving up potential *free* stats. In fact, if I didn't have to spend the stats before I left the room I would have saved them all until I got to ten in each on my own, then chosen where to dump them.

In order to maximize my points, Intelligence was the obvious choice. It was my highest stat, which meant that I'd only be giving up five free points to get it to ten. If I threw all ten there I'd have an INT of fifteen.

I tapped the window and was able to place a point in a stat to see the changes it made to my character. When I did, a confirm button appeared at the bottom. I was able to take the point back without confirming.

Fortitude buffed both stamina and health. With stamina, it was a linear improvement, ten per level. With health, there was an escalating benefit. When I went to a three in Fort, I got thirteen extra HP. When I went to a four in Fort, I got *fourteen* extra HP. That pattern continued as high as I could preview the stat, with point twelve offering twenty-two extra health.

Fortitude also improved stamina regeneration by one per point, and health regen improved by some formula that kept it at twenty percent of my total health.

Wisdom gave ten to mana and one to mana regen. Aside from Fort and WIS, none of the other stats had an effect that I could see displayed numerically.

So, I could gain unknown benefits from most of the stats, or go in on something more concrete like Fortitude or Wisdom. As I agonized over the choices, a new window popped up in front of the character screen.

Four of five party members have completed their character creation process and have initiated a ready check. You have ten minutes to complete character creation.

Shit.

Chapter 3

I had a mini-crisis when confronted with the time limit. After placing my points I still had to select a passive ability, an active ability, *and* choose starting gear. The new screen changed to a large countdown timer and floated away until it was above the single door in the room.

I looked at the stats again. I wanted to put them all in one place to maximize my training stats. I wanted to pick something that had a concrete impact on the values I saw on the screen. But, did I care more about mana or health?

The sickening memory of my ribs shattering against the trunk of a tree and the agonizing pain of internal bleeding and then death flooded my mind. I didn't want to be a glass cannon. I wanted to not fucking die.

I tossed all ten points into Fortitude, pumping it up to twelve and selected *Confirm*.

Health: 198

Health Regeneration: 39/hour

Stamina: 120

Stamina Regeneration: 12/hour

I now regenerated more health in one hour than my entire health total from just a moment earlier. I wanted to dig into these numbers even more, but I didn't have time. The game, or god, or whatever was controlling this system was giving me a kick in the ass.

If I'd known I was under a time constraint I wouldn't have fussed over my appearance so much. I stroked my luxurious beard and started looking for a way to move on to choosing passive and active skills, but another fucking window popped up in front of me.

Wowee! You spent all your Character Creation points on a single stat! A truly inspired and nuanced build. As a reward for your foolhardy bravery you have earned the Dumping achievement!

Dumping: After spending 5 or more stat points at once on a single attribute, you are granted 1 additional point in that attribute. This effect is retroactive.

My Fortitude jumped up another point, and I gained another twenty-three health and five regen, bringing me to 221 health and 44 health regen per hour.

You have reached a Fortitude of 10 or higher at Delver level zero! Just because you won't die, shit still hurts. You know that, right? You have earned the I Don't Attack You, You Attack Me achievement!

I Don't Attack You, You Attack Me: So long as you did not attack first, an enemy becomes stunned for one second the first time they deal damage to you with either a melee weapon or a part of their body. An entity stunned in this way may not be affected by this skill again until the next dawn. Certain skills and abilities may prevent this effect.

Heavens to Betsy! Your Fortitude has reached level 10! Your body has transcended the limits of human resilience and simple attacks from non-magical sources now deal significantly less damage to you. You've also unlocked your first Fortitude evolution. Please select one of the following:

- 1) Like a Rock: Your body acts as though it is five times heavier when determining whether an enemy can force you to move by any means.
- 2) Workhorse: The effects of Fatigue are reduced by 50%.
- 3) I Can Do This All Day: Health and Stamina regeneration bonuses from Fortitude are doubled.

My blood pressure shot up when I was presented with even more choices. Don't get me wrong, it was nice to get more buffs, but I didn't have time to give it any real thought. I was sure that there were a variety of hijinks that could be had with the Like a Rock ability, and Workhorse sounded good, but, like so much of this process, I didn't know enough to decide how good it was. I defaulted to picking the thing that made my numbers go up: I Can Do This All Day. I was up to 88 Health regen and 26 Stamina regen.

The window disappeared after I made my selection and I was left staring at the table. Where was the next window? I had to choose abilities and gear and there were only seven minutes left. Then I remembered the book. I reached out and flipped to the next page. Another blue window appeared.

There are an endless number of skills in Arzia and we hope you've done your homework! Please select what type of Active Skill you would like:

Offensive

Defensive

I had a theme of defense going on but grabbing a defensive skill seemed like overkill. I selected Offensive.

Poke 'em, slash 'em, whack 'em, or blast 'em. What type of offensive skill would you like?

Melee

Ranged Physical

Magical

INT looked like my highest offensive stat, so I selected Magical.

From hellish flames that incinerate your foes to vivid hallucinations that torment them, your enemies will tremble at your power as a master of the arcane arts. Or, they'll freeze. Or collapse on the ground in a fit of giggling. Basically, how do you want them to suffer?

Elementally

Mentally

Dimensionally

Cursedly...

“Dammit!” I said as the list went on and on. I selected Dimensionally since I already had a bonus to it. There was a single spell, and I selected it after reading the description through once.

Oblivion Orb

Dimensional

Mana Cost: 5

Requirements: None

For the briefest moment you create a small dimensional tear in the shape of an orb in your palm, which attempts to transport whatever it touches to another plane of existence. Higher levels of Intelligence increase the size of the orb.

Damage is increased by 1 for each level of Dimensional Magic. The critical damage of this attack is increased by 100%.

I wasn't sure how that worked as an attack spell, but the window disappeared and I flipped to the next page in the book.

Passive skills are powerful effects that help to define your build. Passive skills do not level, but may unlock additional traits as you gain mastery over them. Please select what type of Passive Skill you would like:

Offensive

Defensive

I hesitated. My only form of attack was the odd spell I didn't know how to use, so it made sense to go for an offensive passive. But would an offensive passive give me another means of attack? Passive skills in games were often force multipliers. Get more of what you're good at to really excel. Right now it looked like I was good at taking hits. It was a weak argument, but the logic made sense to me at the time.

I was in a rush, don't judge me. I selected Defensive.

Please select what type of Defensive Passive you would like:

Self

Aura

Self or aura? I assumed self meant the passive only applied to me, but an aura... that would affect my allies too, right? Nobody hated an auramancer. Dude drops into your game with a million active buffs that make everyone stronger? Hell yeah. I selected Aura.

There are three starter defensive auras available. All defensive auras grant you limited awareness of any allies affected by the aura within a limited range:

1) Mike's Magic Shield: You and your allies gain damage reduction to hostile magical effects equal to your Wisdom.

2) Herd Leader: You and your allies gain an additional amount of Mana and Stamina regeneration equal to your Speed.

3) Who Needs a Cleric?: You and your allies gain an additional amount of Health regeneration equal to your Fortitude.

Easy choice. More health regen. I selected Who Needs a Cleric? and my health regen went up to 114, which was a gain of 26, double my Fortitude score. I pondered it for a split second, until I remembered my Ring of Healing. This implied that my ring doubled my health regen *regardless of the source*.

I could now go from the brink of death to full HP in about two hours. I wasn't about to be stitching my wounds back together in seconds while slicing my enemies apart with dual katanas and my cutting wit, but I was on my way.

As soon as I made the selection, power thrummed around me. My body felt great, as though every cell of my being was healthy and whole. My vision was sharper, my muscles were loose and warmed up, my allergies were gone. In fact, my nose was truly clear for the first time I could remember. I took a deep breath and savored the cleansed sinuses.

Three minutes left.

I flipped to the next page of the book and came to my last selection: Equipment.

Whether you want to keep your insides on the inside or cause immeasurable suffering to your enemies and deep emotional harm to the loved ones who survive them, gear helps you get it done. Please select a Starter Kit to receive a complimentary gear loadout.

Starter Kits:

Suckling Sorcerer

Tanky Toddler

Rug-Rat Ranger

Pickney Priest

Ankle-biting Assassin

Baby Barbarian...

I clicked through a couple of the options, taking a look at what they contained. Basic weapon, a couple pieces of armor or enchanted clothes, a couple items, the Assassin had smoke bombs, which was cool, but nothing fit with what I was going for. What *was* I going for? As I gnawed my bottom lip I noticed a new option had appeared. It was written in what was becoming a familiar, hasty scrawl.

Tiny-tot Traveler

I selected it without even looking at what it contained. A single, small necklace appeared in the air before me and I grabbed it just as my time ran out.

The door to the room slammed open and an immense force surrounded me, like a giant hand gripping my entire body, which hurled me toward the open door. I sailed across the threshold and crashed down onto a smooth stone floor, sliding several feet before tumbling to a stop.

I let out a high pitched yelp as I soared, which probably didn't improve the stunning first impression I'd just made on the people in the new room.

There were four of them, and two were gaping at me in open shock. A third merely raised an eyebrow, and the fourth looked disgusted.

“Hi,” I said, sitting up. After recovering from the terror of being manhandled by an invisible giant and having it impress upon me the value of punctuality in this universe, I realized that being tossed out like a bucket of compost hadn’t hurt at all. I hopped up onto my feet and took a look around, my new friends still silently gawking.

One of the wide-eyed looks was from a tall, olive-skinned woman with dirty blonde hair pulled back and woven into a bun. She was dressed in dark leather armor with a bow slung over her shoulder. She looked what I would call, well, handsome. I couldn’t describe to you what makes a woman handsome as opposed to pretty or plain or beautiful or kawaii, but she had it in spades.

The other shocked look came from an even taller person, and seeing them reinforced to me that something truly strange had happened to me.

They weren’t human.

They were tall and lithe, with hands that came down past their knees. They were covered in gray fur and had a long snout, not quite like a dog’s. It was thinner, more tapered, like a bandicoot or a rodent. Short white whiskers twitched to either side of a pink nose, jet-black eyes ran me up and down, and one of their short, pointed ears flicked. They were too real to be someone in a costume and I lost myself for a moment as my mind took a tiny step towards accepting the idea that I had actually, really died. That my home was somewhere very far away and my fiancée was alone. *I was alone.*

I quickly looked away.

The raised eyebrow came from a short and curvy woman with light red skin, which was completely unnatural but after the last person it didn’t trip me up too much. She had a mop of dark, curly hair that came down to her shoulders and she was leaning back on one of the plain stone walls, twirling a scepter in one hand. She wore a long,

blood-red tabard with some elaborate and twisting symbol on the front over a chainmail shirt with white robes that looked thick and padded underneath. A small shield was propped against the wall beside her.

The look of disgust came from the tallest of the group who stood head and shoulders over me despite the extra couple of inches I'd given myself. Inches that were suddenly failing to fill me with the confidence I'd thought they would. He was pale—deathly pale—with ice-blue eyes and hair the color of snow you might find on the side of the highway. He was fully clad in steel armor.

As my eyes moved over the man's getup, I got distracted. I knew there were nifty names for all the individual pieces of the plate armor, but I couldn't remember all of them. I knew more about the lower half, and remembered greaves. Or were they sabatons? Were those different things? I thought they were. Delightfully, Big n' Pale was the first to speak.

"You sure took your time," he said in a voice so low I felt it in my bones. I had been staring at his lower extremities for a lot longer than was polite, and I nodded after he spoke, hoping I looked like I was deep in contemplation about something other than his trousers or what might lay beyond them. I looked up and smiled.

"I was just figuring some things out," I said. "I'm Arlo." I held out a hand to him. His jaw clenched as he looked down at it, then he sighed.

"Arlo, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm very unhappy with what I'm seeing."

Left hanging for the second time that day, I let my hand drop. Maybe they didn't do handshakes here.

"Ok," I began, "why-" He held up a finger and cut me off.

“First, what am I even looking at?” He gestured up and down at me. “You’re wearing rags. I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that your gear pack and everything else you brought got left in the room you just fell out of, a room which no longer exists and where everything left inside is now cast out to oblivion.”

I turned to look at the door and found a blank stone wall, the same as the rest of the room.

“If I assume that,” he continued, “then I can believe that you’re just an idiot, and not someone who is either profoundly challenged or, worse, a saboteur.”

I peeked down at my linen clothes, then around at the others who were all wearing some form of armor. Each of them also had a large backpack on or near them and an additional large sack as big as my torso sat on the ground, stuffed full. I nodded.

“Ok,” I said. Big n’ Pale tilted his head and clenched his hand into a fist.

“Second, you spent a long time in that creation chamber. So long, in fact, that we,” he gestured between himself and the other three, “all learned together on this very day that there is a thing called a ‘ready check’ that can force a person out of the room if they take too long. I’ve never heard of a ready check. Sayil,” he said, turning to the tall beast-person, “have you heard of a ready check before?”

“Nope,” said Sayil in a rough and tumble voice straight out of a Clint Eastwood movie.

“See?” said Big n’ Pale.

“So,” I said, “what I’m hearing is that people don’t normally take that long.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I apologize for my, uh, tardiness. It shan't happen again.”

Big n’ Pale dropped a heavy, gauntleted hand onto my shoulder.

“Are you taking this seriously?” he asked.

“I think so?”

He hung his head, let his hand slide off my shoulder, then took a deep breath and stood up straight.

“Alright,” he said, “I’m the party leader. Have a problem with that?”

“I don’t think I do.”

The short woman leaning against the wall spoke up, looking to Big n’ Pale, whose identity I considered updating to Party Leader in my mind. Perhaps Big n’ Pale Party Leader. That was too long. Pale Party? Big Leader?

“You should at least ask him for his title,” the pink-skinned woman said, her tone much merrier than Big n’ Pale. “To make it official.” Big n’ Pale’s mouth made a thin line but he nodded.

“Fine,” he said. “What’s your title?”

I had trouble deciding how to approach that question. I assumed he was asking me for something along the lines of a noble title, but I had no idea if noble titles were a thing here. If they were, what type of noble hierarchy did they have? Was this a kingdom? An empire? A dictatorship where supreme executive power was awarded by strange women lying in ponds and distributing swords?

I decided to take the honest route.

“Esquire.”

Chapter 4

Esquire was a technically correct title; I did have a law degree. In fact, I could have told them to call me Doctor if I'd felt so inclined, but I thought that might sew some confusion. It was also pretentious.

"Esquire?" Big n' Pale asked, looking incredulous.

"He's a fucking landed peasant!" said the tall blonde in leather.

"Not a peasant," said the shorter red-skinned woman.

"Not a noble either," said the beast-person. Big n' Pale held up a hand to quiet them.

"Esquire Arlo," he said slowly, "how did you end up with a place in the Creation Delve?"

I gave this a second of thought.

"It was a gift," I said.

"Your lord *gifted* you with a slot in this year's Creation Delve?"

I decided to see how far I could stretch the truth. One might characterize the act of granting me a second life as a gift, so that wasn't too far astray from what happened. Plus, it was a gift from a divine being. Perhaps that made them a sort of capital 'L' Lord instead of what Big n' Pale meant, so I just went with it.

"Yes," I said, urging myself to believe the lie I was telling.

"Hell of a gift," the beast-person drawled. The others were speechless.

"What, if I may ask, are all of *your* titles?" I said, looking around the room.

"He's fucking with us," said the blonde. "He's probably the whelp of some fat prince out in Timagrín or something. More money than sense." She walked toward me

and prodded me in the chest hard with a finger. I barely felt it. “You may think this is funny, but your jokes have led you to an unmarked grave in the Delve.”

“Is that a threat?” I asked. She barked out a laugh.

“A threat? I don’t have to do shit for you to get dead.”

“Enough, Chilla,” Big n’ Pale said to the blonde. “Esquire or not, that is the title you have given and so the party will be organized with that fact in mind.” He turned to the short, red-skinned woman. “Good enough, Xim?” She nodded. “Then it’s settled.”

He turned back to me, glaring.

“I am Lord Varrin Ravvenblaq, second son of Thundralke Ealdric Ravvenblaq the Third. Such is my pedigree, which marks me as the highest of this group and thus I am its leader. Because you have claimed to be an esquire, who cannot possibly be of a higher rank than anyone here, I will spare you the lineage of our other members. This is Low-Lord Chilla Stormreiss,” he pointed to the blonde woman. “She is second in the party as her mother is a Wolfsbane.” He pointed at the beast-person, “This is Sir Sayil Starion, who is third, as his father is a count in the Littan Empire. This,” he pointed to the shorter woman, “is Xim of the Third Layer who is fourth because she is a denizen of the deep. And you are Esquire Arlo whose surname is irrelevant and who is the child of no one important.”

“My mother would definitely disagree with that.”

“Enough of your quips,” said Big n’ Pale, I mean, Lord Varrin. He ran a hand through his hair and leaned back, looking forlornly at the ceiling. “What’s your class?”

“Lower than noble and higher than peasant, apparently.” I said. “So, I guess middle?”

“Your build, you fool! How do you fight?”

I knew what he'd been asking, and I knew it was immature to keep riling him up but I couldn't help myself on that last one.

“Spells.”

Varrin waited a moment for me to elaborate, but I didn't. Telling him my stats would be telling him my strengths and weaknesses and I got the feeling me and him weren't going to walk out of here as good friends.

“Fine,” he said after it became obvious I wasn't giving him anything further. “A caster. So that gives us four damage dealers and a cleric. It could be worse. We've got ranged physical from Chilla and whatever the esquire here has for magic damage, plus two melee fighters, Sir Sayil and I, so our damage diversity is decent. Cleric for healing is good since we won't have a main tank, Xim can handle a shield and armor in case she gets attacked. Sir Sayil, did you balance for defense or focus more on attack?”

“Balance,” said Sayil. “Gonna focus on attack as I level, but wanted to make sure I could make it work with whatever team I ended up with.”

“That's good,” said Varrin, “I did the same.” Xim and Chilla both nodded in agreement at the sentiment.

“Did you all not come in together?” I asked. They all looked at me. Sayil and Chilla looked dumbfounded, but Varrin was pissed. Xim just stared at me.

“You don't know how this works at all, do you?” Varrin asked.

“I do not,” I said. Even if I wanted to lie it would quickly become obvious that I didn't know what I was doing. I mean, I thought it was already obvious.

“We've been teamed up with an infant,” said Varrin. “Do I need to teach you your letters as well?”

“You think he can read?” asked Chilla.

“This is the Creation Delve,” said Xim, taking a step forward. “It is the first Delve taken by those who wish to become Delvers.” The others watched her for a moment as she spoke, but Varrin stomped away and started pulling equipment out of his pack. Chilla and Sir Sayil also turned to their own preparations.

Xim walked closer to me and continued.

“One hundred candidates must enter at once for the Creation Delve to activate and the Delve assigns us into random groups of five. We do not know who we will be grouped with until after we have undergone character creation. I believe Chilla and Varrin know each other at least somewhat, but the rest of us are strangers.”

“That’s why they were talking about having a balanced build,” I said.

Xim nodded, her dark, curly hair bobbing.

“Yes, it’s difficult to specialize because too many with the same specialty may be grouped up, which makes it more difficult to complete the Delve on one of the higher tiers. Five defense specialists might get killed by ranged casters in a fortified position. Five damage specialists can be overrun by melee attackers. And five healers, well,” she gave a slight smile, “they can’t do much without the rest of the party.”

She began pacing around me in a circle, looking me up and down as she spoke.

“Most aspiring Delvers go for a balanced approach. Their build will lean toward a specialty, while also fleshing out other stats that will be useful if they wind up in a party with a lot of the same types. Our party is missing a defense specialist. But while both Sir Sayil and Lord Varrin are planning to become Strength-based melee damage specialists, for the Creation Delve they both invested in things like extra Fortitude, or Agility to help them take hits or dodge attacks, as opposed to leaning heavily into Strength and Speed.”

“And you’re a cleric,” I said, looking over her armor and the scepter she continued to swing about as she walked. “So you went for what? More Intelligence and Wisdom, but also a healthy splash of Strength and Fortitude?”

“Close,” she said, stopping in front of me. “Charisma is more important than Intelligence for my casting. I can heal, but I can also take the front line and deal with melee threats if I have to.”

“What if you end up with five ‘balanced’ melee classes?”

Xim shrugged.

“It happens. You can’t focus on everything, so the most common tactic is to pick two roles and build into those. But *you* didn’t know that coming in.”

“That’s right.”

She leaned in and spoke softly.

“So you specialized?”

“In a sense.”

She grinned again, like she was in on some joke that I wasn’t.

“It’s probably fine. People who specialize for their Creation Delve are viewed... poorly. They rely on others to fill in the gaps so they can get a head start on the stats they really want. If enough people did that, then Creation Delves would become a lot more dangerous, so no one likes a specialist. But we have enough balanced members, and some ranged magic will be helpful.”

“Oh,” I said, “it’s not ranged, per se.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Before I could respond, there was a flash of light and the walls around us morphed and changed. They transitioned from bright and clean-cut stone to

roughly-carved rock the color of wet earth. There was a loud crack and a deep grinding sound, followed by a notification window.

Your party leader has initiated the Delve. The selected difficulty is: Platinum. You have twenty-four hours to complete the Delve. Good luck!

“What did you do?!” Sir Sayil roared. When I looked up, an entire wall of the room was descending into the ground, and Sir Sayil had the point of his spear at Low-Lord Varrin’s gorget-covered throat.

Chilla had her bow drawn, aiming at Sir Sayil.

“Take a step back,” she said. Sayil didn’t waiver, his eyes locked on Varrin.

“You’ve killed us,” Sayil said, his spear still leveled at Varrin.

Varrin held his hands out to either side.

“We’re here to delve, aren’t we?” he asked.

“But not to die,” said Sayil. “You never even asked what difficulty we were prepared for.”

“Please,” Varrin scoffed, “you may be far from home, Sir Sayil, but I know who you are. I’ve been keeping up with all the promising candidates for this year’s Delve since I was twelve. Your empire holds tournaments to determine who enters their Delver academies. You swept your bracket, the only Littan to go undefeated that year. Since then you’ve been at the head of your class for six consecutive semesters.”

“And what of it?” asked Sayil.

“Your talents would be wasted on anything less than a gold Delve. Why wouldn’t you aim for the top?”

Sayil stepped back and slammed the butt of his spear into the ground.

“My family is not so greedy for power that we would throw our lives away. I would have been fine with a gold Delve, but you chose platinum. And even if you know something about *me*, I don’t know anything about *you*.”

Varrin let his hands drop, then shrugged.

“Chilla was one of five students hand-picked from my vassals. We’ve trained together extensively and I can vouch for her talent. The fact that we’ve ended up in the same party is an enormous advantage. And Xim is of the Third Layer! Any member of her tribe could carry a party of three-year-olds through a silver Delve without harm.”

Sayil thrust his spear in my direction.

“And what about him?” he asked. Varrin grunted.

“Who cares? He can hide in the back and throw *Force Bolt* or whatever it is he does. The four of us are among the absolute best of this year’s candidates. If we can’t handle a platinum Creation Delve, then no one can.”

“You still should have asked,” Sayil spat.

“I didn’t have to ask,” said Varrin. “This isn’t a council, it’s a party, and I am its leader. You need to respect that while we’re inside.”

Sayil glowered at Varrin, but didn’t say anything further.

While the drama unfolded, I kept an eye on the wall beyond them as it slowly made its way into the ground. Green mist began to creep over its edges and drift in tendrils toward the floor, where it puddled and spread.

“It’s good that we’re all bonding,” I said, “but should we worry about that?”

Xim was already studying the mist, frowning, and the other three turned to look at it. As the wall sank, more and more mist spilled out of it. It flowed across the ground

and began filling the room. Varrin adjusted his sword belt and snatched a kite shield off the ground, sending swirling patterns through the cloud.

“Looks like visibility will be low inside,” he said.

“It’s not just fog,” said Xim, kneeling to study the vapor and taking a hesitant sniff. “It’s poisonous.”

By the time the door had sunk entirely, the mist was pouring out. Beyond it was a dark stone corridor, its walls rough and uneven. A set of stone steps was barely visible within, descending into the cloud.

“Well that’s fucking ominous,” I said. Sayil shot Varrin another dark look. Chilla rifled through her pack and produced three small vials of a dark, amber liquid.

“I have three antidotes,” she said.

“Antidotes won’t matter,” said Xim. “It will cleanse the poison, but you’ll just breathe more in and get poisoned again immediately.”

“Then we take the antidotes after we’ve gone through the cloud,” said Chilla.

“And how long,” said Sir Sayil, “will that take?”

We all leaned in for a closer look, but the bottom of the stairs was obscured by puke-green darkness.

“Maybe we sit this one out,” I said. “Catch the next Creation Delve.”

“Once entered,” said Xim, “you can’t leave the Delve until it’s completed.”

“And if we can’t complete it?” I asked.

“We die,” said Sayil.

I swallowed, then wondered if there were some sort of record for speedrunning your second death.

“It’s a beginner Delve,” said Varrin. “It can’t be very strong. Everyone check your health regen.” Varrin knelt and took a deep breath of the mist. He coughed and stood back up, eyes watering, then he stared off into the distance for a second. “It’s one damage every five minutes. See?” He made a face like he’d just taken a shot of uncut moonshine brewed in a dirty bathtub. “It’s not that bad. Do some math and figure out how long it will take for your health to get low. Xim can rotate her heals. If the mist keeps going we just have to get through it in a few hours.”

“Holy shit,” said Chilla. “My health regen is massive for some reason.”

“Mine too,” said Xim.

Varrin stared off into space again. Checking his stats, I guessed.

“You’re right,” he said. “The detail reads: ‘Plus thirteen health regen granted from Who Needs a Cleric?’. Is that someone’s skill?”

The others shook their heads. I raised my hand slightly and they all looked at me.

“That’s mine,” I said. “No offense, Xim. That’s just the name of the skill. I’m sure clerics are very much needed.”

She just stared, which was happening a lot to me. People staring. These people, at least. I thought it might be a cultural difference. Maybe staring wasn’t rude here. But, honestly, I knew that it was more likely that my whole existence within the context of this Creation Delve was a bit ludicrous.

“The name of that skill,” said Varrin, “is absurd.”

“It’s strong,” said Sayil. “Who cares what it’s named?”

“Is it an aura?” asked Xim.

“Yeah,” I said. “Picked it up as my passive. Thought it looked pretty good.”

“Pretty good?” said Sayil. “For level zero it’s unhinged.”

“It’s an aura,” said Varrin, “They’re always strong to start-”

“Not *this* strong,” Sayil interrupted. Varrin frowned.

“They don’t scale well as you level. That’s why no one takes them.”

“We’re lucky he did, though,” said Sayil.

“Yes,” said Varrin, glancing at me. “If all you do is stand there and give us that health regen you’ll at least be useful. One damage every five minutes is twelve an hour, so thirteen extra health regen completely offsets the poison effect.”

“Glad I can help,” I said. It was true. Varrin was being an asshole, but I kind of understood why. I was obviously a complete amateur at whatever this Creation Delve thing was. Even if the others weren’t experts, they had clearly studied and prepared for it.

If this were a group project, I was the guy who hadn’t spent a single day paying attention in class, then showed up expecting everyone else to do the work. I mean, I hadn’t done that on purpose. I’d been thrust into this situation somewhat against my will. I still wanted to be helpful, or at least not get in the way. So, I could forgive Varrin for his behavior at the moment. Although I expected he was always kind of a dick.

“Is everyone ready to go?” Varrin asked. The others nodded, shouldering their packs and beginning to move to the Delve’s entrance. Varrin picked up the large sack and tossed it to me. “Since you don’t have anything of your own, you can carry one of these.” I smiled and hefted it onto my back.

As I thought about the fact that I didn’t have any gear whatsoever, I remembered that I was still holding the amulet that I’d gotten from the Tiny-Tot Traveler starter kit. The others were already starting down into the darkness, and as I stepped through the entrance behind them I looked down at the necklace.

It had a dark chain speckled with red and silver flecks. A small and utterly black gem dangled off of it, wrapped in an ornate wire setting made of the same material. I focused on it, and a blue window popped up. That was still blowing my mind a little.

Traveler's Amulet

This is an evolving item.

Current Level: Tiny-Tot

Effects:

(1): It's stylish.

Complete the Creation Delve to unlock this amulet's next effect.

It was exactly useless.

I sighed and clasped the amulet around my neck, then stepped down into the murky, green darkness.

Chapter 5

As I entered the fog, my nose was filled with a bitter, metallic scent that made my eyes water. I was also greeted with a notification.

Welcome to your first Delve! Now Initiating user interface. You may customize the interface by concentrating on the element you wish to change.

A series of colored bars appeared at the lower edge of my vision: Red, green, and blue. I assumed they followed standard gaming conventions with red for health, green for stamina, and blue for mana. Above the health bar there was a small skull and crossbones and when I focused on it, text appeared beside it that read “Poisoned, Toxicity: 12/hour”.

I assumed that ‘Toxicity’ told me how much damage I was taking from the poison, since that matched up with the math Varrin had done earlier. I briefly wondered why he’d done math if he had access to the same type of interface. Were his notifications different, or did I have access to different information?

To my upper left was a list of party members, but the only information presented beyond their names was the same skull and crossbones symbol. Each revealed identical text to my own when I focused, “Poisoned, Toxicity: 12/hour”. Another notice appeared, and I paused to read it.

You have entered Delve 1156: The Toxic Grotto.

Difficulty: Platinum

Current accumulation level: 0.5

This Delve's accumulation has been interrupted. Find and eliminate the cause of the disruption to clear the Delve.

Reward: Early mana distribution.

Time Remaining: 23 Hours, 55 minutes.

The notification used a lot of language that I was sure was shorthand. The difficulty was platinum, nothing new there, but what made a Delve platinum? Was it the accumulation level? Sayil's reaction to the difficulty made me think there was more to it, but I had no idea what an accumulation level even was. Maybe it also had to do with the clear condition, which I was happy to see, even though it didn't provide a lot of information. I liked having a clear objective. As for the reward, what was an early mana distribution? I filed those questions away and continued down the steps.

The stairs were damp and had patches of mossy growth that made them slick in places. I stepped down carefully, feeling my body move with an unfamiliar level of grace and precision. My worn leather boots felt like they still had good tread, and although my progress was slow, I made my way down without incident.

As I descended, the stairwell grew gradually darker, until round orbs emitting soft light started to appear. They were set into the walls at regular intervals and I stopped to examine one, finding that it felt cool to the touch, with a surface like smooth rock. I moved on quickly to keep up with my party, but I was curious about what powered the rock lights.

As we reached the bottom, the corridor opened up into a much wider space. The glowing orbs were set into the walls and along the ceiling, providing a gentle level of illumination. Despite this, the omnipresent green fog made it difficult to see more than

thirty or so feet away. The rest of the group had come to a stop, and I stepped forward to join their huddle. Varrin spoke softly.

“Have any of you heard of the accumulation being interrupted before?”

“No,” said Xim. The others shook their heads as well.

“Kill the freaks,” said Chilla. “That’s usually the objective. But I’ve heard of others, like investigating unusual mana sources or reactivating ancient devices.”

“Sure,” said Sayil, “but those are usually found in special-difficulty Delves.” His fur had grown wet and stringy from the fog.

“This isn’t a special, though,” said Varrin. “We should still expect hostiles. We’ll treat it like a normal Delve, just keep an eye out for anything unusual.” He wiped a trickle of green liquid from his brow, then donned a steel helm. “Chilla, take the lead and move us along the left wall. We’ll stay back, but keep within visual range. Sayil, move side by side with me. Xim, stick behind us next to the esquire.” Varrin turned to look me in the eye. “Stay close, don’t wander off, and be quiet unless something is trying to kill you.”

“Even then,” said Chilla, “try not to make too much noise.”

I nodded and gave a thumbs up, then the group fell into formation and began moving. Chilla walked about twenty feet ahead of us, her form half obscured by the fog. She moved with careful steps in a slight crouch, bow drawn and arrow nocked. As we walked I kept an eye on the surroundings, wondering what sorts of things could live down here in the middle of a bunch of deadly mist.

The walls and ceiling were rough and uneven, looking as though they were formed within a naturally occurring cave. There were also stalactites hanging down from above in a few places, but the floor of the space had clearly been modified. It was flat

and had an intentional grain to it. I bent down to look more closely, seeing tiny grooves cut into the floor, so regular and precise that I would have guessed they were machined. It reminded me of the type of flooring you'd find in factories or other industrial buildings, where it was important to keep workers from slipping.

I noticed Varrin and Sayil slowing, and looked ahead to see Chilla with one fist in the air. We came to a stop and she backtracked to us slowly, then whispered.

“Freaks ahead. Look like Stickmen, but it’s tough to tell with the fog.”

Varrin nodded. “How many?”

Chilla shrugged.

“I can make out four, but there might be more.”

“Ok. Return to position and wait one minute, then see if you can pull them with an arrow.”

Chilla turned and crept forward again without a word. Varrin gently placed his pack on the ground, the others following suit, and I put down the bag I was carrying as well. Varrin turned back to me and Xim.

“You two get that?”

Xim nodded, but I needed to know more. The group already thought I was ignorant, and rightfully so. It wasn’t safe to try and conceal how unfamiliar I was with what was happening, although I wasn’t about to try and explain that I was from a different world altogether. If I did that, the best case scenario is that this sort of thing happened a lot here and I’d get a small welcome gift.

On the other hand, maybe outsiders were feared and burned as witches. I was surrounded by four heavily armed and armored individuals. I didn’t want to accidentally provoke any strange prejudices. Most likely they’d think I was a loon, or playing an

exceptionally vicious prank. Either way, I decided that further exposing my ignorance was safer than going into a fight with next to no information.

“What are Stickmen?” I asked. Varrin frowned, but looked as though he’d already accepted my naivete.

“They’re creatures about as tall as a grown man,” he said. “Their body is thin, flexible, and light, but covered in tough skin, so it’s difficult to get a good hit on them. They attack with two long front legs that have hard points and inject you with venom.” He looked over my threadbare clothes. “Try not to get hit.”

He turned back to the front and drew his sword. Sayil stood with his spear ready, and Xim held up her shield, scepter held back and low. I didn’t know what to do, so I took up a boxing stance. Xim eyed me, but then focused back on the dark shape of Chilla without comment.

Chilla let loose an arrow with a soft *twang*, stood and watched for a brief second, then turned and hurried back toward the group. A baleful screech came from behind her, then dark, lanky creatures became visible through the fog, darting toward us.

I tried to count them as they emerged, but lost track at a dozen. Their bodies were long and unnaturally thin, with two short hind legs and two lengthy front legs, each as long as my entire body. The front legs were segmented like a spider’s, but ended in a slightly curved point the length of my torso, which dug into the ground as they galloped and crawled. Their skin was black and craggy, looking like tar-stained tree bark. They had small heads atop long, skinny necks, which were elongated and misshapen. They each had a single oversized eye which darted between the members of our group, and had mouths like a lamprey’s, circular and covered in needle-like teeth. Ichor oozed from the orifice.

A pair of the Stickmen closed the distance between themselves and Chilla, and the archer leapt into the air as one shot a claw toward her. She spun and soared over Varrin, landing in a crouch behind him, another arrow already nocked.

Varrin interrupted the attack from the first Stickman, leaning into the swipe with his shield, then bashing the creature away. He swung his sword in a backward sweep toward the second, and the blade skidded across the creature's flesh, knocking off a few chunks of bark. It let out a screech and tumbled to the side, where Sayil was waiting with his spear. The beast-man thrust at the creature, which was off-balance from Varrin's attack, and Sayil landed a strike on its joint. The spearhead dug deep and Sayil twisted it like a pry bar. The Stickman's front leg tore off its body with a loud *crack*.

Before Sayil could follow up on the injured creature, two more drove toward him and he spun the spear, knocking away two sets of thrusting claws. Varrin intercepted attacks from another pair of Stickmen that had made it to our front line, their pointed limbs driving into his shield with loud thunks.

Chilla let arrows fly toward the creatures, but their thin bodies and quick movements made them hard targets. A couple arrows glanced across skinny torsos before a third struck true on a joint, causing the creature to stagger into a strong downward strike from Varrin, which ran along the back of the creature's neck, catching on its head and cleaving off the top of its skull. It moved about drunkenly before crashing to the ground.

The trio did their best to hold the front line, but Sayil was forced aside, spinning his spear to knock away a half dozen thrusting claws, and more of the Stickmen poured into the gap between him and Varrin. The eyes of the newly arrived Stickmen spun and moved between me and Xim, one locking onto me and two more moving toward the

cleric. I heard the sound of their pointed appendages crashing into Xim's shield. The creature that had locked onto me gave a low, wet moan as it brought its front legs up, getting ready to drive them down into my body.

Now, I cannot express how much I did not know what I was doing. I had very little in the way of combat training. I had taken a grand total of one year of kickboxing lessons, and hadn't even entered the ring with anyone other than my trainer. I wasn't a fighter. Any time a situation had gotten heated enough that I thought violence might ensue, I either talked the person down or got the fuck out of there.

I'd taken the boxing stance because it was the only thing I knew to do. Beyond the fact that my understanding of the martial art was, at best, amateur, kickboxing was designed for use against a *human* opponent. My head was low to keep a fist from crashing into my jaw and laying me out. My arms and fists were up to intercept strikes and throw out jabs and straights. This leech-faced fuck didn't have fists. I was trying to stop a pair of three-foot-long pickaxes with my forearms. It also wasn't aiming for my face. Needless to say, my defense was... ineffective.

The pair of pointed legs lanced down at me. One struck straight between my forearms and the other to the outside of my right. I felt a moment of abject fear as the deadly limbs descended, followed by an overwhelming sense of calm. I had come close to dying a few times in my life, aside from the time that I actually, well, died. In each instance, the moment my brain accepts the imminent danger, it fucks right off with emotions like fear or panic. I shut down and immediately moved into damage control.

What can I do? How do I mitigate? It's a characteristic I was proud of, having a cool head in an emergency. There was also an element of acceptance to it. If things don't work out, if I actually bite it, then I did my best. No use worrying.

Both of the points slammed into my chest, nearly knocking me on my ass. But my footing was good and, despite the power behind the strike, I stayed upright. I gritted my teeth, waiting for a delayed sensation of pain to begin crushing my will, but it didn't come. The claws didn't feel *good*, but they didn't hurt much either. It was like being roughly prodded with an umbrella. It didn't do much damage, it just felt rude.

I confirmed this by glancing down at my health, which was still completely full. I glanced back up at the Stickman, who stared at me in what I like to believe was a moment of confusion. His claws had met soft, tender flesh, and it hadn't done shit.

I swung hard with a right-handed straight, popping the monster right in its tiny little face. Despite the solid hit, I didn't experience the satisfying, concussion-inducing thunk of a well-aimed blow. It felt more like punching a recoiling snake, or a green tree branch. There was no weight behind the creature's head, so my attempt at delivering blunt-force trauma was useless.

There was another long moment where we stared each other down. In reality it was probably less than a quarter second of consideration, but in the middle of the adrenaline-fueled fight it felt long enough that I thought a tumbleweed was about to roll between us.

I seized the initiative and drove forward with a combination of strikes, but like the first, none of them found good purchase. The creature drove its limbs into my ribs and chest as I rotated my hips and leaned into every hook and straight. We may as well have been having a pillow fight.

I jumped back, surprised at the distance I cleared with the hop, and considered my options. At this point, an astute observer might notice, and perhaps loudly remind me, that I hadn't used my *Oblivion Orb*. You know, the one ability I had that was

explicitly designed to maim and slaughter my enemies. In my defense, it's not like I came from a place where magic was an option so, when I flipped into fight or flight mode, that tactic wasn't among the very short default list of things I could do to not die. However, after leaping back like an olympic athlete competing in the GTFO olympics, I was reminded that I was not limited to the mundane options and abilities available to my previously puny human form. I didn't know how to use the spell, but I had an idea about how to apply it.

The creature skittered toward me and I rushed to meet it. I had a plan. That plan, however, failed to account for what the monster did next. As its mighty claws rose into the air, it shrieked and the points of its front limbs began to glow with a green light. I was already committed to the attack and couldn't stop my momentum toward the beast before its claws shot down at me faster than my eyes could process. The points of its legs hit me hard enough to arrest my upper body, though my legs continued forward, and the creature used my newly diagonal stance to slam me into the ground. Its legs dug deep into my chest this time and I felt something hot inject itself under my skin and begin burning away at my muscle.

Overall, it hurt, but not nearly as much as the fatal tree hug given to me by my arch nemesis, The Mighty Oak, in Chapter One. I ignored the pain and reached up to grab the creature's thin neck. Again, I didn't know how to use *Oblivion Orb*, or how to cast any spell for that matter, but the System had given me a few hints as to how it worked. So far, I'd been able to make selections, see additional details, and potentially change my HUD by concentrating or focusing on the thing I wanted to affect. So, I simply thought about casting *Oblivion Orb*.

A power flowed out from my gut and a pulse of white light traveled down my arm. I felt air being sucked in between my fingers accompanied by a loud *pop!* My fist closed more tightly around the creature's neck, and something warm and wet started to trickle down my wrist.

I let go of the Stickman and saw that half of its neck had disappeared, replaced by a golf ball-sized hole. Its head lolled from one side to another, as a violent spurt of dark green ooze sprayed from the wound. It yanked its limbs from my chest, sending up an arcing stream of my bright crimson blood, then collapsed onto the ground, its limbs flailing violently. I hopped to my feet, then dropped on top of the monster, reaching out and grabbing it in the same spot, then cast *Oblivion Orb* again. This time, its neck was nearly severed, the head held on by a small sliver of barky skin. Its body twitched, and then it lay still.

“Well,” I said, “that was effective.”

Chapter 6

I took a second to confirm that the Stickman was dead, then examined my health. I had only lost eight HP from the creature's last attack, but my toxicity had gone up to twenty-four. I guess poison stacked? Regardless, my health pool was large enough that eight damage was negligible, and my health regen had plenty of runway before the toxicity build up became a threat. I stood and surveyed the rest of the battle.

Two Stickmen were chasing after Chilla, who landed an arrow in one creature's arm joint, sending it crashing to the ground. She turned and ran toward a wall, the second Stickman chasing after her. Chilla ran up the wall, then backflipped off of it, the second Stickman crashing into the stone as it tried to lance her. Chilla landed behind the stunned Stickman and sent an arrow through its small skull. As it collapsed, she drew a dagger from her belt, then coup de graced the first Stickman, which was still struggling to get back up.

Overall, it was cool as hell.

Varrin was fending off three Stickmen, weaving blocks, shield bashes, and sword swipes with the power and precision of an industrial machine, three others laying dead at his feet. Two more were in a bloody heap near Sir Sayil, who parried and thrust his spear at two more. Blood trickled down his legs from beneath his chainmail, but his movements showed no sign of injury. Of course, I didn't really know shit about fighting so take that with a grain of salt. He wasn't limping and crying and puking is what I mean.

Another was dead near Xim, who swung her scepter at a second, but the blunt end of the weapon didn't do much. A third Stickman had crept up behind her and was rearing back for an attack with glowing claws. I rushed at the creature, hitting it dead

center in a shoulder tackle, taking it down just as its claws descended. Instead of shredding through Xim's back, the claws came down on me, with one hitting the back of my right leg and the other piercing my left ass cheek. It stung, but I'd had worse spankings from my fiancée.

I got my hand on the Stickman's chest and cast *Oblivion Orb*, the creature shrieking as a significant portion of what I think was its ribcage disappeared. I concentrated on the spell again, driving my palm deeper into the wound until the monster stopped moving. When I stood, I watched as Xim finished her opponent off by knocking it down, stepping on its neck, then bashing its skull against the stone floor with her scepter until it cracked open like a Cadbury creme egg.

Chilla helped Sayil finish off his opponents, cutting one in half from behind with dual daggers. Then they moved to flank the three Varrin was fighting and took them down without much fuss.

After the last Stickman fell, Varrin began walking the battlefield, examining each corpse in turn. He drove his sword through a couple that were still twitching, then looked over our group.

Chilla wiped away a combination of sweat and poison mist from her brow, but otherwise looked unharmed. Xim went to examine Sayil, who was leaning on his spear. Altogether the battle probably lasted no more than a couple minutes, but I was surprised that no one was even breathing heavily. I checked my bars and, by focusing a little, managed to get numbers to show up, overlaid onto each.

Health: 205/221

Stamina: 128/130

Mana: 20/40

Poisoned, Toxicity: 36/hour

My toxicity was starting to get a bit high, but with my health regen of 114 it still wasn't close to hurting me. Other than my mana, of which I'd blown through half, my numbers looked fine. My stamina would be back to full in about five minutes, and my health would take nine. My mana, however, would take five hours to recover. That was a problem I needed to address if I planned on using magic to fight.

A strange sound started to come from the bodies of the Stickmen, and I instinctively took a defensive posture again. It was a sort of sizzling hiss, and I watched as the bodies of the Stickmen began to shrivel and dissolve. The skin and tissue of each sloughed off onto the ground, then melted into the stone, leaving behind a black stain. After a minute or two all that was left were thin, black bones. As I watched the macabre display I got a new notification.

Your party has slain 15 Stickmen: Demon, Grade Zero. Your party receives the following rewards:

1) 30 Ruby Chips.

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to even distribution.

You receive: 6 Ruby Chips.

A series of glowing scarlet coins appeared in the air in front of me, then clattered to the ground. Chilla looked over at me and shook her head. I knelt down and gathered up the six 'chips', and looked them over.

They shimmered with an ethereal luster, casting dancing points of light against the palm of my hand. They were flat and circular, about the size of the fifty-cent pieces my grandpa used to give me as a kid. There were two ornate symbols carved into the chip, one on either side, with sharp lines that came together in gently curving points. Overall it looked like an intricate Nordic rune designed by a calligraphy enthusiast.

The chips had a satisfying weight and were warm to the touch, and I slid the small stack around in the palm of my hand as I stood back up. They had good haptics. I noticed Chilla was now standing very close to me and I jumped.

“You can set those to appear in your inventory,” she said, “so they don’t make a shit-ton of noise by falling onto the ground.”

“Oh. Thanks,” I said, hefting the chips, pleased at the bright clinking sound they made, almost like glass. “How do I see my inventory?”

Chilla rolled her eyes.

“Just think about it, dumbass,” she said. Then she turned and sauntered away back toward the others, who were gathered around Sayil. The way she moved was very fluid and I wondered if that was from putting points into Agility. Would my hips also sway in a hypnotic, cat-like manner if I got my Agility higher?

“Also, they aren’t paint chips,” Chilla called back over her shoulder. “Don’t eat them.”

...*What?* I blinked and turned back to dealing with the strange coins.

At first I didn’t realize she was being literal with the ‘just think about it’ comment, but I realized that Chilla meant for me to focus on the idea of an inventory the same way I focused in order to interact with system screens and spells. I brought up mental images of inventory screens like the ones I’d seen in video games and a window appeared.

Inventory

Current storage: 0/200

I was disappointed that the inventory had some sort of limit, though it was pretty vague about what the limit was. Zero out of two-hundred what? Pounds? Kilograms? Individual items? I looked at the chips in my hand, then held them up to the screen. They zipped off of my palm and into the window, as though they were sucked in, and then appeared on the screen as a small icon.

I focused on the icon, thought about removing the chips, and they floated back out and into my hand in a neat stack. That was pretty nifty. I put them back away into the inventory, which still showed zero out of two-hundred for current storage, and was able to pull up a list of options which let me set the chips to automatically appear there.

I grabbed the large sack Varrin had given me and started back over to the group. I looked down at the heavy bag and began to wonder why I was carrying it, if everyone else also had access to an inventory as well. Was this some sort of hazing?

“We could use one of my antidotes,” said Chilla, looking over Sayil.

“No,” said Sir Sayil. “The build up isn’t that bad yet. With my current regen the poison nets me seven damage per hour, so I can go a while before I’m in danger. I’d rather save it in case we run into other venomous creatures.”

“With my mana regen,” said Xim, “I can output ten points of healing per hour without dipping into my reserves.”

“Alright,” said Varrin. “Xim, get Sayil back to full health. The antidote might clear the poison he’s built up, but he’d immediately go back to taking twelve damage an hour

from this mist. If we run into something else that stacks more poison, which I suspect we will in this place, then we'll use an antidote only when someone's poison damage exceeds their regen by more than Xim's hourly healing output."

I was impressed with how calm and calculated everyone was with this whole life or death struggle thing we were going through, and I took a look at Sayil as the group discussed our situation. There was blood on the outside of his chainmail pants, mixed in with the dark, gooey stuff that came out of the Stickmen. There was a pair of ragged holes in his armor along the abdomen, and I presumed a Stickman had hit him with one of their glowing-claw attacks. This must have caused him to accrue more Toxicity, like it had with me. But unlike me, his regen wasn't high enough to counter it.

If Sayil took a hit like the ones I had, it would have ticked his Toxicity up to around twenty-four. If he was netting seven damage an hour, then that would put his total health regen at seventeen-ish, thirteen of which were coming from myself. So, Sayil only had a base regen of around four?

Assuming Sayil had no buffs to his regen, that made his Fortitude either three or four. According to Xim, Sayil had balanced his stats to consider both defense and offense as a melee fighter, so his Fortitude should have been decent. If a four *was* decent, did that mean that Xim and Chilla had even less health and regen?

I started down a rabbit hole, considering the reasons why the stat value was so low, until I finally settled on what I thought was most likely: carryover stats.

I'd gotten fourteen stat points from my carryovers. If that bonus was unique to me, then I started with fourteen more points than a normal level zero Delver—more than double what I was supposed to have by default. That sounded like an enormous

advantage, but I didn't have enough information to decide how busted the extra points were.

I didn't want to outright ask the others about their stats until I understood the culture of this society better. Asking such a thing might be incredibly offensive. Then again, it could be a matter of course. Varrin *had* asked me about my build pretty soon after I met him, but Varrin was an ass. I didn't think he was a good point of reference.

My thoughts were interrupted when I realized Varrin was talking to me.

"...or Fortitude?"

"Sorry," I said, "what was that?"

"I asked whether you put most of your points into Luck or into Fortitude."

"Why do you think I did either?"

He pointed to my midsection, and I looked down to find that my shirt had been completely shredded. At this point it was less of a shirt, and more like a loose collection of cloth scraps. Like the kind you keep around for arts and crafts, or to clean oil and soot off your hands when working on an engine. But, with blood on it.

"Your clothes are torn to pieces," said Varrin, "but you're hardly injured." He leaned in and squinted at the holes in my chest which, by this point, were nearly gone. "People who come out of a fight looking like that are either very lucky, or very tough."

"I see," I said, feeling like I'd been called out on my charade, though it wasn't like I'd lied about anything. I was just being selective with the info I shared. There wasn't much point in squirming out of this one, so I admitted the truth. "Fortitude."

"I figured as much," said Varrin. "Maybe you should be the one carrying the shield."

I looked down at the steel kite-shield strapped to Varrin's forearm. It had taken a beating in the fight, with dozens of holes punched into it across the front by the Stickmen's front legs. At this point it looked like it might do more good as a cheese grater than a shield.

"I'm good," I said. "Just don't worry about me if a baddie or two comes my way."

"Way ahead of you on that one," said Chilla. "When that Stickman rushed you I figured you were a goner."

I smiled, ignoring the fact that she had just admitted to leaving me for dead, at least insofar as she believed at the time. Varrin kicked at the body of the Stickman whose head I'd mostly severed with my *Oblivion Orb*.

"Your fighting skills are poor," he said, "but at least you put enough into INT and WIS to kill something. I'm wondering why you were going after them like a pugilist at first."

"You saw that, eh?" I said. "Sorry, I panicked."

"It happens," said Xim. "It's even common on the first Delve. People forget about half of what they can do and start fighting on instinct. I think you did well."

Varrin shrugged, then went to his pack—not his inventory—and grabbed a cloth, then began to wipe down his goo-covered sword. Xim placed a hand on Sayil's neck, and a pulse of light went down her arm, similar to what had happened when I cast *Oblivion Orb*, though her light was golden, rather than white. The light transferred to Sayil, then disappeared under his chainmail.

"Thanks," said Sayil, putting his pack back on.

"Normally," said Varrin, "I'd suggest a short rest to recover our resources, but I think we're in good shape. Let's go ahead and move on."

No one objected, and we began making our way deeper into the misty cave. I wanted to try and squeeze more information out of the group about the inventory system, among many, many other things, but we'd gone back to our silent march with Chilla at the lead keeping an eye out for danger.

It wasn't long before we found ourselves at a small, ancient stone bridge which spanned across a viscous river of dark liquid.

"Underground river," said Varrin.

"A weird one," said Sayil, peering into the muck as it flowed by. "Think that bridge is safe to cross?"

The bridge was old and crumbling, with a number of large cracks that spiderwebbed across the masonry. I could see chunks of stone on the shore beside and below the bridge, where significant pieces of it had already broken and fallen off.

"We could ford the river," Sayil suggested.

"You wanna walk through *that*?" Chilla said, her nose scrunching up at the thought.

"Chilla's right," said Varrin. "We have no clue what that stuff is. It's obviously not water and, given the state of this place, I'd bet a golden note that it's poisonous."

"Only one?" Chilla said. "I'd bet ten."

"Chilla, you go across first since you're our scout. After that, we'll move across from lightest to heaviest. So, Xim is second." Varrin took a glance at me and Sayil, seeming to weigh us each in his head. Sayil was a little taller than me, with chainmail armor, spear, and pack, but I was a lot broader than the slim-framed beast-man and carried the heavy sack Varrin had given me.

"Sayil, you go third, the esquire's fourth. I'll go last."

The order made sense. I doubted there was much of a difference between Sayil and me, but Varrin was obviously the heaviest, being over a head taller and even broader than myself, while also wearing the heaviest armor of the group. As soon as Varrin was finished deciding the marching order, Chilla crept her way across the bridge without incident.

Xim and Sayil passed over without much fanfare, aside from a few small bits of stone that the bridge shed into the 'water' from its underside. I stepped across it gingerly, more than half-expecting it to fall to pieces beneath me, but got across with only a single, large brick dislodging from the side of the walkway and splashing into the muck.

I held my breath as Varrin crossed. This would be the most dramatic, and perhaps most predictable time for the bridge to collapse, with the party leader striding confidently across after the rest of the group had gone over untroubled. A few larger pieces of the bridge dislodged during Varrin's journey, but he stepped off the other side without any catastrophic architectural incidents occurring. He turned back to give the bridge an appraising look.

I was expecting him to make a mouthy comment along the lines of, "That wasn't so bad," or "Looks like the worst is behind us," but he was smart enough not to taunt fate with such an obvious provocation. It was a real missed opportunity though, because the moment he turned back around, a massive, sludge covered hand reached out from the slimy river and grabbed him by the waist.

Chapter 7

To Varrin's credit he didn't scream or cry out when the creature snatched him up, he just grunted loudly and then immediately tried going for his sword. The sheath was pinned beneath the creature's palm, though, and he couldn't get a good grip on the hilt. I jumped forward and grabbed onto the hand, unsure of what to do, but I pulled at one of the fingers hoping to give Varrin enough room to squeeze out, or at least access his weapon. That's when the head of the monster breached the surface of the river, and its bulbous orange eyes peered up the bank at us.

Dark, syrupy water flowed off the creature, revealing skin so pale that it was partially transparent. I could see blue and purple veins roping across the creature's skull, which pulsed with an irregular beat. Its face was wide and football shaped, if the football was the size of a compact car, and thin hair was plastered to its skin. Its mouth spread out across its entire face and opened to reveal unsettlingly human teeth, ready to rip through Varrin's armor like a tuna can and mash him into a tasty paste. It dragged the two of us closer, until I was ankle-deep in the water, my boots sinking into the silt and mud of the riverbed.

Two arrows thunked into the back of the monster's hand, followed quickly by the point of Sayil's spear. He dug the weapon deep into the hand, between what would have been the creature's metacarpals if it had been human, then twisted and wrenched the spear from side to side.

Abyssal blue liquid poured out from the wound and the beast stopped dragging us closer, then let out a powerful, low moan that sounded like the pitch-shifted sobbing of an infant. It triggered some primal instinct buried in my brain and I was deeply disturbed by the sound.

I bit down on my lip hard enough to draw blood and tried to ignore the wretched terror the cry evoked within me. Varrin had given up on his sword, clawing frantically at one of the creature's massive knuckles. Sayil released his spear and fell back, splatting into the mud, then covered his ears. His eyes were wide and tears began trickling down his face.

I slapped my palm on the knuckle where Varrin's gauntleted hands had torn off strips of the beast's skin and cast *Oblivion Orb*. I felt bone and cartilage disappear, then moved my hand slightly and cast it again, making a gap large enough to shove my hand into, fingers first. I pushed hard into the wound, tearing tendon and worming deep into cartilage. I cast *Oblivion Orb* twice more, then went for a fifth, but was met with an icy chill that ran out from my gut and a sharp jab of pain shot down my arm. I checked my bars. I was out of mana.

I pulled my hand out, wet and dripping with dark blue blood, then wrapped my arms around the injured finger and pulled back against it with all my weight. The finger gave, then snapped as I bent it backwards. The creature roared again, and I fought even harder against the penetrating fear. Then, Xim was beside me, laying into the next knuckle with her scepter.

Her swings proved far more effective against the beast's solid joints than they had against the Stickmen, and it wasn't long before the monster gave up, snatching its hand away and sending Varrin crashing to the ground. The moment he was free he began scabbling away, but the monster wasn't ready to give up on a potential meal, and it slapped its hand down, its uninjured fingers digging into the mud. It heaved itself up and out of the water.

Kim and I tried to fall back. I grabbed Sayil under the arms to drag him away as he continued to clutch at his ears and stare wide-eyed at the monster. Its massive arm pulled its body out of the water, where it began sprawling along the ground like a crocodile with quick movements from side to side. Despite the beast's humanoid head, its body was long, with three pairs of webbed and taloned feet. Its slick translucent skin was stretched taut against nubs of bones and ribs.

Where the creature's second arm should have been there was only a ragged nub, bright pink and with the end of a shattered bone still protruding outward. It was injured, and severely. Something had already fought with this beast and inflicted enough damage to take off one of its enormous limbs. I spared a second to consider what kind of monster would be able to do that, before the creature's giant head closed in on me.

I dropped Sayil, realizing that I had no way to drag him away quickly enough. Now that it was out of the water and moving on its six reptilian legs, I doubted that I could escape even if I abandoned Sayil to his fate. Kim stood behind me, resolute and unyielding. She held up her shield, for all the good it would do, and had her scepter poised for a strike as soon as the beast closed the last few feet between us. I looked around for something to use to help her, maybe a rock that I could at least throw and distract it, when I noticed Sayil's spear on the ground.

At some point during our struggle to free Varrin, it had dislodged from the monster's hand and plopped down into the mud. I swept it up, then drove the butt of it down into the ground. I held it like a pike and stood firm, aiming the spear head toward the mouth of the creature. Its head snapped forward and its jaws closed in around me.

I felt the spear drive into the roof of the beast's mouth before its teeth closed on my waist, ripping through my skin and compressing my spine until I thought it would

shatter. It abandoned its attempt to chomp me in half as quick as it had bitten and reared back. The spear went with it, lodged into its hard palate. As it recoiled I saw that Xim clung to the side of the monster's face.

She gripped a tuft of the creature's stringy hair and squeezed the side of its face with her thighs. Then, she raised her scepter high and swung hard for one of the creature's massive, orange eyes. It smashed into jelly with the first strike, the beast roaring and shaking its head. It started to raise its hand to swat at Xim, but I dove on top of it. My weight didn't arrest its movement, but the arm slowed. The limb was long and its grip was incredible, but the arm itself wasn't very strong, seeming designed to drag prey into the water, not to lift it into the air.

Xim smashed her scepter into the eye twice more, mincing it completely, then hurled her weapon away and back toward the shore. She cocked her arm and drove her hand deep into the monster's eye socket.

The beast bellowed and Xim let out a fierce battle cry as she ripped out a chunk of flesh from inside the monster's skull. It shook its head and turned its body, trying to flee back into the dark scum of the river, but Xim held tight, plunging her hand into the wound and pulling out another chunk, then another. The beast's body twisted and it made a terrible, gurgling noise, then it slumped, head plunging into the water. Xim fell, splashing down into the disgusting mess below.

I crawled off the arm and waded in, getting waist deep before finding and helping Xim back up and out onto the shore. We collapsed back onto the ground, breathing hard and staring at the monster's corpse, which had already begun to shrivel and decay.

A notification popped up.

Your party has slain 1 Atrocidile: Abomination, Grade Two. Your party receives the following reward(s):

- 1) 5 Emerald Chips
- 2) 1 complete set of Atrocidile Teeth
- 3) 1 Atrocidile Essence

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to: Even Distribution.

You receive: 1 Emerald Chip.

Party Leader has set item allocation to: Master Looter.

Party Leader receives all other rewards.

Several moments passed before I spoke.

“That was metal as fuck,” I said to Xim. “You tore its brain out through its eye socket.”

Xim shook a combination of cerulean blood, brain matter, and river slime off her arm, then held it out and away from her body. She grimaced, squinting one eye shut and glanced over at me. Then, she smiled.

“I’ll assume that was a compliment,” she said, “and I graciously accept it. Feel free to build a temple where you may worship me.”

I grinned back at her, then looked around to check on the others. Sayil had come back to his senses and he crawled up the shore and back onto the flat stone of the cave floor. He looked shell-shocked, staring at the monster’s body, clenching and unclenching his hands. Varrin was farther away, barely visible through the fog. He was also sitting on the ground and looking toward me and Xim. I couldn’t make out his expression but I assumed it was a look of awe and respect. Chilla was nowhere in sight.

As the adrenaline of the fight wore off, my stomach and lower back began to ache intensely where the monster's teeth had closed around me. I checked my bars to see the extent of the damage.

Health: 190/221

Stamina: 127/132

Mana: 0/40

Poisoned, Toxicity: 38/hour

The bite would have probably killed anyone else in the party. I'd taken thirty or so damage, but considering the natural defense given to me by reaching ten in Fortitude, I'm betting that the damage numbers against someone in the single digits would have been significantly higher.

I was also growing curious about stamina. Despite the intensity of the fight, it had only gone down by five. Maybe stamina had as much to do with the duration of my exertion as it did with the intensity of it. My toxicity had gone up by two points, which had to be from wading through the river of gross, and that was just from skin contact. I shivered at the thought of how high it would have gone if I'd swallowed it, or gotten it into any of my mucous membranes.

I looked Xim over. She'd been completely submerged for a few seconds.

"How's your toxicity?" I asked. She read something I couldn't see, then took a deep breath.

"It's at thirty-five."

"You're gonna' need one of those antidotes."

“I will,” she said, then scanned the area. “I don’t see Chilla anywhere. I can just heal myself for now; lost a bit of health when that thing threw me off into the river.”

She pressed a palm to her neck and I watched the golden light travel up her arm and out into her body.

“Should we look for her?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“Varrin’s call. It may be worth it to stick around here for a little while in case she comes back.” I looked over to Varrin, who’d made it onto his feet and was coming towards us.

“It was a fear attack,” he said through gritted teeth. “I wasn’t prepared for it. My Wisdom is too low.”

Kim stood and placed a hand on his arm.

“I barely resisted it, and I lost a few seconds trying to shake it off. It got everyone on some level.”

The memory of that soul-shaking terror came back to me, fresh as an open wound, and I shuddered. It was the type of experience I knew I’d never forget. That and the giant, pale, human-headed crocodile abomination. All of this was going to be unforgettable, really, but I hoped that the bone-deep fear would be the most haunting thing I experienced within the Delve.

A woman’s scream came from the fog, echoing off the stone walls.

We found Chilla's corpse about a hundred yards away. She'd either run, or been dragged, down a narrow corridor that branched off from the river chamber. Her abdomen and chest had been hollowed out and the muscle had been stripped from her thighs. There were obvious teeth and claw marks. She'd been eaten by something.

Varrin fell to his knees beside her, reaching out and cupping the side of her bloody face. Sayil stared at Varrin darkly as the young man grieved over Chilla, and I gave a quick prayer to any gods that might have been listening that Sayil wouldn't say anything so stupid as "I told you so." Fortunately, he refrained from saying anything at all, opting to move deeper down the corridor, keeping an eye out in case any of the predators returned, still hungry.

None of us were surprised to find her body. We'd gotten a notification a few minutes after our fight with the Atrocidile.

A party member has been slain: Chilla Stormreiss.

All items in the party member's inventory will be returned upon completion of the Delve.

While the items in Chilla's inventory were gone, everything in her pack was still next to her body. That's how I discovered the grim reason why necessary provisions were kept in packs outside of the inventory. If the party member died, their allies could take what they needed.

Kim drank down one of the antidotes, and she and I moved what we could from Chilla's pack to our own. Tools, rope, rations, medical supplies. Kim dug out an extra pair of daggers and handed them to me.

“Here,” she whispered, “it’s better than nothing, but don’t expect much. If you don’t know what you’re doing you’re just as likely to cut yourself as the enemy. Don’t have to steal any more of Sayil’s stuff.”

Sayil hadn’t been happy with the fact that his spear was irretrievably lodged in the mouth of the half-submerged Atrocidile, but he also wasn’t about to wade into the slime river and try to dig it out. He pulled a pair of shortswords from his pack and strapped them on instead, grumbling about things like ‘reach’ and ‘effective range’.

There was also a small journal in Chilla’s pack, with an illustration pasted inside of a younger Chilla in front of a middle-aged man and woman. Her parents, I guessed. We gave that to Varrin, who tucked it away wordlessly. There was more in the pack, but it would get left behind.

After resting for an hour near the body, Varrin waved a hand and I got a new notification.

Party Leader has released Chilla Stormreiss’ body.

Defeated Party Member will be transported outside of the Delve.

The floor of the cave opened up with the sound of grating stone, and Chilla’s corpse and the rest of her belongings descended gently into the cavity. The stone moved to close the gap, and she was gone.

There was something about seeing her body that was more real than everything else that had happened. I’d seen a number of living creatures brutally slain in a variety of ways that very day, but they were all monstrous. The violence didn’t hit home because it was easy to dissociate from feeling any relation to the things that were being

violenced. But a human body, torn apart and laid out to rot, was one of the most disturbing things I'd ever seen.

We spent another hour after Chilla's body was taken away so we could rest, hydrate, and let Xim distribute another couple of heals. Varrin had gotten a bit squashed by the full-body handshake the Atrocidile had given him, and Sayil was still losing health over time from his toxicity.

There wasn't much talking, aside from some discussion of our strategy, formation, and tactics moving forward. Our ranger was gone, so we no longer had the luxury of a trained scout. Chilla had also been our main source of ranged attacks, since my only spell effectively made me a third melee fighter.

Xim was helpful enough to let me know that the choice to forego a ranged option by an aspiring spell caster at level zero was atypical. Varrin let me know that it was so stupid, he was considering assigning me a conservator after we got out of the Delve to make sure I wasn't a danger to myself or others.

Ultimately, Sayil pulled out a set of knives with curved blades on either end and fastened them to his belt. He told me they were for throwing when I asked, and it seemed like everyone else already knew that.

When we stood and prepared to move on, I realized how disgusting we were. We'd only been in the Delve for a few hours but the two encounters so far had left us covered in a thick coating of filth. Varrin and Sayil were both clean compared to me and Xim, and they were still covered in mud, Stickman goo, blood, and sweat. I'd gotten doused with a good coating of Atrocidile saliva on top of that, and was caked from the waist down in drying, toxic river gunk.

Xim was the worst off. After driving her arm up to the shoulder into the mashed eye and brain of the Atrocidile, which was nasty enough on its own, she'd been dunked in the river. Her once white robes were stained a dark greenish-brown, the links between her chainmail were clogged, and I couldn't even make out the symbol on her tabard any longer. I'm sure we had a nice scent to us as well but, fortunately, the constant scouring of my nasal cavity by the omnipresent, deadly mist had robbed me of any sense of smell.

As for my clothes, my shirt was a total loss at this point. After riding the Atrocidile's hand, the garment had earned a few new rips and had become more of a vague suggestion of a shirt. I pulled it off and threw it onto the ground, then considered doing the same with my pants. They were still mostly intact, but had enough new holes in them that they'd made their way beyond 'fashionably distressed' and now fit more closely with 'homeless chic'. Plus, they had about ten pounds of sludge caked onto them. My boots were doing ok, but soil squished between my toes with every step, even after taking them off and doing my best to clean them out. In the end, I decided that tackling the Delve with my dogs out and my manly parts dangling in the fog wasn't a wise course of action. Wisdom was my third highest stat, after all.

Chilla's pack had held an extra pair of clothes, but they were nowhere near my size. I also wasn't keen on the idea of trying on the dead woman's shirts while Varrin mourned her loss right in front of me. Anything Xim had was too short and slim, Sayil's frame was too narrow, and if Varrin had anything that would fit me, he wasn't offering, and I wasn't asking. I ended up striding through the Delve shirtless and covered in mud, like I'd just lost the county pig-wrestlin' competition.

First, we backtracked to the river chamber, looking for any additional tunnels or exits, but found none, aside from a hole where the river drained into unknown depths.

Kim told me that this was normal for a low-level Delve, which usually presented the simplest floor plans and layouts. As the level of the Delve increased, the rule of thumb was that its complexity increased as well, to the point where certain Delves turned into sprawling labyrinths whose main difficulty became finding the exit in time. I asked Kim why there was a time limit, but she shrugged.

“People have theories,” she said. “A lot of Delvers think it’s arbitrary; just part of the challenge to decide who’s worthy of the rewards. Others think that the portals connecting the Delvers to the outside world can only stay open for so long. The supplicants of Astrania believe the Delves are evil, and that the whole thing is a trap that feeds on the souls of Delvers who become imprisoned. No one knows for sure, though.”

After returning to the tunnel where we’d found Chilla, we slowly made our way deeper. I began keeping time by tracking my mana regen, watching it creep upward at an agonizing pace. After more than an hour passed, the tunnel began to narrow. We had to swap from walking in pairs to moving in a single-file line, with me at the rear, and I started thinking about cave explorers who got caught in tight places underground.

At one point I started to worry that the Delve actually *was* some sort of trap, that the tunnel would never end and we’d walk merrily down it until the ceiling collapsed or it flooded with water or it turned out that we were really inside the throat of some giant space worm. Spending such a long time on edge, waiting for whatever killed Chilla to come stalking down the never-ending tunnel, was getting to me. I began looking over my shoulder every couple of minutes to make sure I wasn’t being stalked by something. I was doing that very thing when I walked into Kim ahead of me.

The group had stopped, and Varrin sent a message down our line like a game of telephone, with Sayil whispering to Xim and then Xim whispering to me.

“There’s a chamber ahead. Varrin doesn’t see anything alive, but there’s some antia in the room.”

“Some what?” I asked.

“Ancient devices. A lot of Delvers hunt for antia, but it’s usually accompanied by some bad business when you find it.”

“What kind of bad business?”

“Lots of kinds. For example, the kind that doesn’t kill you, but paralyzes you and lays eggs in your ear canals, then lets its babies suck your mana veins dry until you die. Or the kind that can take your arms off without shedding a drop of blood, then dissect your hands, but somehow you can still feel your fingernails as it strips them off.”

“You know,” I said, swallowing, “you’re pretty dark.”

“People often say that about those of us from the Third Layer.”

I noticed Varrin glaring at us from up the tunnel and I gave him a thumbs up, feeling like a schoolboy who’d just been caught chatting in class. Xim faced forward and the four of us marched carefully into the room.

The shit inside was wild.

Chapter 8

The natural rock walls and ceiling of the tunnel gave way to smooth-cut stone when we stepped out of the corridor. The chamber we found was too large to see its bounds through the ubiquitous mist, but the stone lights were still visible far above us when I looked up, their illumination becoming small, spectral blooms in the haze.

From within the fog were rows of glowing green lights which slowly pulsed with the timing of a giant's breathing, long and slow. On the floor were a mess of spiraling black tubes that looked like thick electrical cords or cables. I bent down to touch one, expecting to find rubber or plastic housing, but instead finding its surface hard and slick with moisture, like some sort of polished crystal. The edges curved out to meet the ground, looking as though the floor had been cast into this shape, or that the shape itself had grown from the ground.

As we moved toward one of the pulsing emerald lights, we found a large crystalline object floating in the middle of a column-like structure. Its surface was made of something so clear that the only way I could see it was that the fog abruptly ended. It was as if a cylindrical beam of force descended from the ceiling to trap this massive crystal and protect it from the corrupted air outside.

We all stared at it in wonder for a few seconds, then watched as a small bead of emerald liquid formed at the bottom of the crystal, then dripped down into a black grate beneath. One of the large tubes was set into the base of the structure, and it wound its way further into the underground facility.

We walked around for at least twenty minutes and found no end to it. There must have been thousands of the crystals hovering down here, slowly leaking their magical lime kool-aid into what I now suspected were hoses. But, where were the hoses taking

the liquid? Was it being gathered somewhere? Was there an entire swimming pool of the stuff? Or, maybe a lake? I had no idea how long the fluid had been accumulating. There certainly didn't seem to be any people down here monitoring the place.

"I've never heard of something like this," Xim said, her eyes wide and drinking in the sight. It would have been beautiful, had I not been covered in filth and inhaling toxic gas with every breath.

That was beginning to wear on me mentally. My health regen made up for all the toxicity I'd built, but it didn't negate it, it just healed the damage faster than it accumulated. My blood vessels felt like I was on a slow I.V. drip of pepper spray, my guts squirmed, and my eyes were bleeding. Just a little bit, though. The others looked like they felt worse than I did, except for Xim, who had taken everything that had happened so far in stride.

At one point Sayil tapped the barrier with the tip of a sword. It didn't make a clink or a scraping sound as though it were made of glass or plastic. It didn't make any sound at all. The point of his sword just stopped. Against Xim's protest he leaned into it, putting his weight behind the blade, but it didn't budge. He inspected the edge afterward, but it was undamaged.

We eventually found the far wall to the complex, which was perfectly flat, ascending upwards out of sight. We followed along it until we came back to the tunnel we'd entered through. Then, we continued to follow the wall until we ended up back where we started, more or less.

"Dead end?" Sayil asked.

“We’ve checked the other rooms,” said Varrin, looking around as if he could see anything more than twenty feet away, aside from the glowing lights. “There has to be an exit.”

“Maybe it’s hidden,” said Xim, “like an illusory wall or a secret switch.”

“Not in a Delve this low level,” said Varrin.

“Not that I’m an expert,” I said, “but it seems like this one is a bit unusual so far. At least, based on your reactions.”

“That’s true,” said Xim. Varrin nodded reluctantly.

“Something like that... Atrocidile,” Varrin said, throwing a lot of stank on the word ‘Atrocidile’, “is beyond what I would expect from a Creation Delve, no matter the difficulty. And these chambers are the type of things you find in a special Delve or a mid to high level platinum.”

“The objective,” said Xim, “mentioned that the mana accumulation had been interrupted by something. That’s what we’re trying to find and fix. What if this *would* be a higher level platinum, or even a special, if it were allowed to accumulate to maturation? It said the reward was an *early* mana distribution as well.”

Sayil’s eyes narrowed as she said this, and his hands balled into fists. He glanced at Varrin, then turned and walked away a few steps.

“If that’s true, then everything we’ve assumed based on this being a Creation Delve would be wrong,” said Varrin. “The layout so far has been simple, like you would expect from a low-level Delve.”

“Higher level doesn’t necessarily mean higher complexity,” said Xim. “That’s just true more often than not.”

I'll admit that I wasn't smelling everything they were stepping in with this conversation, but I had a pretty good idea. If I was understanding them, it was like we were in a late-game area, but all the monsters were scaled down to our level.

"So," I said, "the magic batteries that run this place are set to low-power mode?"

"Maybe," said Xim.

To be honest, I was surprised she understood that question. I guess they had batteries here? We weren't speaking English, but my idiomatic English expressions still got across. Sometimes.

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," said Varrin. "Let's walk the wall again. We'll each keep contact with it and look closely for any irregularities that might indicate a hidden door."

And that's what we did. I slid my hand along the wall as we walked, while Varrin and Xim did the same. Sayil dragged the sheath of one of his swords along the bottom, which made an unpleasant scraping sound. We made our way back around again, finding nothing.

"What about the center?" I suggested.

There was a brief debate over how to tell where the center even was, and it was decided that we would count steps from one wall to another, while also counting the rows of floating crystals. We started at one wall and walked half the steps toward the middle, counting the pillars along the way. We didn't end up exactly between pillars at the halfway point, but were close enough to feel confident that the pillars were spaced equidistant from one another. Then, we took a walk up the center row.

After another few minutes of walking we found a wide, spiraling staircase that led further down. There were dark and sticky streaks of blood on the steps, with three-toed

footprints about the size of my hand pressed into them. The shape reminded me of a lizard of some kind, and I hoped we weren't about to run into a pack of acid-spitting dilophosauruses. I stopped and considered how I knew the name of that particular dinosaur, but was interrupted when Varrin began making his way down. The rest of us followed.

The staircase had narrow stone walls, also smooth like the walls above, and I wondered if this was some sort of cement, since it lacked any perceivable bricks or blocks. As we descended, the fog slowly dissipated. There was still a serious haze going on, but I no longer felt like I had a fog machine blasting full-force from two feet away.

I rubbed at my eyes, clearing away some of the blood and tears as I adjusted to the humidity dropping from one-thousand percent to two-hundred, and when I took a good look around I realized this room was even more impressive than the last.

In every direction were endless rows of densely packed plants, like a cultivated field, ready for harvest. The plants sprouted out of soft, spongy soil, with thorny stalks that were bright orange, gnarled, and twisting. The thorns were the size of my thumb, and the tips glistened and dripped with what was either the accumulation of moisture from the fog, or its own deadly poison.

At the top of the stalks, about four feet off the ground, was a bright yellow flower, with long, drooping petals that splayed open to reveal a bright glowing green crystal, like a miniature version of the ones from above. Off of this crystal wafted a vapor that ascended toward the roof, adding to a densely packed cloud above us; the poison we'd been walking through the entire Delve.

As I looked farther out into the room, the stalks disappeared into the mist, but the light from the glowing crystals sprouting atop them could be seen for what must

have been a half-mile. There had to be a hundred thousand of these things. Maybe more. My jaw hung open at the scale of this underground facility, and a drop of something wet landed on my head.

I reached up and felt a cool, moist spot of something oily. I brought my fingers down and saw the tint of green from the liquid. I looked up, but the ceiling of the room was too high to make out through the fog, so I knelt down and felt the soil. It was damp. I stood and looked out over the field, sighting the occasional drip of some liquid from above.

“The big crystals upstairs,” I said, “are watering all this.”

“Are they growing more?” Xim said, awe in her voice. “It’s so much! What are they doing with it?”

“Nothing,” said Varrin. “Whoever built this place died before our ancestors were making stone tools.”

That got me curious, but before I could say anything I heard a low thud, and the others crouched. I quickly followed, trying to peer between the stalks to see what had made the sound. The thudding continued, moving closer. It sounded like someone was pounding at the soil with a sledgehammer. Out of the mist came a nine-foot-tall humanoid creature with shining black skin and glowing orange eyes.

That was a theme in this place, I mused, everything was glowing. It was like I’d stumbled into some sort of cornfield rave, but had forgotten my neon hula-hoop and was regretting taking the blue pills the nice man by the porta-potties had given me. Well, at least I was shirtless and covered in mud, so, dressed for the occasion.

The thing moved smoothly while walking, but came to sudden stops and moved in quick, jerking motions. As I watched, it reached out with a hand that sprouted into a

dozen thin fingers and gently gripped one of the crystals. It leaned in, turning its head from side-to-side, as if to appraise the crystal, then twisted and snapped it from the stalk. It dropped the crystal into a small opening in its chest, then continued on down the row, head turning from side to side as it surveyed the other plants.

It came down the row close to us, and Sayil and Varrin both slid their swords from their sheaths as it drew near. When it was twenty or so feet away it stopped, head swiveling in our direction. It craned its neck and looked exactly where we all crouched. It was tall enough that the stalks did nothing to hide us, and we all tensed, ready to hop into action the moment the creature moved a step closer. It slid its eyes over the four of us, then turned back to a nearby crystal, glancing at it for a moment, then moving on. We all let out a breath as it stomped down the row, then disappeared back into the fog.

“What in all the hells was *that*?” said Sayil.

“Harvester,” I said, drawing a curious look from Xim.

“You’ve seen something like that before?” she asked.

“Not exactly. Where I come from we use machines to harvest crops. Based on the way that thing moved and acted, I don’t think it was alive. At least, not in the usual sense.”

“Are your machines that intimidating?” Sayil asked.

I imagined a farmer from the feudal era coming into contact with a combine harvester.

“I suppose that if you were seeing them for the first time, from this close, and had no idea what they were, then yes, they probably would be. Maybe more, in fact.”

“I see,” said Sayil.

“Regardless,” said Varrin, “it wasn’t hostile. Not yet, at least. Let’s move on and keep trying to find our objective.”

“Whatever that is,” grumbled Sayil.

“Maybe it’s that ‘harvester’,” said Xim.

I shook my head.

“It’s just a gut feeling, but I don’t think so. This whole place seems very intentional. The set up above is some sort of magical hydroponics, and all this down here is the crop. Having an automated harvester makes sense, it doesn’t seem out of place. If anything, harvesting the crystals helps the facility by making room for the next batch.”

Xim nodded and Varrin gave me a look I couldn’t quite decipher. I suspected that he was reevaluating me, since I was talking like I knew what the fuck I was saying for the first time, rather than asking questions that made him wonder whether I were secretly three toddlers in a trench coat, pretending to be a Delver.

“Do any of you know what those crystals are?” I asked.

Sayil shook his head and Varrin furrowed his brow.

Xim set her chin on a palm, then said, “I think it’s a crystalized form of poison essence.” She gave me a slight smile. “Just a gut feeling.”

“That... can’t be,” said Sayil. “It’s too much.”

“Delves often contain resources we can’t imagine,” said Xim.

“If that’s the case we should take as much as we can carry,” said Varrin.

“Wait, what’s poison essence?” I asked.

“Arlo,” said Varrin, which surprised me, since he used my name instead of calling me ‘esquire’, “you’re telling me that you can figure out what that *thing* was, along with the ultimate purpose of this entire facility, but don’t know what an essence is?”

“I feel like it wasn’t that hard to take a stab at what’s going on in here,” I said. “But, yes, that’s what I’m telling you.”

At this point, Varrin didn’t even look disappointed, he just looked confused.

“It’s the pure form of something,” said Xim. “Or, the most basic form, depending on how you think about it. Basically, a poison essence can be shaped into any type of poison, if you know what you’re doing. The Atrocidile essence we got earlier could be used by a mana weaver to shape an infant Atrocidile, or any specific part of an adult Atrocidile, with shape and size variations running the gamut of what is possible in an unmutated adult.”

“You can make babies with it?” I said.

“With the right essence, yes. Those aren’t very valuable, though. I mean, in the wider scheme of things. I’m sure the Atrocidile essence is worth a heap of notes, since the creature was unusual and a little strong. But the more generic an essence is, the more valuable.”

“Since you can make more things out of it?” I guessed.

“Yes!” Xim said, a bit too loudly. “Sorry. But, yes. A poison essence can be used to make any type of poison, which can mean tons of things. What even is poison? Is it limited to things that are poisonous to humans? To deeplings? To the weaver that’s shaping it? How do you define when someone is poisoned, as opposed to some other form of harm caused by ingestion or contact with something that harms you

biologically? Maybe you can make compounds with poison essence that are revolutionary-”

“We get it,” said Varrin. “What she’s saying is that if those really are poison essences, there’s enough here to buy a kingdom, and then crash the poison essence economy afterward.”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Xim. “But we can’t carry all of this out with us. There’s too much.”

“What about the inventory?” I asked.

“Of course we’d use that,” she said. “But how much do you think all this weighs?” she waved a hand out over the field.

“I have no idea.”

I stepped to the closest stalk, then gingerly tapped the crystal on top. It tingled when I touched it, like it had a small electric charge running through it, but it didn’t hurt. I took a hold of it, then twisted like I saw the harvester do. It popped off with a slight crunch, and I hefted it. It was about the size of a spice grinder, a little longer than the width of my hand, maybe two inches in diameter at its thickest point. It might have weighed a quarter pound. If there were a hundred thousand in the room, that would be twenty-five thousand pounds. I had no idea if a hundred thousand was even a good guess.

I opened my inventory and placed the crystal inside. The capacity now read 1/200. I also had my chips in there, and I didn’t know if those counted towards weight. I went to the next stalk and popped the crystal off. It was a little bigger. I popped it into my inventory and there was no change. I was able to get four more into my inventory before it went to 2/200. So, five to an inventory slot. Slot? Unit of weight? I needed to

figure that out. In any event, I had a rough guess. I could carry 198 more 'slots' worth, which was a little less than a thousand of the crystals. That was assuming I didn't want to carry anything else.

The others had started doing the same thing, twisting crystals off the stalks and putting them into their inventory. I looked around for the harvester, concerned that it might be upset that we were stealing from its field, but it wasn't anywhere in sight. We all looted to our heart's content for a time, and when we'd all filled up our inventories, leaving room for chips and other surprises, we'd only cleared a space that was around thirty feet wide and twenty-five deep. A sliver of what was around us. I thought about what Varrin had said, and couldn't help but imagine the rows of crystals as a field full of hundred-dollar bills that I didn't have the room to pick up.

I *really* needed a bigger inventory.

Chapter 9

Once we were done roleplaying a group of hobbits in a potato patch, we made our way through the field, once again following a wall. We walked past the tall harvester guy, but it didn't pay us any attention, still appraising each crystal it went past and stopping to pick the ones it found to its liking.

We traveled in the same direction as it did for a few minutes and I wasn't able to discern how it was choosing between the essences. The thing took crystals of varying sizes and shapes, and each had little else to distinguish it. The stalks were of a fairly uniform height and each crystal had the same vibrant green color and radiance as the next. Maybe it was collecting a sampler, or a curated variety of sizes to decorate its house with. It could put them next to an incense burner shaped like a dragon and a copy

of the Bhagavad Gita it had never read. I'm sure they looked very nice beside a labradorite orb and a book on astrology.

Unlike the chamber above, we quickly found a hallway branching off from this room. We continued around the perimeter without going down it to make sure we didn't miss any other paths, and found three more, one on each wall. The room was so large that, moving at a careful pace, a trip around the perimeter took us nearly an hour. After coming back to the first hallway we'd discovered, which Varrin had marked with an 'x' using some chalk from his pack, we stopped to discuss a matter of increasing importance.

"We've been in this Delve for a little over eight hours," said Varrin. I wondered how he was able to tell, since he didn't have a watch or any other obvious timekeeping device. But, after studying my interface for a minute, I was able to bring up the system message that had given us our objective.

You have entered Delve 1156: The Toxic Grotto.

Difficulty: Platinum

Current accumulation level: 0.5

This Delve's accumulation has been interrupted. Find and eliminate the cause of the disruption to clear the Delve.

Reward: Early mana distribution.

Time Remaining: 15 Hours, 43 minutes.

Four hours had been spent exploring this massive, two-level essence farm.

“I’m hoping that this area is the main body of the Delve,” said Varrin. “If so, then we’re doing well with our time. However, I think it’s best that we not spend more time than we need on sight-seeing.”

“Is that what we’re doin’?” asked Sayil.

“The essences were a good find. But, we spent a while gathering them. I don’t think we can afford any more delays like that one. I want to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

Sayil shrugged. Xim looked like she was about to start chewing on a nail, then caught sight of the state of her hand and decided against it.

“I don’t think time is going to be our problem,” she said. “And I’m fine with focusing on finishing the Delve, but we still don’t know what we’re looking for. We have to give the environment some level of attention.”

“Fair enough,” said Varrin. “For now, let’s keep a cautious pace. We’ll revisit this when the time drops below twelve hours.”

While the others discussed our temporal allowance for dilly-dallying, my eyes wandered over the environment. I looked out at the essence plants, absorbed by how strange they were, and by the scale of the underground farm. Regular drops of green liquid came down from above, and I glanced up toward the ceiling again, studying the dense fog above us. That’s when I noticed the first creature crawling down the wall toward us.

It froze when it saw me see it. It was about the size of a bulldog, with an oversized head that was two-thirds mouth, full of sharp, carnivorous teeth. Two long arms grew from just behind its head, and it gripped the flat surface of the wall with wide fingertips, like those of a gecko. It had two stumpy legs ending in a pair of three-toed lizard-like

feet, a pair of tiny black eyes, and dark, slimy-looking skin. Behind it, a pointed tail rose up and pointed down at me. At the end of it was a sharp stinger. There were at least a dozen more around and above it, with more creeping out from the mist. I was amazed that we hadn't noticed them.

"No one ever looks up," I whispered, then reached out a hand and placed it on Varrin's shoulder. He looked over at me, then followed my gaze. Xim and Sayil followed suit, then slowly began backing into the hallway. The first creature cocked its head, and a thick stream of drool ran off its teeth down toward me. Its tail began to glow, then jerked and sent the sharp stinger shooting off of it. The barb pierced me right above the collarbone.

I swore at the burning pain and jumped into the hallway, the monsters clamoring down the wall now that the brief standoff had ended. A couple more stingers thumped into the soil behind me as I flew out of their sight and one of the creatures landed hard on the ground, dazed. I was initially confused by that, but remembered my I Don't Attack You, You Attack Me skill, and assumed it had gotten stunned after launching the stinger that hit me and had lost its grip on the wall.

After sprinting a few meters, I spun to see the creatures crawling into the corridor along the walls and ceiling. Several let themselves fall to the ground, spinning in the air and landing on their short legs, their feet making a wet smack as they hit the stone. They raised their comically long arms and bared fangs, then started lumbering down the corridor. Some of them had fat tongues hanging out over the row of sharp teeth, and I wondered how they didn't accidentally shred them.

We made it a hundred feet or so down the hall when Varrin turned back toward the creatures and drew his sword.

“Why are we stopping?” I asked, sliding to a stop and nearly slipping on the wet stone. There was some sort of moss growing on the floor here.

“We don’t know what’s down this tunnel,” he said. I raised my eyebrows and pointed back toward the encroaching monsters.

“Not those!” I said, then ripped the stinger out of the base of my neck. It had only done four damage, but stacked another five toxicity which took me to forty-three.

“You can’t know that for sure,” said Xim. “Might be a whole nest of them down there.”

“Yeah? Or there could be a fucking food truck selling tacos and cheap tequila shots! We don’t know.”

Sayil was the farthest down the hall, looking between our group and then deeper into the corridor. The hall disappeared into darkness and fog. I used to like fog, thought it was cool. Kind of spooky, but aesthetically pleasing. That opinion was changing rapidly.

“This is a good bottleneck,” said Varrin. “We force them to fight us head-on.”

“Brother,” I said, waving at the rapidly approaching wave of monsters, “they’re on the fucking ceiling. I don’t think that’ll work the way you want.”

Two more of the stingers landed in my back.

“Shit!” I turned to face the horde. “Fine!” I put up my dukes and got ready to throw down.

“Wait, you need to get behind me,” said Varrin.

“Nah,” I said, as three more needles plunged into my chest. “I got this.”

I wasn't just full of bravado. I had a reason to stand out front in this fight. I wasn't troubling myself too much with concerns about whether it was a *good* reason, I just acted on the first thing that came to mind.

The creatures were launching ranged attacks with the stinger on their tails. They did a little damage which wasn't a big deal. I can soak the damage and Xim can heal up the others who got hit. The bigger problem was that the stingers caused more toxicity to build, which Xim *wasn't* able to heal, and for which we only had two more antidotes. Even a couple of those stingers would cause anyone else to lose health for the rest of the Delve, unless we wanted to spend an antidote on them. I, on the other hand, was at fifty-three toxicity and still had a lot of runway before it overcame my health regen.

I also had a suspicion that I wanted to confirm. In my first fight with the Stickmen, their regular attacks couldn't hurt me. It was only when they used their big, glowing attack that I took damage. The Atrocidile bite hurt, but its mouth was as big as a door and it probably had the jaw strength to match its size. These little assholes looked like they weighed about sixty pounds. Yeah, their stingers could do a drop of damage, but I was betting that was a special attack like the ones made by the Stickmen. When the first pair of the dog-lizard-scorpion beasts got close enough to launch themselves at me teeth-first, I offered up my forearms.

They chomped down hard enough to break teeth, and I grinned wide when it didn't do shit.

I held my arms out to either side, the monsters dangling off of them, and Varrin cut one in half while Xim clobbered the other with her scepter. Another pair of lizard hounds dropped from above and went after my neck and head. Hot, wet breath slammed into my face and I was reminded of how blessed I was for having my sense of

smell obliterated by constantly inhaling the Delve's toxic nasal-spray. A slimy tongue slapped me across the cheek and I considered catching it in my teeth to give the monster a taste of its own bitey medicine, but felt like french-kissing a venomous dog-lizard wasn't something I wanted to add to my list of enriching life experiences.

The monsters piled on and a couple more stingers hit me, sending their owners to the ground, stunned. Before long the beasts started hitting each other with the needles more often than me. Once a monster fired its stinger, a new one didn't immediately grow back, so it looked like a one-shot attack. I staggered backward as the weight and force of so many of the beasts pressed into me, leaving a mound of corpses behind from Varrin and Xim's uninterrupted attacks. Xim even tossed a couple of heals into my back until I told her not to worry about it, which I knew would lead to some hard questions after the fight.

After a few minutes of relentless biting, stinging, clawing, grappling, licking, drooling, and dying, the last of the creatures was sliced in half by Varrin. I pried its jaw from around my bicep, letting the severed head drop to the floor where the rest of its body lay.

Xim quickly pressed an antidote into my hands and looked me over. I was covered in blood, very little of it my own, and I casually tugged several stingers from my chest. I tried handing the antidote back to her.

"I'm uh, not actually losing health yet."

Her jaw hung open. Varrin swung his sword, slinging monster blood and guts off the blade.

"Did you-" Varrin began, but was interrupted by the post-combat notification.

Your party has slain 14 Gekkogs: Amalgamation, Grade Zero. Your party receives the following reward(s):

1) 12 Ruby Chips

2) 14 Gekkog Stingers

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to: Even Distribution.

You receive: 3 Ruby Chips.

Party Leader has set item allocation to: Master Looter.

Party Leader receives all other rewards.

Varrin waved his notification away, then continued.

“Did you put *all* of your points into Fortitude?”

“That can’t be,” said Xim. “You have a spell that can do *ok* damage, and you can cast it more than a couple of times. You have to have points in WIS and INT.”

“Ok, here’s the thing. I put all of my *Creation* points into Fortitude.”

“What does that mean?” asked Xim.

“Did you- did you have *other* points?” Varrin stammered.

“I already had some points distributed, but I didn’t place them myself. At least, not intentionally. I mean, I made life choices that gave me the points, so in that sense I placed them where they ended up, but getting an extra point in Intelligence wasn’t really on my mind when I decided to pick up a double-major, ya’ know?”

Xim held up her hands, then shook them.

“How?!” she said.

“How many?” Varrin said at the same time.

I pointed at Varrin.

“First, not sure I want to tell you that.” I pointed at Xim. “Second, great question. Third,” I pointed down the hall, “the fuck did Sayil go?”

Xim and Varrin both turned to look down the corridor, but Sayil was gone. We soon got another notification. A notification that we’d already seen one too many times this Delve.

A party member has been slain: Sayil Starion.

All items in the party member’s inventory will be returned upon completion of the Delve.

“Did more of them come from behind?” Varrin asked as we marched down the corridor, looking for Sayil’s body.

“If so, why wouldn’t they flank us, too?” said Xim.

“I was a little distracted, but did either of you hear anything?” I said. “If he were attacked, wouldn’t he call out or something?”

“Maybe they didn’t come after us because they were satisfied with Sayil,” said Varrin. “Or he fought them off while we were focused on the front, but fell later on.”

“If he fought them, then where are the corpses?” asked Xim. “The blood?”

I looked at the ground as we went, but there weren’t any out-of-place body fluids.

“With Chilla,” I began, trying to word my thoughts delicately, “I think she was affected by the Atrocidile fear thing, and was driven away. Then she got ambushed by something. Do you think Sayil ran off as well?”

“From what fear effect?” Varrin said.

“Maybe a non-magical one? Like, he was just scared the normal way?”

Varrin shook his head.

“You think Sir Sayil ran from those petty beasts of his own volition? No. Something took him away. We must not have heard anything over the sounds of our own fight.”

Xim looked up at me.

“You *were* yelling a lot.”

“I was?”

“Yeah, you were saying that the Gekkogs were bad boys and that you weren’t going to give them any canned food for a week. Then you said that the Delve had a ‘one bite rule’ so you were taking them to Dr. Varrin to be put down and that you were very sad about it.”

“Huh,” I grunted. I didn’t remember any of that.

Chapter 10

Sayil's body was even worse off than Chilla's had been. It had also been hollowed out, but more meat was stripped from it, leaving little more than bones and tendons behind. Even his face hadn't been spared, and ragged tufts of fur gave way to gaping holes in his cheeks, the white of his teeth visible through them.

Varrin hurled his battered shield against a wall after studying the body, clattering loud enough to make me wince, and the sound echoed down the stone corridor behind us. He leaned against the wall and slid down to the ground, tossing his helm aside and gripping his dirty white hair in gauntleted fists. I watched him, trying to decide whether he was overwhelmed with anger or guilt, maybe both. He may have just been overwhelmed in general.

Varrin had been the one to decide on the difficulty of the Delve, a decision over which Sayil had made his feelings abundantly clear. Now that the Littan was dead, an unexpected pang of anger shot through me.

When we'd lost Chilla it had been a somber moment, but on some level she had gone into this with eyes wide open. She'd defended Varrin over the choice, and I suspected that the two of them had decided on platinum before they'd even entered the Creation Delve. So, when she had died, the loss felt more like it was at the hands of the Delve.

With Sayil, the blood was on Varrin's hands. He'd made an arrogant choice, and now he was learning about consequences. I wondered how much of that he'd had to face up to this point, as the child of some sort of noble. I couldn't stop a bitter feeling welling up in me—that privilege had sheltered him, as it so often does. But I also didn't truly

know the man or his upbringing. I left my assumptions behind and surveyed the room. Varrin could figure himself out in his own time.

Sayil's body was in a large chamber lined with tall alcoves. The hall ended here, and there were no other notable exits, aside from a large crack down one wall that might have been wide enough for a small human or other compact creature to crawl through. I suspected that whatever had killed Sayil had escaped through the crack, though I found it difficult to imagine something that small being able to eliminate Sayil so easily. There were no obvious signs of struggle in the room, nor any tracks that I could see.

Within each alcove was another harvester like we'd seen in the fields. Black tubes sprouted from their chests which, upon inspection, looked like they were fastened to the harvester and could be removed. I considered that one of these could have been the cause of Sayil's death, but the one back on the farm hadn't been subtle. Even while fighting the Gekkogs, I figured there was a pretty good chance we'd have heard one of these things stomping up behind us. There was also no blood or other viscera on the things, and the only active one we'd encountered hadn't shown any hostility toward us.

There was also a thick layer of moss, or whatever the local equivalent was, growing up and over the feet on the harvesters. If any of them had moved, the moss grew back up onto their feet real quick. As it was, I didn't think any of the ones in this room had moved for a long time. Still, I couldn't eliminate the possibility, so I kept an eye on them as I walked back over to Xim.

She was leaning over Sayil, still peering at the wounds and turned his head from side to side to get a closer look at... something. She shook her head and started running her hands along his arms.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

“Bones,” she said. “He doesn’t have any broken bones.” She held his hand up and looked at me. “No wounds on his fingers either.”

“Oh. So, that means what? He had good calcium intake as a child?”

“His swords are sheathed. His throwing knives and all still here. It doesn’t look like he fought at all. But,” she gestured back down the hall, “there’s no blood trail leading to the body.”

“Still not following.”

“If he’d been ambushed there should have been a struggle,” Xim said, standing and wiping her hands off on her tabard. The act probably made them *more* dirty, if anything. “Unless whatever attacked him killed or disabled him with its first attack. Now, everything in here has tried to eat us. Everything except these things.” She waved a finger between the harvesters. “Monsters we’ve encountered attack with natural weapons. Claws, teeth...”

“Magically enhanced pointy bits,” I added.

“If he were attacked back where we were fighting, then he would have likely been bleeding. If so, we would have a blood trail. If something hit him and knocked him unconscious, then dragged him down here, his skull should have cracked.” She knelt and turned his head from side to side again, a little less than gently. “But there are no obvious signs of attack with a blunt instrument.”

“Got a theory?”

She shrugged.

“It looks like he came down here and just died. Then, something ate him.”

“Maybe he *did* run away, found a dead end, and got jumped by something out of that crack in the wall.”

“I thought for sure that it was those Gekkogs that killed Chilla,” said Xim. “That they’d come back here to their nest after their meal. But after seeing this, I don’t think that makes sense.”

I looked at the large crack. It was possible that a Gekkog could have gotten through it, but I agreed that their behavior didn’t line up with what Xim was telling me.

“We have a mystery monster who’s picking us off one at a time?”

Xim sighed and started rifling through Sayil’s pack, pulling out any supplies that might be useful. I went to the body and, after glancing at Varrin, who was still grappling with profound guilt and despair, decided to do a little bit of corpse robbing. The term didn’t have the same ring as grave robbing, but Sayil wasn’t in a grave. Although, maybe the Delve could be considered a tomb? I took his swords.

At first, I tried to get his sword belt around my waist, but it was too small. I settled for taking one of the swords off of the belt and holding it by the scabbard. It was an upgrade over my dagger, although I wasn’t confident that I’d be able to wield it any more effectively.

Xim eyed me.

“Guess you did end up stealing some more of Sayil’s stuff.”

“I am covetous. It’s my fatal flaw.”

Varrin got back to his feet and glared at us.

“Can you two take this more seriously?” he growled.

It was the wrong thing for me to hear at that moment.

So far, I felt like I’d been giving Varrin a lot of slack. But that reproach sent an ice-cold lance of rage right down the middle of my body. Maybe if I hadn’t been bleeding from the eyes, covered in shit, and fresh off of finding the second mutilated corpse of the

day, I would have been a bit more chill. As it was, that statement sent me right over an edge I didn't even realize I'd been standing next to.

I strode over to Varrin and stared him down. He was head and shoulders taller than me, but he still looked young enough to get called into the principal's office, and he was starting to act half that age.

"It's called a coping mechanism, fuck-face, and it's the sort of thing that lets you choose between having a laugh and burying somebody, so you don't want me to take this seriously. If I did, you'd end up right next to Sayil." I gripped the collar of his armor and pushed him back into the wall. "You're the one who put us in this situation. Xim and I didn't ask to get caught in orbit around your monumental dumbassery, but here we are. You've already gotten your girlfriend and this poor bastard killed with the quality of your leadership, so don't you even dare take a self-righteous tone with me."

I let Varrin go and took a couple steps back. The lordling eyed me intensely, his expression going from shock, to rage, to a sort of hollowed-out anxiety. He looked away from me to Sayil's body after a few seconds, and I took a couple deep breaths. The breathing exercise didn't help much, since it felt like huffing carolina reaper sauce. Eventually, I managed to put my less comfortable feelings back into a box and stuff them deep, deep inside. There'd be a healthier time to deal with those later. For now, I needed to get back to surviving in the calmest way I could.

"This is a dead end," I said. "We've got what we need from Sayil, so go ahead and do your body-release thing, then we need to move on. We've got three more exits to check and the clock doesn't stop while we all engage in honest and constructive communication."

Varrin's hand clenched around the hilt of his sword and his jaw tightened, but he waved a hand and we got the notification telling us Sayil's body was being taken outside the Delve. The ground opened up, swallowed the beast-man, and we moved on in flinty silence.

There were no more Gekkogs on the walls of the farm area, and we kept our eyes up as we made our way around to the second hallway. Another ten minute hike brought us to a second chamber identical to the one where we'd found Sayil, but the harvesters in this room were on the floor in pieces.

Most looked like they'd been disassembled, but two had obviously been torn apart. Soft, spongy material made up the 'flesh' beneath black skin, with thousands of small veins running through it, brown and desiccated. The bones were silvery and metallic, and their stomachs opened to reveal a large, membranous sack where the crystallized essences were stored after dropping down the hole in its chest. The disassembled harvesters were partially full of crystals, but the two that had been ripped open had their membranes slashed and any essences that had been there were gone.

We studied the scene wordlessly, then moved on to the next hall. At the end was a stone panel that could be lifted to reveal a wide shaft that descended in a slope deeper into the facility, reminding me of an old coal chute. Poison fog billowed out of it when opened, and I speculated that this is where the harvesters dumped the essences after gathering them. Or a garbage disposal. Either way, it was better than a dead end, but none of us were eager to go sliding down it.

The fourth hallway was shorter than the others, and led to a series of rooms that were full of what looked like benches, desks, and even beds carved from the stone. The

rooms were filthy, covered in a thick coating of dust and grime. If there had ever been any bedding or other degradable items beyond the stonework, it had long since rotted away. After briefly exploring the rooms and finding nothing of interest we went to the end of the hall, where there was another descending stairwell.

I took the lead this time, Varrin following behind Xim and I without a word, and the stairs went much further down than was reasonable. After descending for twenty minutes my mind began to return to the paranoid fear state from the endless tunnel above.

Would this ever end?

How far down had we gone?

I felt like we could have gone down the length of a skyscraper at this point, but I'd never gone down that many stairs before. I started to wish for an elevator, but disregarded that idea after I considered all the classic horror-movie tropes like being trapped inside, falling to our deaths, or having a liquid metal murder-robot from the future land on top and start trying to carve its way inside to kill my son.

When we finally exited at the bottom, any relief I felt at being out of the Delve's version of SCP-087 was quickly extinguished. We were in a perfectly circular, perfectly dark tunnel, with none of the glowing rocks that lit up the rest of the Delve. After a minute of us all staring down the tunnel, trying to will our eyes to pierce the inky dark, I broke the silence.

"I know I've already said this once today, but that is fucking ominous."

Chapter 11

“Only a *little* ominous,” Xim said.

“You know it’s probably full of monsters.”

“Sure, but we know there are monsters. It would be worse if we *didn’t* know about the monsters and they surprised us. Also, the fog isn’t too bad down here.”

“I guess.” She was right about the fog. There was still a slight haze, but the air was mostly clear. My toxicity wasn’t going down, though. “I’m assuming one of us has torches.”

Varrin reached into the sack I carried and pulled out a lantern. He turned a dial on the side and the shutter opened up, sending a beam of white light down the tunnel.

“A bit better than a torch,” I said. “How’s that work? Do you have lightbulbs here? I figured with the medieval getup that this was a pre-industrial type of vibe.”

“I don’t understand half of what you just asked,” said Varrin. “It’s a glowstone lamp. There’s a glowstone in it.”

“Oh. It works pretty well.”

“It has a minor focusing weave to enhance and direct the light. It’s one of the few magically imbued items you can bring into a Creation Delve.”

“There are restrictions?”

“So many,” said Varrin. He walked off down the tunnel.

Xim and I walked side by side just behind Varrin, which was a little awkward with the curve of the floor, but both of us wanted to be able to see what was ahead. There was a light stream of water running along the ground like it was a sewer or water runoff system. Unlike the Delve above, the sewers were not very straightforward.

The first time we came to a junction that gave us three possible paths to follow, we decided to stick to the right wall. That led us to a wide, impassable grate. When we wound our way back to the original junction, we kept right again, which was straight from our original bearing, and came to another junction after a few minutes of walking. Varrin sighed and took out his chalk, then began marking the paths we'd explored and the ones we hadn't.

I began building a mental map of the sewer in my head and after two hours was starting to get a good idea of the shape of the area. There were a large number of junctions, and while they didn't follow a direct grid pattern, it was more geometric than organic in design. The bounds of the sewers also seemed to correlate to the facilities upstairs. Where I estimated there was a wall above, we would quickly find a grate or a dead-end with water trickling down from a drainage pipe in the ceiling.

At one point we found a sheer cliff face where the water ran off into a massive underground chasm. Varrin's light wasn't strong enough to make out the far walls of the room and the sounds of the water hitting the bottom came from a long, long way down. I made a note of that one in the event we got desperate for a path to progress, but none of us thought it would be a bright idea to take a dive and pray.

Several hours passed before we became nervous. That's not true, we were all nerves down there in the endless maze of absolute darkness, but we did begin to get *more* nervous when the twelve hour mark came and went. If my mental map of the place was correct, we had thus far covered an area of around fifty percent of the large grow chamber above. I was reasonably confident that we would find some sort of exit before our time got too short.

That's what I told the others, at least. Who knew how big this place might be.

I eventually suggested that we test an idea.

“If we head directly north from this point then we should end up in the area where the chute from above dumps the crystals out.” I’d arbitrarily decided the cardinal directions, since compasses didn’t function in this Delve.

“Even if I believe you,” said Varrin, “why does that matter?”

“If this facility was designed to pump out those crystals, then it’s reasonable to believe there would be more of the facility wherever they are delivering the crystals.”

“Or,” said Xim, “that chute travels a mile through the rock and dumps out the side of a mountain.”

“You think we’re inside a mountain?” I asked.

“Maybe. The Delve portals we use take us to real locations in the world, but they don’t tell us where.”

“If the Delve ends up trapping us after the twenty-four hours are up, rather than disintegrating us or eating us or whatever else it might do, would someone be able to come find us from outside?”

“Doubtful,” Xim answered. “We know the Delves exist out in the world because they have been found on occasion, but most of them are hidden deep within the earth. We’re unlikely to be discovered in time.”

“I see.” My mind cataloged that info for later. “Still, I think my idea is the best we’ve got.”

Varrin looked between the two of us, then nodded and began heading up the tunnel toward the nearest junction. As we made our way ‘north’, I noticed that the water flowed away from the direction we were heading. That gave me further hope that we

were moving toward some new part of the facility. After all, you wouldn't runoff water flowing *toward* your industrial facilities.

After another hour of marching, my thoughts and attention began to focus more inwardly. The scenery was all the same and I could only walk in silent vigilance for so long before I got sick of it. We weren't talking, trying to reduce the chance that any errant monsters might hear us. We hadn't seen any for some time, but I didn't let myself fall into a false sense of security.

I began to think about what I'd been through so far. The Delve had been so intense that I'd mostly been riding it out from one outrageous event or set-piece to another without taking any time to reflect. Now I was running through a list of possibilities for what was happening to me.

I'd already decided I wasn't dreaming. If I were, then I would have to begin doubting every experience I'd ever had, and I'd already decided a long time ago that I wasn't a big fan of Cartesian doubt as a life philosophy.

While I thought it was useful to doubt my senses and memories on occasion to try and remove bias, I never let my skepticism rise to the level of doubting the existence of reality completely. Every sense that I had told me that my experience was real, so I believed it was real. This also ruled out drug-induced hallucinations, which in my experience were never this grounded and concrete. It additionally barred the idea that I was in a computer simulation designed to trap my mind while a rogue AI network used my body as an energy source of dubious efficiency.

There was always the possibility of this being an afterlife wherein I am dead and this is some sort of personal hell, heaven, purgatory, or other machination of divine origin. I found that just as plausible as the scenario being presented to me, which is that

I died and was reincarnated in some other world or universe. Since it required the additional assumption that some greater being was actively brainwashing me into experiencing a false reality, I discarded it as a theory. I had no good reason to prefer it over the resurrection scenario.

It was clear by this point that this wasn't Earth, and I began analyzing the situation through that lens. What were the chances that life would evolve on a separate world in a shockingly similar humanoid form? Was the atmosphere coincidentally a similar mix of primarily nitrogen and oxygen? Why was gravity so similar?

It was entirely possible that my physiology had been changed to adapt to a different set of environmental factors and that I was experiencing an alien environment in a familiar way.

It was also possible that the humanoid form had some sort of universal functionality that caused alien life to trend toward it.

It could also be the case that this was an alternate dimension centered on a version of Earth that was similar to, but distinct from, my own.

That last theory was backed up by my subrace being listed as "extra-dimensional entity", and the attendant details concerning my body traveling between dimensions. Without having more concrete information, any serious consideration about all of that would have to be held in reserve.

While I was curious, the thoughts were mostly a new distraction from the core topic that I least wanted to think about. If I was dead and buried on Earth, and revived in a new world, then everyone I knew and loved was gone from my life.

There was a time when I wouldn't have minded that. I was a pretty miserable dude in my twenties, and had a serious case of misdirected anger toward the world for

my own perceived shortcomings. I was buried in debt, perpetually single, depressed, overweight, had a non-existent relationship with my family, and worked a series of godawful retail jobs. That last one was honestly the least tolerable item on that list. If this had happened to me at twenty-five, I would have probably loved it. Fuck that world and the cosmic horse it rode in on.

But now...

I had done a lot of self-improvement and reflection. I'd gotten my mental health under control, which went hand-in-hand with my physical health. I lucked into a beautiful woman asking me out and that blossomed into a fantastic relationship. After some serious work in therapy I was able to speak to my father again after years of blaming him for my mother's death. It was still his fault, therapy didn't change that, but I was able to reconnect and find a way to exist with him. That also led to reconnecting with my brother, who I'd alienated for supporting him.

I still wouldn't say I was happy. I didn't even know what happiness *was*. What I will say is that it was the best I'd felt since I was twelve. And now, poof! Death by tree. My friends, my family, and most importantly, my fiancée, were gone. The weird part is that they weren't the ones who'd died, it was me.

I couldn't decide if that made it better or worse. While I knew academically that my life was much better than it had been in the past, and that my life overall was much better than the lives of countless other people, when I took a hard look at how I felt about losing it all—well, I didn't mind *too* much.

That was such an odd realization. I loved my fiancée, I knew that at least. Sure, forget my family and my fancy high-paying job that was still boring as shit. Yeah, I never felt comfortable in society at large and wasn't very attached to any culture I was engaged

with. Ok, I thought most of the world was stuck in an immutable political hellscape that would lead to the inevitable torment, suffering, and untimely death of all our descendants. But, I did love *her*. And I was sad. But she was alive and well and strong and would be able to move on without me. If I was truly stuck in an unconnected reality and we were lost to each other, then I would have to move on as well.

The decision snapped me out of my reverie to realize that I *wasn't* moving.

Xim and Varrin were about twenty yards ahead of me and I had no memory of slowing down. I started to hasten my pace to catch up to them, but heard a soft whisper from all around, almost as though it came from inside of me.

It hissed a single word.

[*Stop.*]

Chapter 12

I may be a pristine example of manly stoicism when it comes to a variety of stressful and life-threatening circumstances, but when a creepy ass voice starts whispering to me out of the darkness in a deadly underground maze of supernatural sewers, I am likely to lose my cool a bit. That is precisely how I realized that something unnatural was happening, when I failed to flinch even a little. I was calm, serene, and more at ease than I had been my entire time within the Delve. I stopped without much thought, and looked around curiously for the source of the command.

[*Come.*] The sinister voice vibrated within me. I noticed a pair of glinting eyes in an adjoining tunnel to my left.

The owner of the eyes held a softly glowing orb in its hand and I walked towards it. I expected to see another twisted or mutated creature. Maybe a three-meter-tall gentleman in a crisp suit with a blank, white face. Perhaps a fucking werewolf. But, this was just a dude. A half-naked, pale, filthy dude with broken yellow teeth and stringy hair hanging down from a hairline that looked like it had started to give up in middle school. The guy was ripped, though, which was an odd contrast. Who had time to go to the gym, but not to brush their teeth?

I walked closer to the man, who was about six inches shorter than me, and stopped when I was close enough for him to touch. He smiled and looked me up and down, licking his lips. He had a satchel over one shoulder that was darkly stained along the bottom half, but looked empty. The orb he held was metallic, with two lines of luminous symbols ringing its top and bottom. It hovered gently over his palm. In his other hand he gripped a jagged tool. It had a thick grip, at the end of which was a sort of

scoop, as large as a mixing bowl. The edge of the scoop was lined with long, serrated points which, when I looked closely, resembled teeth or fangs.

The man peeked at my allies, receding down the hall, then looked back up to me with a grin. He adjusted his grip on the melon-baller from hell, and the runes along the orb lit up. I felt the whisper again, though the man's lips never moved.

[*Lie down.*]

I looked at the ground, then back up at the disgusting, pale man with the heroic physique.

I reached out and grabbed him by the neck.

“No.”

His eyes went wide and he dropped his scoop, then grabbed at my wrist, but still held onto the orb with his other hand. I squeezed as hard as I could, then cast *Oblivion Orb*. There was a loud *pop!*, then blood came spilling out from between my fingers.

That got him to drop the orb, which, to my surprise, didn't fall, but floated gently to the ground. He grabbed my wrist with both hands and twisted his whole body. The bones in my wrist creaked, and I lost my grip on his throat. He made a rasping, croaking sound, shooting blood from between his lips, then stumbled back into the dark.

I wiped my hand off on my pants and called out to the others.

“Hey! I got something back here!”

Xim and Varrin shot around, confused that I was so far away, then began running back to me. I squinted into the dark after the weird pale guy, who I could hear stumbling down the corridor, but I was in no hurry to go after him in the pitch black. I squatted down to observe the orb, then gave it a poke. It didn't react and I didn't feel any tingling

or pain when I touched it, so I picked it up. When I stood, Xim and Varrin were beside me.

“What happened?” Varrin asked.

“There was this guy,” I said, “he had this orb and he—or the orb, maybe—was whispering shit right into my brain.”

Varrin turned the glowstone lamp down the tunnel and we could make out the shape of the man as he squeezed into a large crack in the wall. As we watched, the crack widened to accommodate him, then shrank back down after he squirmed through it, now too small for a normal person to pass. He’d also left his scoop behind, which I prodded with my boot.

“He had that, too.”

Xim picked it up and examined it.

“What a strange implement,” she said, turning it over. “It looks like it’s designed to replicate teeth or claw marks.”

“What do you mean it whispered into your brain?” asked Varrin.

I relayed the brief encounter, and Varrin’s expression grew dark.

“You think that’s what killed Chilla and Sayil?”

“Maybe,” I said. “He had some sort of mind control thing,” I held up the orb, “and that organ-scooper-mabob.” I pointed at the tool Xim still held.

“How did you resist the mind control?” Varrin asked.

“No clue.”

Varrin opened his mouth to say something, but the whisper intruded into all of our minds.

[Release... me.]

I held the orb closer to my face and squinted at it.

“Are you talking to me?” I said. The symbols on the orb pulsed.

[*Release... me,*] it repeated, its mental voice growing beyond a whisper.

I gave the orb a shake.

“I don’t think I will.”

The symbols along its body flickered.

[*Please?*]

I looked between Varrin and Xim. Varrin shook his head slowly, then turned to cast the light of his lamp around the area, keeping watch for any more surprises. Xim leaned close to the orb.

“What are you?” she asked.

There was no response, so I gave the orb another shake.

“Answer the lady, please,” I said.

[*I am the mind and the will. I am the beating heart of hearts.*] The sinister mental voice began to crescendo [*I am the arbiter of what shall be and what shall not! I am-*]

“The duck that flaps in the night?” I said.

[*I am not this thing... a duck.*]

“A duck?” said Xim, looking hastily around the corridor. She raised her scepter
“Where is it?”

“Uh, there’s no duck, Xim.” The cleric visibly relaxed, and I turned back to the orb in my hand. “Listen, try to be a little less grandiose and a bit more specific.”

[To be specific would be an endeavor your feeble minds would not comprehend. My nature is beyond your capacity to realize. I transcend that which you can grasp and the nuance of my being cannot be contained within the linguistic confines of your-]

“Ok, how about this. In five words or less, what are you?”

The runes twinkled.

[I am the Core.]

“The core of what?”

[This place. This facility. This Delve.]

Kim recoiled, and I raised an eyebrow at her.

“You’re saying you’re the master of this place?” she said.

[I am not so full of hubris that I would claim a title more befit to the Old Ones. I am the executive overmind, the governor of creation within these walls, entrusted as overseer to the execution of the Great Will.]

“The manager,” I said.

[A facile and overly simple characterization of my functions, but it is not incorrect.]

“What are you doing skulking around with yolked Gollum?”

I felt an unpleasant sensation pass through my head, like a subtle vibration that was half-imagined.

[Your use of unfamiliar cultural references is vain and short-sighted, as you speak only for your own amusement. Those around you will quickly tire of it.]

“Sure, let me rephrase. Why were you hamming about with Crypt Keeper von Steroids?”

Another tingle in my head.

[That reference is so obscure that even others of your own kind would find it difficult to comprehend.]

“Are you- Are you reading my mind right now?”

[Yes.]

“Oh,” I said, scratching my jaw.

[You see? That is a forthright response wherein the manner of communication is simple and effective. Abandon your foolish pursuit of self-sabotaging wit and adopt a more immediate mode of speech.]

“The loquacious, mind-invading Delve spirit is critiquing how I talk,” I said, more to parse the information than anything.

[I am not a spirit.]

“Right, you’re this location’s supervisor. That’s convenient, I’d like to file a complaint.”

[I am not a supervisor! And you have no authority to register your petty bleating.]

Xim clapped her hands loudly between us.

“Let’s take this conversation back to somewhere more constructive,” she said.

Then, to the Core, “Why were you with the villain who has been hunting us?”

[That fiend’s name is Hognay. He has coerced me into his service.]

“How would he coerce one such as you?” asked Xim.

[He threatens the very existence of the Delve. It is my duty to prioritize the continued function of this facility above all else.]

“Is he the reason the mana accumulation has stopped?”

[Indeed. I do not know how he was able to infiltrate this place, as he did not enter through the normal portals, such as you. Once inside, he summoned a lesser c'thon that consumes the gathering power of the Delve. He has already caused extensive damage to the obelisk to remove my physical shell and cut off my access to the Delve's functions. I will shred his muscle and tendon and extract his central nervous system! I will suspend it in a preservation chamber and torment him with salt and acid for all eternity!]

“Jesus,” I said. “You can do that?”

The runes on its body pulsed.

[I would need to make modifications to the Delve. I am certain that I can acquire authorization from the System. I will fertilize soil with his ground bones and grow piertan plants that will provide the corrosive matter for his own torment!]

“You go ahead and do that,” I said. “If this guy is the reason the Delve is stalled out or whatever, then we just need to take care of him to finish our objective, right?” I looked at Xim for confirmation. She looked thoughtful.

“Maybe,” she said. “What should we call you?”

[My designation is Core one-one-five-six.]

“But ‘Core’ isn’t your name, right?” I said. “It describes *what* you are, not *who* you are.”

[This is true, in essence. I am a Core.]

“So calling you Core one-one-five-six would be like calling me ‘human five billion twenty four million one hundred thousand and sixty three.’”

“It’s also too long,” Xim added.

[It is only too long due to your unwieldy use of vocalized language.]

“This place is called The Toxic Grotto, right?” I said. “You’re the core of The Toxic Grotto, so maybe we can just call you Grotto?”

[That is fine if it will settle the matter. I have little interest in what you call me.]

“Alright, Grotto,” said Xim. “My name is Xim and this is Arlo. The big guy over there patrolling is Varrin.” She held her chin in her hand. “Are you a *boy* core, or a *girl* core?”

Runes glittered.

[The closest analog in your limited parlance is male.]

“Nice to meet you, Grotto! What do we need to do to fix the Delve?”

[I cannot be certain, since I am no longer in communication with the Delve’s operations. Eliminating the c’thon that drains the mana will be the first step. If there has been no further damage, then that will be sufficient.]

“And that probably involves getting rid of Hulky Hognay,” I said.

[True. I find it doubtful that he would abandon this Delve of his own volition. You would need to persuade him to leave. Preferably through a liberal application of violence. However...]

Grotto popped up out of my hand and hovered into the air, then took a lap around the pair of us. He went over to Varrin and did the same, until the big guy waved the Core away like a fly. Grotto returned and his runes blinked.

[You are all too weak. Even if your other two companions had not perished, the battle would be all but hopeless.]

“Aren’t these Delves adjusted to player level?” I asked.

[A crude description, but close enough to the truth. If this Delve were functioning normally, it would be a deadly challenge for a group of five newborns like

you, but far from impossible. Hognay and his beast are not from this Delve, however. They have trespassed from outside and Hognay possesses power beyond what this Delve can produce at its current accumulation level. If that were not so, I would have crushed him myself and consumed his life essence to power even greater lethal countermeasures!]

“Then the Delve is a deathtrap to lure in Delvers and consume their souls,” I said, looking to Xim. “I guess the followers of whoever-you-said were right.”

“The supplicants of Astrania.”

[No. Your vulgar assertion is not the purpose of the Delves.]

“Then what is?” I asked.

[You are unworthy of that knowledge. Know that you serve a vital purpose, and be satisfied.]

“So, you don’t know?”

[Of course I know, I am the Core.]

“Then what is it?”

[Why do you believe that absurd tactic will elicit more information from me? I am not a child and will not be goaded into revealing that which is hidden for a reason.]

I frowned and looked at Xim, jerking my thumb at Grotto.

“He doesn’t know.”

“A tragedy, for sure,” said Xim. “To endure in a task without knowing the reason why, it must be very difficult.”

[You are not as insidious as you believe with your clumsy antagonism. Continue to waste time here and the fate that befalls you will be well-earned.]

I shrugged.

“We’ll try to let you know when we figure it out. I hate the thought of you struggling down here without a clear purpose.”

[Silence! We must find a way to restore the mana accumulation and this prattle is destructive to our cause!]

“Fine,” I said, “but if a fight with Hognay and his... c’thon is unwinnable, then what can we do?”

“Could you help us?” Xim asked Grotto.

[Again, I am not integrated with the Delve... I would be capable of lending aid, were I placed back within the obelisk.]

“And what is the obelisk?” I asked.

[It is the obelisk of this Delve.]

“Ok, but what does it *do*?”

[That is also not for you to know.]

“There are theories,” said Xim, “that it is the central structure which gathers mana from the surrounding areas. That’s typically where you find the Delves’ strongest monsters and the main goal for most Delves is to reach it.”

“Sound right, Grotto?”

[I can neither confirm nor deny your rudimentary theories and suppositions.]

“So it’s true,” Xim said, looking excited. “There’s so much more I want to know! Why are there monsters in the Delves? Are they intentional, or a side effect of accumulating mana? I always thought they were a mix of both, since you earn chips when you slay monsters, and chips are a form of condensed mana. The monsters must spawn or grow from the mana-rich environment.”

[I have not said any of that is true! Your presumptions are foolish!]

“Yeah,” I said. “I wouldn’t put too much faith in the words of a malevolent mind-controlling murder-sphere.”

[I am not malevolent. My existence serves a greater good.]

“You helped swole Napoleon murder two of our party members.”

[I was under duress, and the lives of Delvers who enter the Delves are forfeit until they prove their worth. My actions were only an extension of their trials.]

“But not Hognay,” I said. “According to you, he’s far stronger than what should have been here. Mind controlling our allies into his clutches is a clear violation of whatever trial you’re talking about.”

[If you believe that my interests lie in providing a fair and balanced experience for Delvers who seek out my rewards, then you are misguided and naive.]

“What rewards are we even talking about?!” I said, getting a little heated.

“Chips and stats,” said Xim, frowning. “I know you’re less informed than you should be, but you don’t even know that much?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling my reasoning for keeping my origins a secret growing weaker by the second.

I didn’t know these people and I didn’t know what they would do with the information that I came from another world or whatever had happened to me, but at this point the risk of death at the hands of Hognay, his monster, this orb, or our time running out loomed larger and larger in my mind. I was beginning to question whether my honesty could have gone towards preserving Chilla and Sayil’s lives, but I didn’t see how it would have made much of a difference. Maybe it would have helped our strategy, or maybe it would have created even more conflict in the group. I brushed away the sproutling of guilt and took a deep breath.

“I don’t know *anything*.”

Chapter 13

“I woke up in the character creation room and, until that moment, I had never even heard of a Delve before. Where I’m from we don’t have a System that shows us status screens or updates, we don’t get missions, we don’t have an inventory, there’s no magic or any of that.”

Xim drummed fingers along her cheek as she digested the information.

“You said your slot in the Delve was a gift from your lord.”

“A generous stretching of the truth. Someone or something put me here, but I don’t really know what it was.”

“Coming from a place without System notifications isn’t that strange. That’s a Delver thing, and some isolated regions don’t have a treaty with Hiward to enter the Creation Delve. But, not knowing about Delves at all is very odd. You’d have to be living somewhere totally cut off from the world. Like one of the primitive tribes near the Less-Than-Habitable Forest. Magic is rare enough that some people never run into it, but most major cities have casters. Delves aren’t the only way to get access, but they’re the easiest.”

“That’s an oddly-named forest,” I commented.

“No, the Oddly-Named Forest is on the other side of the continent.”

I *think* Xim might have been messing with me, so I ignored the bait.

“Where I come from is probably *very* cut off from wherever ‘here’ is,” I said.

I noticed Varrin glancing back at us. He was listening in on the conversation, but keeping his thoughts to himself.

[*This revelation is not germane to our current course of action,*] Grotto uttered into our minds. [*I recommend that your allies consider this knowledge and adjust*

accordingly, but we must decide how we are going to reclaim the obelisk and repair the Delve.]

“I still don’t understand,” I said. “You were helping Hognay because he was threatening the Delve, but didn’t helping him put the Delve in even greater danger?”

[It was not an easy choice. When Hognay arrived, he decimated my defenses and began harvesting the mana for himself with the c’thon creature. He promised that he would leave once he had gathered sufficient mana reserves, but I did not believe him. I queried the System to have the Delve listed for early distribution and the System approved my request, but failed to list the Delve at the level I had suggested, using the measure of mana accumulation to determine difficulty rather than the power of the intruders.

[When your party entered, Hognay was furious as your presence risked disrupting his machinations. He threatened to destroy the obelisk and the Delve if I did not assist him in eliminating your group before you were able to find the obelisk room. I did not believe you were powerful enough to stop him, even if you did reach the obelisk, so I agreed. It is unfortunate that your party members perished and I regret that I was forced to play such an active role in their demise, but as the Delve’s core I am often responsible for the deaths of Delvers as part of my duties. I will not claim that it truly bothers me that I had to take such action.]

“Why do you think we can help you now?” I said.

[You, Arlo. Not only were you able to break my invasion of your mind, but you possess an ability that can harm Hognay despite the fact that he is a level two Delver. Such feats are very difficult for a level zero Delver to achieve. If we work together, we may have a chance to put an end to his meddling and rid Arzia of the scourge that is

his existence! Join me and deliver profound justice to Hognay and his beast through judicious application of torment and suffering!]

“He’s level two?” said Xim. “If so, he has double the stat points of me or Varrin, and who knows how advanced his skills are. We haven’t even unlocked intrinsic skills yet, but he could have been developing his for years.” She looked up at me. “I know you didn’t want to tell us earlier, but how many bonus stats *did* you start with? We need to know if we plan on confronting Hognay.”

“Fourteen,” I said reluctantly. It still felt uncomfortable divulging the information without knowing how vulnerable it made me. “But they were split among the different stats, so none of them were super high to start.”

“What are the scores of your three highest stats?”

I bit my lip and considered how to respond, but didn’t think about it for long. Xim had been nothing but helpful to me the entire Delve. Besides that, I liked her. She seemed honest, enduring, and smart as hell. I decided to take the risk and tell her whatever she needed to know.

“Fortitude is my highest. It’s at thirteen. Intelligence is my second at five, and Wisdom is my third at four.”

“That’s incredible,” she said.

[I don’t understand. How is that possible? There is no mechanic for starting with any stats above one or getting more than ten points to allocate during Creation.]

“Why is it even called Creation?” I said. “It seems like you all already had lives before coming in here. You just spent stat points, right?”

[A Delver's body is not the same as the one they entered with. It is reforged and made anew to accommodate the power that is granted by the Delves, among other things.]

“So you all got to customize your appearance too?”

There was a moment of silence.

“No,” said Xim. “I look mostly the same as I did before, but there are some changes. I’m more trim, for starters. I have more muscular definition and my appearance has been refined. Scars are gone, no more blemishes, that sort of thing. I didn’t get to make any active changes. Did you?”

“Ah. Yeah. I got the opportunity to change anything I wanted. But, I kept it mostly the same. Just a few cosmetic changes that I liked.”

Xim looked me up and down, making me very self-aware that I was still shirtless, then met my eyes.

“Just a few cosmetic changes?” she said.

“Yeah.”

She nodded, then shrugged. I wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“Hognay still has more stats than you, but you’re closer. The intrinsic skills will make a huge difference, though. You’re still outclassed. We all are. Plus, there’s the creature he summoned. He may be a summoner, or he could have used an item or a ritual prepared by someone else. C’thons come from a different dimension, so if he’s a summoner his attunement is either mystical, dimensional, or physical. If he used an item or ritual that means he is well equipped, even compared to another level two. Then again, even if he has the most rudimentary gear he’d be considered well-equipped against us. We don’t have any mana weaves or augmented items.”

I had no idea what half of that meant, but it seemed like Xim was partially talking to herself so I let her continue without interrupting.

“Our numbers aren’t a huge advantage. A level two will have techniques that could kill me or Varrin with a single good strike. If we’re going in then you, Arlo, will need to take the brunt of his attacks. If you could tank him *and* the c’thon, that would be ideal, but I doubt you’ll be able to hold the attention of both of them. If so, not for long.”

[You know quite a lot for someone at your level.]

“This is my ambition,” said Xim. “I want to Delve. I’m not here to grab a few stats and lord over people with my power like many of the nobles that come through Delves. I planned on running gold through level twenty. Even higher if I can keep up with the difficulty. I want to know more about Delves—why they exist, how they function, and who created them.” She smiled at Grotto. “Maybe you can help me get a head start on that.”

[It is not my place to give a Delver any advantages. The rewards you reap are obtained through your own power.]

“Even *that* is a hint,” said Xim, smiling. You’d have no idea she was facing near certain death. She looked *more* excited, if anything. “You said that you can help if we get you re-seated in the obelisk.”

[Yes. If I can access the Delve’s functions then I can provide significant support. I could not oust Hognay on my own but, with the three of you, it may be possible given Arlo’s... advantages.]

“We get to the obelisk chamber,” I said, “I distract Muscles and C’thon, one of you slaps Grotto into the obelisk and bam, we win. Sounds good to me.”

Varrin clomped back to the group.

“I’d prefer more specifics,” he said. He looked at Grotto and his hand tightened around his sword hilt. I began to think it was a sort of tick he had when agitated. He inhaled deeply through his nose and closed his eyes as he exhaled. When he opened them he seemed to have mastered whatever emotions he was grappling with. “What kind of support can you provide, Grotto?”

[I cannot know until I see the full state of the Delve. Hognay entered three months ago, and I have been disconnected for much of that time. If I am able to access the normal functions of the Delve then I can redirect mana flows away from the c’thon and perhaps reclaim a portion of the power it has stolen. I can also direct entities within the Delve to the obelisk chamber, though it will take time for them to make their way down here.]

“Entities?” I said. “Like more Gekkogs and Atrocidiles?”

[Yes, though there is only one Atrocidile.]

“Oh, we killed that one.”

[I know.]

“Would this backup be on our side?” I asked. “So far, the creatures here have uniformly tried to eat us.”

[They would be on my side.]

“And you can tell them not to attack us.”

[That... is not in their nature.]

“Then how about some other type of ‘entity’?”

Grotto’s runes flickered.

[Sure.] His tone was suspicious.

“Very well, let’s talk about other advantages,” said Varrin. “I don’t think any of us have been able to pull out every tool we have in a fight. Personally, I’ve yet to use my spiritual swordsmanship. This is a situation where we want to hit the enemy with everything we have all at once. Put the pressure on and get them on the defensive.”

“I’ve got one big card I haven’t played,” said Xim, a smile spreading across her face, “but it’s costly to use.”

We spent an hour discussing everyone’s abilities in detail, asking Grotto for guidance on the enemy as we did. The orb didn’t know everything Hognay could do, but had seen him in action enough to provide some good intel.

The biggest unknown factor was the c’thon. Grotto had only ever seen it feed, and the monster didn’t only eat mana from the Delve. Most of what Hognay gathered with his nightmare melon-scoop was given to the c’thon to keep it happy and docile. He hadn’t only been harvesting organs from our fallen allies, but also from monsters throughout the Delve. Monsters that had proven challenging to us, even when fighting them as a group.

“Arlo,” Varrin said toward the end of our discussion, “Xim probably knows this already, but I doubt you do given your circumstances. Chips can be consumed to restore mana quickly, but there are two major reasons why no one does this. First, it’s an act of extreme opulence. Ruby chips are the least valuable kind, and just one of them is worth enough to feed an entire peasant family for several years. There are alchemists that can dilute chips into potions that are much cheaper to use, and one chip can produce a dozen lower level potions.

“Second, chips are concentrated mana and consuming one puts a huge strain on your mana veins. It’s possible to seriously injure, or even kill yourself if you use them

irresponsibly. If it comes down to life or death and you're out of mana, it should be safe to use a single ruby chip to get your mana back, but it will be extremely painful. There are many documented cases of Delvers who consumed a chip and died after getting distracted by the discomfort. If you end up in that situation, be prepared. In no case should you consume a second within twenty-four hours of the first. At our level, the first chip will cause serious damage, but a second will be fatal."

I nodded. I didn't know what mana veins were, but I imagined what it would feel like for blood vessels all over my body to suddenly begin rupturing. I couldn't imagine it was pleasant. Was that what Chilla meant when she told me not to eat one?

"Don't suppose you have any of those potions?" I said.

"No. For whatever reason, the Creation Delve suppresses most magically imbued items. The chips are a workaround because they're acquired in the Delve and are raw and unrefined. Because of that, they flood your entire body with mana. That's why they're dangerous."

"And how do I use one?"

"Chew it up and swallow."

"I hear they taste awful," said Xim. "And it feels like eating shards of glass. My mom had to do it once and she told me that there was just so much blood coming out of her mouth afterward."

"Great," I said. "Thanks for the info."

After finishing our preparations to our satisfaction, we had Grotto show us the way to the obelisk chamber. It was, to my delight, in the northerly direction I had suggested we go. Mostly.

Varrin traded his kite shield to me in exchange for Sayil's sword, allowing him to dual wield. He said he preferred greatswords, but having a second sword was still more in line with the way he liked to fight as opposed to a sword-and-board approach. He assured me that I would not find the sword useful, given that I knew nothing about sword fighting. I made sure that my pair of daggers pilfered from Chilla was in easy reach and got my left arm through the shield's straps.

The obelisk room wasn't far. Turns out we'd gotten pretty close, which is one reason why Hognay had risked luring away another member of the group even though there hadn't been a good distraction. We figured he knew we were coming so, while we didn't try to broadcast our approach, we favored speed over stealth.

Our plan heavily relied on the nebulous support Grotto was offering, and I couldn't help but worry that the murder-ball would backstab us somehow. He didn't give off the sense of being a kind and caring sort of fellow. More of a 'revels in the pain and suffering of their enemies' type of dude. We didn't have much of a choice, though. We had to solve the Delve's problems or else we'd be killed when our timer ran out. A timer that was currently sitting with a little under six hours left.

Hopefully, killing or chasing away the c'thon settled things and there wasn't some other bullshit we had to do for Grotto before we could leave. I'd already been awake for twelve hours when I was killed and had pulled another eighteen plus in the Delve. I felt like the process of dying and being resurrected had given me something equivalent to a night of sleep for my body, but the mental fatigue was starting to grow thick. I was ready for a bath and a bed, not a high-stakes brawl with Hognay and whatever a c'thon was.

Grotto had given us a simple description of the creature, but it became obvious that he wasn't very good at communicating visual concepts: it was big, had a lot of legs,

and was very strong. We also had no idea of its combat capabilities. Our plan had so many holes that if it had been a bucket, well, it wouldn't have been a bucket. It would have been a piece of scrap that used to be a bucket. And here we were trying to scoop up a deep drink of victory juice with it.

The entrance to the obelisk room was a fifteen-foot tall arch in which two heavy wooden doors had once been set. Now the doors were piles of splintered timber on either side of the archway. As we grew close I could see soft light emanating from inside the room and I drank the antidote Xim had given me after our fight with the Gekkogs. My toxicity dropped from eighty-eight all the way back down to zero. Then, after a few breaths, it popped back up to three. The poison fog was thinner down here and that lessened its potency, which was nice. Hopefully an extra point of health regen every minute would make a difference in the fight, but I doubted it.

We did a final check of our equipment and statuses, then walked through the large archway and into the obelisk chamber.

Chapter 14

The first thing that grabbed my attention was the enormous blue and violet octopus wrapped around a dark pillar at the chamber's center.

At least, octopus was how my brain parsed the creature. After a second of processing, I realized that it was something else entirely. It had a thick cephalopod head with a pair of dark eyes that locked onto us. The body below was a series of large tentacles, several of which grasped onto the black stone structure that I assumed was the obelisk. But, unlike an octopus, the creature was covered in long, downy feathers that swayed and drifted in the air. It gave the c'thon the appearance that it was underwater, or that gravity was something it had decided to ignore. Along the bottom of its tentacles, where I would expect suckers to be, the limbs were covered in hundreds of insectoid legs like the underside of a centipede. The central body of the creature was twelve feet tall, and I had no idea how long the limbs would be once they unfurled from the obelisk.

All around the room were piles of dark bones; the remains of creatures that Hognay had fed to the c'thon. He may have eaten some himself as well. If he'd been here for three months, what else would he be surviving on? In the corner was a set of bones far larger than any of the others. The arm bones of the Atrocidile. Whether Hognay had taken it, or the c'thon had torn it from the monster itself, it didn't matter. Either situation was terrifying, and I didn't know which one would be worse.

The most impressive thing about the room was not the terrible creature and the remains of its meals that dominated the space, but what hovered where a ceiling should have been.

Floating above the obelisk was an incredible mass of thousands upon thousands of poison essences. They extended out to fill up the entire space above the wide, circular

room, and I got the impression that the mass was even larger than what I could see. The crystals spun lazily around in a whirlpool pattern, the smoking green crystals at its center being crushed into a fine powder that ignited and filtered down into a soda-can-wide beam of brilliant emerald energy. The beam struck the top of the obelisk, which shone bright enough to hurt my eyes when I stared directly at it and left me blinking to clear away the afterimage.

At the base of the obelisk, beneath the c'thon, Hognay sat with his back against one of the creature's tentacles. It coiled around his body and the tapered tip encircled his neck. I assumed it was doing something about the hole I'd introduced to the man's throat—he hadn't even cleaned the dried, flaking blood off of his chest. His eyes were closed when we entered, but snapped open as soon as we crossed the threshold.

Hognay's expression darkened and he climbed to his feet while the rest of us took in the room, the c'thon's tentacle releasing him. When the limb moved from his neck I saw that the wound had been completely healed. He wasn't a particularly short guy, but he was definitely leaning toward the below average side of things. His frame was thick and well muscled, but he moved easily, more like a well-honed athlete than a bodybuilder.

Despite having a body like a greek sculpture, the man was revolting. His thin hair hung limply from his head in oily strands. His face was sunken, with dark bags beneath his eyes and a mouth full of yellow, chipped teeth. He was dirty and shirtless, and I wondered if he'd lost half his clothes while tangling with the beasties down here like I had. His pants were also filthy, but were covered in sturdy-looking leather armor. Aside from that he wore only a pair of lightweight boots, an amulet that glinted brightly when it caught the light, and a mismatched pair of fingerless gloves.

He opened his mouth to speak, making the classic bad-guy mistake of assuming he was about to get a chance to monologue. I didn't give him that chance.

Our plan was shock and awe, so I opened up with an ability I hadn't been able to try out yet. I cast *Shortcut*.

A ten foot crack tore reality open and sucked me inside. The world went black and silent for a fraction of a second, then I was thirty feet closer, standing right in front of Hognay. I shoved a palm into his chest and cast *Oblivion Orb*.

To Hognay's credit he recovered quickly after finding me close enough for a warm hug. He was already taking a step back to put space between us when I struck. My hand hit his chest, but he was able to move away the slightest bit before my spell activated. White light shot down my arm and I heard the familiar *pop* of the spell as it took a bite out of the universe and air rushed in to fill the void left behind. Hognay took a partial hit and he grunted, clapping a gloved hand over the fresh, golf-ball-sized hole in his sternum. He was learning what it felt like to get a scoop taken out of *him*, and this was his second lesson of the day.

I'd hoped that the hit would be enough to disable Hognay. I didn't know how far behind the sternum the heart was exactly, and even with a clean hit I doubted the spell would have dug in deeply enough to clip it. But I've broken my sternum before. Probably twice, if you count body slamming the tree, but I wasn't around for the painful result of that injury.

The first time it happened I could barely move for a week. The pectoral muscles attach to the sternum. An injury there can make any movement of the upper body agonizing. Laying down, sitting up, any lateral movement of the arm puts pressure on that bone and inflames any tear or injury to the muscle attached to it. What I'm saying is

that a broken sternum should take someone out of a fight, unless your adrenaline is pumping hard enough to let you ignore that sort of wound until you calm down. I didn't *break* Hognay's sternum. I put a *hole* in it.

He didn't give a shit.

His eyes glanced down at something I couldn't see—maybe his health bar—and he took a fighting stance. Blood ran steadily out from the wound on his chest and he tensed his body. Talons tore out from the tips of his fingers and the skin on his hands and arms up to his elbow grew dark and hard, glinting like they were covered in lacquer. He rushed forward and swiped out at me.

I was able to put up the kite shield, but his claws tore through it like it was made of tinfoil. I intercepted two more swipes and the bottom half of the shield was nearly torn off. He knocked the shield aside, then stepped in and went for my throat.

His movements were quick, precise, and furious. I barely got my right arm up in time to keep my neck from being renovated, and the claws cut deep into the muscle of my forearm. A chunk came out of my health bar and a new symbol started blinking above it. My body grew heavier and I glanced at the notification, barely having time to skim the text before turning my attention back to Hognay.

Curse: Weakness 10%

Health: 205/221

A glancing blow across my arm had done half as much damage as the head-on Atrocidile bite, while carrying a debuff on top. A kernel of fear hit me in my gut, then I shut it down and got back to work. The only way out was through.

I readied myself to trade hits with Hognay. He was moving too fast and I was too inexperienced to find an opening, so I planned on letting him land a hit and then planting another *Oblivion Orb* wherever I could. Having another hole in his body may not kill him, but the more I could disable him the better the fight would go. I stepped into Hognay's attack, preparing to get slashed along the ribs, when a massive purple limb shot out towards me.

Oh yeah, there was a school-bus-sized octopus monster in here with us.

I had already committed to the attack, and I prepared to get plowed by a two-foot-thick tentacle like I was starring in my own hentai, when a pair of blades came down on the approaching feeler. Varrin went full sushi-chef on the octo, spinning and launching a series of whirling attacks on its limb while his swords glowed with a silvery light. My hand slapped down on Hognay's armpit as his claws dug into my ribs. I cast another *Oblivion Orb*.

His claws cut through my skin deep enough to scrape across my bones and I felt a couple ribs crack from the sheer force of his hit. I took out a gnarly chunk of his lateral muscle and probably severed a couple of his own ribs in return. I tried to trade again, but his claws swiped up across my gut and he knocked me back before I could land my spell. My health bar was plummeting and I'd earned a new debuff from his other hand. I checked my bars, realizing my body was growing even heavier and my vision was starting to blur.

Curse: Weakness 20%

Curse: Blindness 10%

Wounded: Bleeding 30/hour

Poisoned: Toxicity 3/hour

Health: 117/221

Stamina: 130/132

Mana: 20/40

My health and mana were halved, and my list of status effects was growing at a disturbing pace. Hognay's face was set into a firm scowl, but I could see him grit his teeth against the pain. He moved to a more defensive posture, keeping his arms close to his body with claws raised. He had two fresh holes, each one taking a disabling chunk of muscle out of his body, but I was worse off.

I was struggling to keep my core engaged, the muscle in my abdomen carved up. I could barely move my right hand from the injury in my forearm, and moving the right side of my body at all was excruciating. Even breathing hurt as my cracked ribs screamed with every inhale. I felt hot, wet blood running down my abdomen and seeping into my pants.

That was fine, I was just the distraction.

Xim slipped between thrashing tentacles as the c'thon focused on Varrin's onslaught, carrying and protecting Grotto under her shield arm. The c'thon had fully disentangled itself from the pillar and was floating through the air, hurling limbs covered in soft, shimmying feathers.

Varrin spun and slashed, glowing blades whipping around him and digging into the c'thon's legs. The wounds went deep, but compared to the overall girth of the feelers they weren't deep enough. Still, the c'thon bellowed in reply, unwrapping itself from the obelisk to start taking Varrin seriously, freeing up four more limbs. I could hear the

insectoid claws on the underside of the tentacles scrape and clatter along Varrin's armor, and I deeply hoped I wouldn't get to experience what those would do to bare skin.

Kim ducked down low and let Grotto zip away toward the base of the obelisk. Now that the c'thon had moved, I could make out a sphere-shaped recess about three feet up from the ground. Chunks of the obelisk had been broken and pried away to reveal the space where I expected Grotto spent most of his life.

While I took that in, Hognay took advantage of my distraction. He leapt forward, driving a claw at me like a punch, rather than a wide sweep like he'd done so far. The hand glowed with an eerie yellow light, and I knew that if he landed a clean hit with that attack it would pierce straight through my body and skewer all the soft, squishy, and biologically-necessary vital organs in its way. I focused as much as I could in that split second, and hoped that spells worked the way I wanted them to.

I cast *Shortcut* and, just as Hognay's claws were hurtling toward my chest, a crack opened in reality and sucked me in, then spat me out right behind him. Hognay overcommitted to the attack and was off-balance when his hand found only air rather than the beating heart of his enemy. I reached out and grabbed the base of his skull, then cast *Oblivion Orb*.

Hognay's entire body stiffened the instant I heard the *pop* of the spell. Blood and other fluids spilled out of the new hole in the back of his head and he fell over like he actually *had* been carved from stone. When he hit the ground his body twitched and shook in some sort of trauma-induced seizure. I watched the display with a macabre fascination before coming back to my senses.

I didn't think Hognay could survive having a golfball-sized chunk of his skull, brain, and cervical spine suddenly vacate his body, but he had so far shrugged off injuries that should have crippled him. I'd removed half of his larynx earlier and he'd been able to run away like it was a polite karate chop to the throat. No, I wasn't about to let this half-naked psycho get back up so he could go scoop more organs out of people. I had enough mana for one final *Oblivion Orb*.

Always go for the double-tap.

As I stooped over with hand outstretched, preparing to coup-de-grace Hognay with all the mercy of a reptile, I found out what those insectoid c'thon claws felt like on bare skin. A feathery blue and violet tentacle wrapped itself around my waist and hoisted me into the air.

Chapter 15

The creature's dozens of centipede-like under-legs scraped and clawed at my midsection. They weren't able to pierce my skin, but felt like they would leave large welts behind when they were done. While they couldn't break my skin on their own, several worked their way into the wounds along my gut from Hognay's claws and began digging into the exposed flesh within. The hand-length, hard-tipped appendages tried to pry open my stomach, more agonizing than the claws that had first carved the gashes.

When the first of the bug-like legs dug into my belly, the c'thon froze for a second from my stun ability, and I was able to reach around the tentacle and yank my daggers from the hilts I had attached to my belt. I began stabbing down on the feeler frantically, but it was like stabbing hard rubber wrapped in steel. The daggers bounced off of the c'thon's skin, barely leaving a scratch behind.

"Grotto!" I yelled. "If you're going to do something this is the time!"

I squirmed in the tentacle's grasp and looked for the others, even as my health bar ticked down in small chunks with each piercing stab.

Wounded: Bleeding 32/hour

Health: 102/221

Wounded: Bleeding 34/hour

Health: 100/221

Wounded: Bleeding 36/hour

Health: 98/221

[Believe me when I say that the excruciating doom of my foes is one of my primary functions! Steel your delicate mortal mind and body, and prepare to witness my ire!]

Varrin was wrapped up by two other tentacles. His armor was covered in scores and scrapes, his pauldrons had been torn away, and I could see blood running down his legs. Xim had climbed up onto the limbs constricting him and was pumping a series of heals into his neck, golden light flashing down her arm every second. As I watched, another arm of the c'thon whipped across the room and slammed into Xim, sending her hurtling into a wall twenty feet away.

I went back to stabbing at the tentacle holding me. If I could just get through the skin...

“When?!” I said. “When will we see your ire?!”

[Just... give me a second. It's been awhile and my functions are not fully integrated yet.]

“We don't have a second!”

I gave up one of the daggers and used the last of my mana to cast *Oblivion Orb* on the feeler. The monster didn't even flinch at having a piece of the leg removed, but I used the same technique the c'thon was using on my gut and slammed the dagger down into the exposed muscle. It sank in this time, though only about a third of the way. I yanked the blade out and reared back, holding the grip in both hands with one on the back of the pommel, then drove it down with all the force I could muster. It went in up to the hilt and the monster let out a deep grunt.

The limb whipped around and the world spun, my head swimming from the sudden acceleration. It let me loose and chucked me into a stone wall. I felt, as much as heard, a loud *crack* when the back of my skull smashed into the rock, and the world went silent. Then, as though it had a will of its own, the ground came up and smashed me in the face. I assumed that I had fallen, but I'd left my vestibular senses back up on the wall.

I rolled and tried to get back upright, but had no concept of up or down, so I collapsed back to the ground from all fours. I took a deep breath, distantly aware of the alarming amount of blood running down my face from the back of my head, and fought to get back up onto my hands and knees. I looked up and squinted through blurred double-vision, incapable of making anything out beyond a squirming blob that the c'thon had become. Sound slowly returned, and I could hear Varrin screaming along with the squeal of twisting metal.

[The power you wield is not your own, foul beast! Be smited by my radiance and know that I am the end!]

My vision started to clear and I saw glyphs along the full length of the obelisk light up. Twisting blue veins sprouted across the c'thon's body, then burst open. Thin streams of vibrant blue-white energy began flooding back to the dark pillar. The beast let out a screech loud enough to make the floor vibrate and tossed Varrin to the ground. It spun back around to the obelisk and its dark, beady eyes shot over it. More and more of the liquid energy was pulled from its body and into the obelisk.

[Tremble in my wake, for I am the true ruler of this realm! Let thy flesh burn to ash and be consumed by me! Wait, wait, no... don't do that! Stop!]

The c'thon wrapped all eight of its tentacles around the obelisk, then started thrashing violently and fissures spiderwebbed out along the base of the obelisk where it had already been damaged. Grotto spun and his runes flared as the recess holding him began to crumble.

[Insolence! Are your sins not yet grave enough? You defy even the will of the masters?!]

There was a loud *snap* and the base of the pillar broke. The c'thon heaved against the obelisk and sent it smashing to the ground, crushing piles of bones that shattered and shot splintered fragments through the air. A cloud of dust kicked up from the impact, swirling as the c'thon's limbs flowed through it. The c'thon reached out with its tentacles toward Grotto, but he zipped up into the air and began darting away.

“Fuck,” I said. “Was that it Grotto? That was your big play?!”

[Your lack of faith is disturbing!] Grotto's thoughts came in anxious bursts as he dodged another lashing feeler. [I have taken back some of the mana it stole and this impudent cur has been substantially weakened. I have already initiated phase two and the c'thon's destruction of the obelisk will not interrupt it!]

“How long until phase two?!”

[Though I am possessed of great intellect and foresight I-,] Grotto wove between two more tentacles, [I cannot say for certain! A minute? Two, maybe? No more than three!]

Three minutes. There was no way. We'd barely been fighting for three minutes and Varrin was in a heap, Xim was struggling to get to her feet, and I was completely out of mana. I glanced down at my bars, hoping they didn't look as bad as I felt.

Curse: Weakness 20%

Curse: Blindness 10%

Wounded: Bleeding 40/hour

Poisoned: Toxicity 3/hour

Health: 42/221

Stamina: 125/132

Mana: 0/40

So this is what being three-quarters dead felt like. If my health regen wasn't so huge, I'd keel over in an hour from status effects even if the c'thon ignored me. As it was, one more big hit and I was toast.

Kim made her way to Varrin while the c'thon chased Grotto like a cat after a laser-pointer. I watched her put two more heals into the big guy, then she turned and faced the c'thon.

She was about to pull out her trump card, but I had no idea if it would be enough.

A beam of crimson light tore down from above Xim, smashing through the cloud of poison essences. The emerald whirlpool had already begun to lose cohesion when the obelisk had tumbled, but now the essences crashed into one another within the cloud, creating a falling rain of shattered green crystal. The room began to fill with a thick new cloud of poison.

The light enveloped Xim, and her body began to grow. Fur sprouted from her, the same light red of her skin, and a single jagged black horn split her forehead and rose out of it. Her chainmail plinked and shot links around the room and her padded robes ripped open when her torso grew too large for it, revealing a darkly stained bodysuit that

stretched as she transformed. She emerged from the ruined armor as a hulking figure nearly eight feet tall.

Kim launched at the c'thon. It was still distracted by Grotto and she blindsided it with a demonic shoulder-tackle, then gouged its side with her wicked horn. The c'thon wrapped her up with its tentacles and body slammed her into the wall, which cracked and shed chunks of rock. Kim bit down on a feeler, taking out a huge mouthful of yanagidako, which is distinct from calamari since calamari is squid.

Kim tore two of the tentacles away from her body and pushed them aside, then threw a series of punches at the c'thon's giant head that landed with deep *thunks*. I got to my feet and stumbled over to Varrin, moving along the edge of the room to keep as far from the fight as I could. Varrin was sitting up, and I helped him to move back to the wall where he sagged against it. His breathing was heavy and rasping.

"How long did she say that would last?" Varrin asked.

"A minute," I said, looking down at his torso. The armor was crushed, constricting his chest and stomach. "We need to get that armor off of you."

"Good luck. May need a pry bar." He took in a ragged breath and something caught in his throat, sending him into a shallow coughing fit. "Might be the only thing keeping me in one piece," he choked out.

The c'thon lifted Kim up and rammed her into the stone wall again with a loud crash, then released her and floated back. It turned its underside up towards her and let out a huge spray of black ink that hissed and sizzled where it landed. Some of Kim's fur dissolved under the corrosive substance, but she curled her body and held up her arms to keep the spray off her face.

When she recovered she looked even more pissed, letting out a deep roar and rushing at the c'thon again. Xim swung hard into its center while the c'thon whipped her with its tentacles. She bit away pieces of the beast's limbs and sent severed centipedal underlegs scattering to the ground while more raked against her skin. She gouged new wounds all over the monster with her horn as the beast shoved her back into the wall. Xim was doing work, but the c'thon looked a long way from finished.

I opened my inventory screen and pulled out a ruby chip. I held it up and raised an eyebrow at Varrin.

"My attacks use stamina," he said. "And I'm out. That won't help me. Plus, it would probably finish me off."

"Guess it'll be up to me then."

"I don't know what you can do to that creature, even with full mana."

[He can serve the grand function of keeping it busy until more effective assistance arrives.]

I jumped, realizing Grotto was hovering right next to my head.

"Fuck, man. You gotta signal your approach or something."

[Why? I am an entity that thrives when hidden. It is my nature to be surreptitious.]

"What if we fled?" said Varrin. "We can regroup and heal, then come at this thing again later. It may be easier now that Hognay's dead."

I glanced over at the stealer of organs, various and sundry. He was still face down on the ground and it didn't *look* like he was breathing.

[Doubtful. The c'thon's body is highly mobile and flexible. It can fit through spaces much smaller than itself. You will be chased down and flogged until your death. Then it will feast upon your corpses.]

“That wouldn't be good for getting your Delve back to working, eh?” I said.

[Oh, that is impossible now.]

“The fuck do you mean?”

[The obelisk has been destroyed and much of the power I was able to recover from the c'thon has been expended on summoning our aid. There is no longer an effective method to synthesize materials for its repair within this Delve.]

“Does that mean we failed?” said Varrin. “We're already doomed?”

Grotto's runes twinkled.

[Perhaps. What was the wording of your quest?]

I brought up the notification and read it aloud, “This Delve's accumulation has been interrupted. Find and eliminate the cause of the disruption to clear the Delve.”

[It does not say that you must repair the Delve.]

“Shit,” I said, “that c'thon is the cause of the disruption, so as long as we 'eliminate' it we're good.”

[Maybe. The System's logic can sometimes be... opaque.]

“You're in charge here, Grotto! You can't tell us?”

[I manage the Delve itself, but I am as beholden to the System as you are.]

“We don't have time for this,” said Varrin. “Eat that mana chip if you're going to. You'll need a few seconds for it to take effect and Xim isn't looking great.”

I scowled at Grotto, then tossed the ruby chip into my mouth, biting down on it as I turned to check on Xim's fight. She was on the ground, her entire body wrapped up

by six tentacles that squeezed and throttled her. She struggled to press out of them with her constricted arms.

I watched the fight as the glassy chip broke into sharp shards in my mouth. After the first couple of chews, I thought that eating the chip might not be as bad as it had been hyped up to be.

Then, my mouth exploded.

The razor fragments of the crystalline chip shot out in all directions within my mouth. Jagged edges dug into my tongue, my hard palate, my cheeks. They gave me the tonsillectomy I'd never had the pleasure of experiencing in my youth. I yelped and blood streamed out of my mouth as the needling fragments of the chip melted, then shot through my veins with an icy heat.

Pain radiated across my entire body and I could see an unfamiliar pattern of hair-thin veins pulse with blue-white light beneath my skin. I felt them crawl across my face and when the phenomenon made it to my eyes, my vision became a bright, blinding flash. My mana shot back up to full, then the pain got worse. I fell to my knees, struggling to stay aware of anything outside of my body. A new debuff appeared over my health, and my interface was the only thing I could still see clearly.

Mana Overload: Your mana veins have been damaged. You are unable to regenerate mana for the next 24 hours. Any attempt at recovering mana will result in loss of health.

I gasped and looked back up. Varrin was staring at me with the kind of expression one makes when watching someone else eat shit while skateboarding. I managed to get

back to my feet, the adrenaline and endorphin hit from the internal blitzkrieg the only thing keeping me upright.

“Ok,” I said, slurring the words out of my ruined mouth, “let’s strategize a bit.”

As soon as I spoke, Xim’s transformation wore off.

Chapter 16

Xim's horn and fur dissipated into shimmering globules of colored light which floated into the air before atomizing and disappearing. Her body shrank down to its original size and she went limp. The c'thon brought her up to its face, studying her for a moment. I made a split-second decision, made sure I had my dagger in hand, and used *Shortcut*.

I appeared just above the c'thon and landed on its head, hugging it with my entire body for grip. The skin was slick, but I was able to plant an *Oblivion Orb* into its scalp and shove my dagger into the wound without slipping off. The creature let out another thunderous bellow and reached up with its two unoccupied tentacles, wrapping one around my ankle, the other trying to snake around my torso. I held firm to the hilt of my dagger, and as it gave a tug on my foot the blade cut a line across its head. Its limbs jerked back and it tossed Xim to the ground to bring up more of its feelers, presumably to find a less damaging way to remove me.

It tried to rotate its body to shake me off, but that made the blade cut through more of its flesh and it quickly rethought that decision. Several tentacles wrapped around me and lifted me upwards, though I made sure to twist and slash the dagger as I was pulled away.

I could tell the grip of the limbs wasn't nearly as strong as before. When it constricted me and its smaller insectoid legs scratched at my skin, I didn't feel like I was moments away from being crushed and clawed to death, though it was still a tight squeeze. It let go of my lower body with its rear tentacles and brought me around with its front four to stare at me.

I hung upside down in front of the c'thon, struggling to take a breath.

“Hi there,” I wheezed, though the words were incomprehensible through my broken mouth.

It growled, then reared back to slam my skull into the floor. As the ground rushed up to assault my cranium for the second time this fight, I cast *Shortcut* again, focusing on the opposite side of the room. The crack in space opened and I disappeared from its grip. Empty tentacles smashed into the stone.

When I reappeared I was still upside down, but the momentum of my rapid descent into concussion-town did not travel with me, which was good information to have. I did, however, land on my head, doing my best to tuck and roll. It was uncomfortable, but the fall from a couple feet off the ground didn't do any damage. My Fortitude protected me from that much.

As I scrambled back up I had a distracting thought about a series of experiments I could run to determine how far I could fall without taking damage each time I raised my Fortitude. I tucked that thought away as the c'thon spun and locked back on to me.

It didn't immediately charge. It hovered in the air, appraising me. Maybe it was confused by my magic disappearing act, or maybe it was trying to decide if I was worth the trouble. Thick, amethyst-colored blood oozed from dozens of wounds across its body. One of its feelers was cut nearly in half, and there were several deep gouges in its head, including the most recent one I'd carved along the top.

It turned and checked out Varrin, who pushed off of the wall and stood up straight, swords in hand, but he was putting on a show. There was no way he could fight anymore. He struggled to take in shallow breaths and, despite his tenacity, he wobbled off-balance and had to take a step to widen his stance.

Grotto hovered next to Varrin, and the c'thon's eyes narrowed when it caught sight of him. The creature rushed the orb and Varrin clumsily brought his sword up. I'd been trying to get the c'thon away from the pair, at least Varrin and Xim. Jury was still out on Grotto due to all the murder and mayhem, but blaming him for that felt like blaming a dog for eating the hotdog you left on the side table when you went to pee. Not that a sneaky snack was the same as homicide, but, I don't know what I'm getting at. I didn't hate Grotto, I was wary of him. Still, I was trying to get Varrin and Xim out of here alive and I was too far away to run back in. I had fifteen mana left, so I cast another *Shortcut*.

I teleported right into the c'thon's face, which slapped into me as it continued charging. I clung to the octo with my right hand, which could only grip, and dropped my last remaining dagger. I took a page out of Xim's book and palm-thrust an *Oblivion Orb* into one of the creature's big black eyes. I was going to go for the Mortal Kombat style handful-of-brains fatality, but the monster bucked hard when the center of its eye vanished, and its tentacles thrashed at its face. One grabbed me, hurled me away, and the ground kissed me on my mug for a third time. At this point, we were practically dating.

The throw hurt. It wasn't the worst thing that had happened to me in the Delve, or even in this fight, but my body was screaming. The injury to my right arm alone would have been the worst pain I'd ever felt in my old life. My ribs and gut were gashed open, my mouth was dripping blood, and I wondered whether a piece of my tongue had detached. My head was pounding and the rest of my body was a mess of scrapes and bruises. My veins felt like they were being burned from the inside, which wasn't even a sensation I knew was possible. But, I wasn't dead.

I had eighteen health and zero mana. My bleeding debuff was up to sixty and as nuggets of the poison essences fell from the sky, the cloud of mist was growing thicker. My toxicity was steadily rising. Before long my health regen would be overwhelmed. It took everything I had to roll to the side and watch as the enraged c'thon swung frenetically at Grotto.

Varrin managed to dive aside, but the monster wasn't after him. Grotto wove between the first few tentacles, but one shot down from above. Grotto got spiked into the ground hard enough to crack the stone and I heard the crunch of metal as he hit. His body bounced and soared through the air, then landed and rolled toward me. Something inside of him rattled as he came to a stop a few feet away.

I tried to get up. I had to do something. The c'thon was coming for us, ready to finish the job it had started. But I couldn't do it. My arm crumpled and I collapsed. I tried to rise using core strength, but something else tore inside my abdomen and I slumped over again. My bleeding went up another tick.

Two deaths in one day. Maybe I'd get an achievement.

[*I... told you it wouldn't... be more than three... minutes,*] Grotto's voice stuttered in my mind.

Three large black shapes plowed down through the cloud of emerald crystal above, one right after another, landing in deep squats, then rising. Nine feet tall, black leathery skin, scanning eyes, and a dozen thin, wriggling fingers on each hand.

The harvesters.

"They dove down that chute?" I slurred.

[*Fastest... way to get... here.*]

"Fuck. Glad we passed on that."

The c'thon whirled to confront the new guests, who took up positions in a triangle around it. There was a brief standoff before the harvesters lunged at the beast. Their heavy bodies thudded into the c'thon and they drove thick arms down upon it. Their thin fingers pierced into the c'thon and the harvesters dragged their hands along its skin, leaving trails of new wounds along the octo's tentacles and head. It screeched and flailed, taking all three for a ride, but they held on and continued to savage the monster.

The harvesters had the c'thon on the backfoot. It was throwing limbs wildly, but its attention was split too many ways and the harvesters either dodged the feelers or began focusing their attacks on the ones constricting them. The wounds piled up on the c'thon and I felt a smile creep onto my face. That was stupid of me.

The c'thon gave up on handling all three harvesters at once. It abandoned four of its limbs to two of the harvesters, letting them maul with abandon. It brought forth the four remaining tentacles on the harvester directly ahead of it, wrapping it up and squeezing hard. The c'thon howled and wrapped a thick tentacle around the harvester's head, then tore it right off. It thrust the harvester high into the air, then flung it to the far side of the room where it smashed open, dozens of essences pouring from its split belly. The c'thon focused on the next harvester.

It wasn't enough. All of this, and it wasn't enough. The thing was too fucking strong. Half of the ground was slick with its amethyst blood and it was still fighting. Even if it died from its wounds, it would have plenty of time to take us with it.

[*Arlo,*] Grotto's voice whispered into my mind. It was weaker than before, even quieter than the first time he'd tried to lure me to my death. [*I cannot... relinquish this Delve to that monster. I must not... let it escape, now that it... has gotten a taste of this place.*]

“The Delve’s already broken,” I said. “There’s nothing to save.”

[No. If the creature survives... it can absorb the essences above... It has consumed so much... of the converted mana from the essences... it should be able to absorb the raw crystals without harm. It is a mana fiend. It can sense the types of mana... it has tasted in the past. It will grow vastly stronger here... then seek out more Delves.]

“I don’t know what you’re asking here.” My vision blurred again and I had to blink it away. “I can’t even stand.”

[I must repair myself, but I need mana... to do it. I cannot absorb chips like you can. But, I can absorb... mana from Delves. It is a major source... of my power.]

“You’re not asking if you can eat me are you?”

The c’thon took the second harvester apart limb by limb. Three of its tentacles were limp and useless. One was nearly torn in half.

[So, that’s a no... to me eating you?]

“Of course it’s a fucking no.”

[The c’thon will eat you... anyway.]

“Then I’ll kick its ass a little more before it does.”

The runes on Grotto’s body blinked rapidly.

[There is... another way. But I find it... distasteful.]

“Distasteful? Buddy, we’re all about to die here. Fucking spit it out.”

[I can become bonded... to you. Then, you can consume a chip... and I will absorb the overloading mana.]

“That’d kill me.”

[Your overload debuff... it is a shorthand for the damage you have suffered. It is not... an absolute law. I can guide... the absorption so that it does not harm you. Then I can absorb the rest... so that it does not do further damage.]

“What would that even accomplish? You get repaired, then what? That monster will just destroy you again.”

[You will have all your mana back. And I... can show you a better way to use your spell... the one that eats reality.]

“Dammit, this feels like you’re trying to trick me into killing myself so that you can eat me!”

[I would never do that... That is not true, I might do that... but I swear upon my soul that I am not trying... to do that. The System may... erase me if I am lying.]

I watched the c’thon rip a leg off the final harvester. Varrin hadn’t moved since diving to the ground. Xim was still unconscious, at least I hoped she was unconscious, in the same place where the c’thon had dropped her. On the bright side, Hognay remained lifeless. I swore that I was going to make sure he was dead if I survived this.

I stared at Grotto. The orb’s runes were blinking and fading. Even if he was tricking me, did it make much of a difference? What was I going to do? Nothing. That’s what. I would sit here and die and feel like I proved some sort of stupid point. If this had a sliver of a chance of working, I needed to try it. Didn’t I? There was also the pain. Even if I died, the pain would stop.

“Fine. Do it.”

[Pick me up... and hold me to your chest.]

I crawled the few feet it took to make it to Grotto, and it felt like eternity. I gripped the orb and hugged it to my body.

[Now you must... eat a mana chip. Ruby... preferably. Emerald will certainly... kill you.]

I called up my inventory and grabbed another ruby chip out with my bloody hand. I put it in my mouth. I hesitated, but steeled my resolve and bit down.

[Now, whatever you do... just let this happen... and don't struggle too much.]

“Wait,” I said through a mouthful of broken glass, “what is that supp-”

Wires shot out from Grotto and dug into my skin, then the world became a wave of system notifications.

WARNING! Delve Core 1156 is attempting to integrate with your biological systems. If you do not resist this attempt, Delve Core 1156 will have access to a variety of your bodily functions.

WARNING! Delve Core 1156 is attempting to become your bonded familiar. If you do not resist this attempt, you will gain the passive skill “Bonded Familiar”. You may only have four passive skills. If Delve Core 1156 becomes your bonded familiar, your unused passive skill slots will be reduced to: 2.

ERROR! For Delve Core 1156 to become your bonded familiar, you must possess the intrinsic skill “Dungeoneering”. You do not possess “Dungeoneering”.

Delve Core 1156 is requesting System access to grant you the intrinsic skill “Dungeoneering”.

ERROR! You have not unlocked intrinsic skills. System has denied Dungeon Core 1156's request to grant you "Dungeoneering".

Delve Core 1156 is attempting to override System denial. Override code required.

Delve Core 1156 has submitted override code 001: Preservation of Delve System.

Delve Core 1156 has submitted override code 003: Preservation of Delve Core.

Delve Core 1156 has submitted error code 999: I Really Want This To Happen.

System accepts override code 003.

You have been granted the intrinsic skill "Dungeoneering"!

You have gained the passive skill "Bonded Familiar"!

Delve Core 1156 has become your bonded familiar! Your new bonded familiar has already been named. Delve Core 1156 gains the USER DESIGNATION: "Grotto".

By making a Delve Core your bonded familiar, your "Dungeoneering" skill is raised to 10!

WARNING! Grotto has integrated with your biological systems.

Your Bonded Familiar skill gains the Mystical trait "Ambient Absorption".

Your Bonded Familiar skill gains the Spiritual trait "Psychic Bond".

System has applied the Divine trait “Shared Fate” to your Bonded Familiar skill.
System has applied the Physical trait “System Tribute” to your Bonded Familiar skill.

ERROR! A divine force has prevented your Bonded Familiar skill from gaining the Physical trait “System Tribute”. Trait is canceled. See help menu for more details.

The messages went beyond the visual text boxes I had experienced before. These messages flooded my mind. The information was beamed straight into my brain while the chip in my mouth exploded and pumped blazing energy through my mana veins. I lost track of time. I lost track of reality. I lost the connection to myself and my own identity. I became a distant entity, floating above and outside of my body’s experience. I didn’t know this man who was suffering. I didn’t understand what was happening to him. I didn’t know how I had gotten here.

A booming voice thundered through the non-space I occupied.

[I am renewed and reborn! I am made flesh and that flesh is burning with vitality! My very existence is the doomsday clock that lingers over the lives of all those who oppose me! I am- Ah, yes. I forgot you were here, Arlo. This suffering is exquisite. A masterpiece of grotesquerie. It is a shame to wipe it from existence, but I will adjust your pain tolerance. One moment, please.]

I was pulled back into my own body and engulfed in a flash of pain, but the moment I regained awareness of it, the torment began to recede. My mind sharpened and my eyes snapped open. The colors of the room were vibrant. Sounds were crisp and

clear. I could feel every inch of myself, and though I knew where I was injured, the sensation was distant and unintrusive.

Grotto hovered over me, his runes glowing with new intensity.

[Now, Arlo, you must listen to me and do as I say. If you do not, we will all die.]

Chapter 17

I sat up. The c'thon had just finished ripping off the head of the final harvester, and the octo was in terrible shape. Five of its limbs dragged the ground. Its head was half mangled. Colorful feathers floated down through the air and covered the floor, mingling with the creature's blood. It turned to me, and its expression transcended the boundaries of species and dimension—rage.

“Got it,” I said to Grotto. “Go.”

[The way you use spells is archetypal. The descriptions given to you by the System are strong suggestions, they are not inherent within the spell itself.]

“This the time for a theory discussion?”

[Silence. Oblivion Orb manifests as a small orb within your palm because that is the most efficient size, shape, and distance from your body for your current mana matrix, which is small, crude, and weak. You are not beholden to this shape and you can adjust it to your will. Doing this will vastly increase the drain on your mana until you have mastered the techniques. These are skills that are developed by superior mages and many Delvers of this generation seem to have forgotten the art.]

Grotto's speech came at an impossible speed, but I could comprehend it. He was communicating through feeling and intuition as much as through words, which allowed him to explain all this before I became cephalopod food. The c'thon was struggling, wobbling and having difficulty staying aloft, but still closing the distance. It grasped at the floor with mangled feelers, dragging itself through the air.

[This is called mana shaping. The exact form and nature of a mana shaped spell are personal to the caster and sometimes unique. I cannot tell you what shape to apply to the spell, I can only guide you there.]

“Got it.”

[*I don't think you do.*]

“Then upload it to me, no time.”

[*That's not how this works!*]

The c'thon was nearly on top of us. There wasn't any more time for Grotto's school of witchcraft and wizardry. I waited until the c'thon was close enough to tickle my nose with one of its still-functioning tentacles.

I looked up, and cast *Shortcut*.

I went as high up into the rapidly deteriorating crystal cloud of poison essence as I could, my body facing flat downward toward the top of the c'thon's head. I pointed my arm down toward it, two fingers extended, and concentrated on *Oblivion Orb*, rather than casting it.

[*Focus on the shape! It needs to be something you're intimate with! Something you resonate with! Don't cast the spell, release it!*]

I fell, smacking through the crystals, toward the c'thon. It was turning around, trying to find me.

No one ever looks up.

I focused everything I had on my shape. I imagined it erupting from my fingers and felt the sensation of power building in my gut. I watched as my mana bar drained, going well past the five mana normally required for the spell. I plummeted as my mana did, growing closer and closer to the c'thon. Finally, when my mana was about to hit zero and I was breaking through the essence cloud, I took a deep breath.

“Makankosappo, bitch.”

A finger-wide beam of light-warping energy sprouted from my finger and shot out in a concentrated, spiraling shaft. The attack whipped through space in an instant, drilling into the top of the c'thon's head. The *pop* that sounded from the spell was as loud as a nine millimeter and mixed with a wet, meaty slap as c'thon flesh was sucked into the fresh vacuum within its own body.

I landed on top of the c'thon, its body like a feathered mattress of hard rubber. I bounced off of its head and flopped over onto one of its tentacles before hitting the ground. The air was knocked from my lungs and I struggled to take in a breath. It was only then that I considered the fact that the fall could have finished me off. Fortunately, octo was tough, but it wasn't hard.

The c'thon's remaining limbs went limp. It drifted to the side, then dropped to the ground as whatever force that kept it aloft had finally called it quits.

I stared at the beast, waiting for it to rise again. I sat there for a full minute before I endeavored to get back on my feet. Without the screaming sensation of pain that I was sure my body was trying to send to my brain, it wasn't *too* much of a heroic effort. I went over to the c'thon and gave it a good, hard kick, but it didn't stir.

“Gonna make a feather boa out of you or something. Maybe a shirt.”

Another beam of light erupted up from where the obelisk once stood and I tensed.

“This better not be phase fucking three of this fight.”

Rather than facing another hitherto unseen menace, a series of notifications popped up.

Your party has slain 1 Hognay Haskagander: Delver, Level Two. Your party receives the following reward(s):

- 1) 9 Emerald Chips
- 2) 9 Ruby Chips
- 3) 48 Hiwardian Golden Notes
- 4) 300 Hiwardian Silver Notes
- 5) 981 Hiwardian Copper Notes
- 6) 1 Glove of Cursing: Weakness
- 7) 1 Glove of Cursing: Blindness
- 8) 1 Amulet of Blinding Light
- 9) 1 Pair of Grippy Boots
- 10) 1 Tablet of C'thonic Summoning (Broken)

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to even distribution.

You receive: 3 Emerald Chips, 3 Ruby Chips, 16 Hiwardian Golden Notes, 100 Hiwardian Silver Notes, 327 Hiwardian Copper Notes.

Party Leader as set item allocation to: Master Looter.

Party Leader receives all other rewards.

Your party has slain 1 Ihbriobrixilas: C'thon, Grade Three. Your party receives the following reward(s):

- 1) 6 Emerald Chips
- 2) 18 Ruby Chips
- 3) Lesser C'thonic Essence
- 4) Lesser C'thonic Core

5) Lesser C'thonic Ink

6) Personal Loot (Varrin Ravvenblaq) Lesser C'thonic Bone Greatsword

7) Personal Loot (Xim Xor'Drel) Lesser C'thonic Bone Prayer Beads

8) Personal Loot (Esquire Arlo) Feather Boa of the C'thon

9) Personal Loot (Esquire Arlo) Leather Vest of the C'thon

All players receive their Personal Loot

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to even distribution.

You receive: 2 Emerald Chips, 6 Ruby Chips.

Party Leader as set item allocation to: Master Looter.

Party Leader receives all other rewards.

I was suddenly dressed in a fitted ocean-blue leather vest, and draped in a sumptuous violet and indigo feather boa. I probably looked like a male stripper that had just spent a month in trench warfare, but at least I had some new clothes. Although, I'm not sure how happy I was with the personal loot distribution. Xim got some beads that were surely magical, and a bone greatsword sounded righteous. I'd have to check out whether these clothes had any magical effects, or if they were just dapper, but that could wait until later.

Party members have perished during the Delve. Inventory items of the slain Delvers have been returned to their chosen deposit point. If no deposit point was chosen, items will be delivered with the Delver's body.

Congratulations! You have cleared Delve 1156: The Toxic Grotto

This was a platinum Delve! \(\text{°}\text{°}\)/

You earn 8 additional stat points. Please prepare yourself to receive them.

The beam of light from the broken obelisk split into three and twisted in the air, then shot out toward me, Xim, Varrin. The energy flowed into my body. It wasn't uncomfortable or painful, just very strange. It was an inexplicable sensation of weight, but not a physical one. If I had to put it to words, it was as though my soul itself was becoming denser.

Remember this, Delver! Unassigned stat points will degrade over time as the unintegrated mana dissipates. Therefore you MUST spend these points within 24 hours to gain the full benefit. After 24 hours the points will be reduced by 1 and an additional 1 point will be lost every 3 hours.

A fucking time limit... I doubted there was any way to train another stat up to ten before I had to drop these somewhere. More Fortitude, I guessed. Shit.

Yikes! You got poisoned a whole bunch for a really long time. How are you still alive? Why would you do this? Is this fun for you? I think you have a problem and you should see a therapist. Regardless of this reckless, self-sabotaging and destructive behavior, I am going to enable your bad habit by giving you an achievement!

You gain "Exposure Therapy: Poison". You gain 25% resistance to poison. Isn't that great? If you're a no-good begging-chooser and don't think that's enough,

then you can gain additional poison resistance by suffering higher levels of toxicity for even longer amounts of time. How much and for how long? Torment yourself endlessly until you figure it out!

I rolled my eyes at the System rediscovering its sense of humor. It was like the thing had a split personality. One minute I'm getting dry loot notifications, the next it's gaslighting me for dealing with its own environmental hazards. I didn't *ask* to breathe toxic mist until I wept blood.

There were no more status messages, so I hobbled over to Xim.

She was breathing, but still unconscious. I went to check on Varrin as well. He was face down, but his eyes were open. I slowly bent over to check his pulse, when his eyes rolled up to me.

"Please don't touch me," he said.

"You wanna stay down there?"

"Maybe. For a minute at least."

"Alright. You do you. I'll go and take care of Hognay."

"What? Hognay? He's dead."

"That's what they always want you to think."

"They? Who wants you to think that?"

I scooped up one of Varrin's swords, gave him a little salute, and walked back to Hognay.

"You dead?" I asked, giving the organ-thief a fiercer kick than I'd given the c'thon. He didn't budge. "Guess you don't mind if I do this, then."

I swung the sword down hard on the back of his neck. The blade bit deep, but didn't go through clean. It took me four more chops before his head came off, which I felt took some of the drama out of the moment. The human spine is pretty tough. I rolled the head over with my foot, making sure it was really Hognay and not some sort of shadow ninjutsu clone, but it looked like him, right down to his oily hair and shitty teeth.

I dropped the sword, picked up the severed head by the hair, then looked around the room. It was absolutely destroyed. Harvester parts, bones, cracked stone, corpses, shattered obelisk, gallons of octo blood and ink, and hundreds of feathers. More and more of the crystalline poison essences were crashing into one another and raining down around us. The mist was growing thicker by the second as well. Picture perfect post-apocalyptic vibes.

I walked toward Xim, but was distracted when I noticed an unfamiliar pack in the corner of the room. My inner lootbug came out and I shimmied over to it. It was a different style from any of the ones brought by our party, so I figured it must have been Hognay's. I tossed it into my inventory, using up the little bit of space I had saved after farming the essences upstairs. When I did, a smaller satchel popped back out. The larger pack was still in the inventory, so this must have been tucked inside.

ERROR! Inventory is too small to contain Bag of Refreshments. This is a spatial item. It's bigger on the inside.

I picked up the bag and peeked within. There was some bread, cheese, various dried meats, and what looked like a fruit and nut mix, each wrapped in wax paper. There

was also a canteen full of something, but I didn't open it. I put all that on my "Shit to Check out Later List", slung the strap over myself cross-body, and went back to Xim.

I tried to wake her, but she was out cold. I set down the severed head, pulled her up and over a shoulder into a fireman's carry, then scooped abbreviated Hognay back up and walked toward Varrin.

"Time to go," I said. "I'm barely standing here. We wait any longer, I won't be able to walk out of this place. Also, poison fog of ever-increasing intensity."

He looked up at me. Leather vest over a dirty, shirtless chest. Gaudy feather boa. Luxurious beard caked in blood, mud, and probably some guts and other viscera. A couple pieces of bling, amulet and ring. Carrying an unconscious woman over my shoulder, and holding a severed head by the hair.

I gave him a winning smile and a wink.

"Ok," he said, then slowly, and with many a grunt and groan, pushed himself back up. He spat a wad of blood onto the ground next to his second sword, then stared at the blade. It was chipped and covered in c'thon goo. He waved a hand at it dismissively, as though the effort to bend over and grab it wasn't worth the hassle, and started limping toward the opposite side of the room from where we'd entered.

A large section of the stone wall had begun descending, similar to the entrance we'd taken to get into the Delve. Behind it was a shimmering blue portal. I looked around for Grotto, who'd been suspiciously quiet this whole time, and found him hovering over the c'thon's corpse.

"You coming?" I asked.

Grotto spun and floated closer to me.

[The Delve is ruined.]

“Yeah, you mentioned the obelisk was toast.”

[Without the obelisk, there is no reason for this Delve to exist.]

“Ok. So, you’re coming then, right? One of the System notifications said we had a ‘shared fate’, whatever that means. I figure I need to keep up with you.”

[As my final act as the guardian of this Delve, I will set it to shut down.]

“Sure thing. Just, make it quick. My legs fucking hurt and I’m carrying someone here.”

Grotto floated back to the broken obelisk and nestled inside the spherical recess, what was left of it, and his runes played out in a pattern. A deep rumble filled the air and the ground beneath my feet trembled.

“What does shutting the Delve down mean?” I asked, too tired to grow nervous at the sounds.

[I am making it collapse in on itself.]

“Oh. Self-destruct button.”

I felt him scan my brain, though it was no longer an uncomfortable feeling, maybe because he was now my bonded familiar.

[Yes, we have about sixty seconds to leave. Would you like to wait until the timer reaches one second, for the theater of it?]

“Absolutely not.” I marched straight towards the portal, Grotto floating over to my side.

[Oh, one last thing.]

“Dammit Grotto!”

He hovered back to the c’thon corpse, and tendrils of energy flowed out from him to the body. Feathers and flesh began sloughing off of the octo and started forming up

around Grotto. After a few seconds Grotto was a perfect copy of the c'thon, but three feet long from top to tentacle-tip. He was also decidedly cuter than the dead monster.

“I won't even ask why.” I kept moving toward the exit.

Varrin looked back at me from the portal's edge and opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it. He gave me a nod, then reached out and touched the portal. It didn't behave how I'd expected. He didn't walk through it, he just disappeared as soon as his fingers brushed against the surface. He left a faint afterimage behind, which quickly vanished as well.

I walked to the portal a second after he was gone, then reached out and slapped it.

Chapter 18

Moving through the portal was similar to my *Shortcut* ability. There was a flash, a brief sensation of movement, then I was outside of the Delve. When I exited, I was still indoors, finding myself in another large stone chamber, but rather than being faced with terrifying creatures amidst misty darkness, this room was well-lit and full of people.

Varrin was already being set upon by no less than ten men and women, fussing over him with concerned looks. One stout fellow retrieved a large tool box and began extracting various implements, presumably to pry the big man out of his armor. Another pair, dressed in light blue robes, were beginning to send wisps of crimson energy from their fingertips to the visible wounds on Varrin's face and exposed skin. The magic caressed the injuries, wiping away fresh bruises and closing cuts and scrapes.

There was a richly-dressed young couple standing just beyond the group attending Varrin, watching him with worry. The man was as tall and broad as Varrin, and had a similar pale complexion and dirty white hair. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, and I assumed it was Varrin's brother. The woman was also tall, near six feet, but lithe. She held the larger man by the arm, and had her fingers laced through his own. I assumed it was the brother's wife or significant other. Both of them were beyond attractive, looking like they belonged on the cover of *Vogue*, but before I caught myself staring my attention turned to a different couple approaching me.

They were decidedly more exotic. The man had dark black skin broken by pinpricks of white that gave the sensation of looking at a man made of clear night sky, rather than flesh and bone. His pupils were a dazzling violet. As he approached, I noticed that he was floating, not walking. I'd initially registered his lower half as a robe,

but realized that his form transitioned into an undulating shadow at the waist. The dark substance swam through the air as he moved.

The woman next to him was short and curvy, with dark black hair and crimson skin, dressed in a loose-fitting white gown. A pair of short, ebony-black horns peeked out from beneath her bangs. She bore a striking resemblance to Xim, and I assumed this was her sister.

The woman's eyes were locked onto the unconscious cleric, who was slung over my shoulder, but paused her approach when the shadowy man placed a hand on her arm. His eyes had caught sight of the severed head I held, and he was likely, and rightfully, skeptical of this stranger. The general mess of my appearance probably didn't help, made even more absurd by the pristine feather boa draped around my neck.

"Hi," I said. "I assume you're Xim's family. Sorry about the head, it's not from anyone in our party, promise."

The woman broke away from the man's gentle grasp and the pair walked forward anxiously.

"Is she alive?" the woman asked, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Yeah. She's just passed out," I said, looking for a place to deposit Xim. I was starting to feel like a conquering barbarian just standing there with her. The dark man floated over and reached out, taking her off of my shoulder with very little effort. Whoever he was, he was either extremely strong, or used some sort of spell to make Xim lighter. Not that she was heavy, but he'd taken her away like she was made of cloth and stuffing. He turned and silently took her toward a small table, flanked by two men in blue robes similar to those attending Varrin.

“Thank you,” the woman said, her eyes glancing at the severed head again. “I have many questions, but I should go and be with Xim for now.” She turned and watched her partner set Xim down, and the pair in blue began working with threads of dark red energy.

“Of course,” I said. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Introductions later, as well,” she said, before turning and hurrying over to Xim’s side.

I didn’t know what to do with myself, but the overwhelming pain from my conglomerate of gashes, broken bones, blood loss, and series of debuffs was beginning to reassert itself. I looked around for a place to sit, and noticed that the room was well-furnished. There were several tables near the edges of the room like the one Xim was laying on, but also clusters of plush loveseats and armchairs arranged around low tables. There were empty bottles, glasses and mugs, and trays of half-finished food scattered about, almost like this were some sort of lounge / hospital-ward hybrid. I walked to a nearby loveseat set against a wall and collapsed into it.

As I looked around, I noticed a few more distinct groups in the room. Another well-dressed couple, who wore grim expressions, stood near an occupied gurney. The woman’s hair was a familiar shade of blonde, and I realized that Chilla was the one laid out. One of the blue-robed healers looked down at her regretfully.

On the far side of the room was a group of six near another gurney, with the figure on top covered in a colorfully patterned cloth. Five of the six people were Littans, the same race as Sayil, who I expected was the one under the cloth. They had differing colors of fur, ranging from white to gray to brown, but all had a similar narrow and graceful build. None of them wept, but it was clear that they were distraught as they held

one another or leaned against a wall, head slumped. A few of them caught sight of me, looking at me for a time before whispering to one another, and I couldn't tell what type of reaction they'd had.

An older woman in more elaborate blue robes spoke with a pair of gentlemen wearing some sort of military uniform. One of the men had a rolled cigarette between his lips, which smoldered gently. His eyes scanned the room, though he looked fairly disinterested in what was happening. When his eyes met mine he half-grinned and gave me a little wave. I smiled through the pain and waved back. He chuckled, then returned to his survey.

The older woman patted one of the uniformed men on the shoulder, then turned and made a beeline toward me.

She betrayed no expression while making her way. She moved swiftly to cross the distance, though didn't look hurried. When she arrived, she placed her palms together flat in front of her chest and gave me a shallow bow.

"Forgive me," she said. "I apologize that no one has yet seen to you, but we were not given notice that another Delver would emerge within this chamber. Do you require any assistance locating your retinue?"

"Oh," I said. "I don't have one."

She raised an eyebrow and looked me over more closely.

"Again, I apologize but I do not know how to address you properly."

"Arlo is fine," I said.

"I'm afraid I would be uncomfortable referring to you so informally. If I might be so bold, would you be willing to share your title?"

"Ah, I see. Esquire."

Both eyebrows went up at that.

“Well then, sir esquire, if you do not have a retinue, may I offer you medical aid? You appear to have seen your fair share of combat.”

“Yes,” I said. “Please do. I should have passed out a half dozen times by now.”

“Of course,” she said, pulling back a loose sleeve.

She waved a hand toward me and a spray of golden light spilled out of her palm and settled on my body. When it hit me I was overwhelmed by an immense sense of calm and wellness.

It was like kicking off my shoes after hiking twenty miles, getting a full body massage, eating a two-thousand calorie meal, then wrapping myself in silk pajamas and snuggling up into a downy blanket on a bed made of positive affirmations. I felt my organs and bones shift, and it filled me with ecstatic relief. Every movement was like a grumpy body part finally figuring out exactly where it wanted to be. I nearly lost consciousness on the spot.

“Oh my god,” I mumbled. “That’s the stuff right there.” I took a look at my health and saw that it had shot up a hundred points. The woman looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“Again, Esquire Arlo, I apologize. I underestimated your need. It is not often that I need to use more than a basic spell on a level *one* Delver.” She cast the wave of golden light once more and my health went back to full. She then turned her hand over and wove her fingers through the air. More golden light pulsed from her and my debuffs dropped away one by one.

“No worries, this is amazing.” I ignored the weird inflection she’d put on my level, and sank even deeper into the loveseat. I was probably soiling it beyond repair, but I

didn't care in the least. I'd buy them a new one if I had to, assuming I had enough money to do so. I didn't know what the money I'd looted from Hognay was worth.

"Is there any other way I may be of assistance?"

"I don't suppose you have some clean clothes? Maybe a hot bath?"

She smiled and gave a shallow nod.

"Of course. I will retrieve an initiate to assist you. This facility has a number of private baths which can be prepared with a moment's notice. As for clothing, we do not keep anything on hand that might be considered suitable for one of noble station, but if you are willing to accept a simple set of garments, I can arrange for one to be brought to you. They will be basic, but I assure you that they will be comfortable."

"That's fantastic. I'm happy with whatever you can provide. Sorry, but, as you observed, I'm not very familiar with this whole process. Do I owe you anything for all this?"

She held up a hand and shook her head.

"There is no need. Everything here is complimentary. Your Delve fees will more than cover anything you might use here."

"Ok. About those fees. Um..."

Her smile widened.

"When you exit the lobby there is an attendant that will collect a portion of what you earned within the Delve."

"That's... good to know." I began to get anxious. Taxes were truly inescapable, even after death. Hopefully they didn't need a social security number or anything. "May I have your name?"

"I am Supplicant Hierti Madson, at your service."

“You’re a member of a religious order?”

“Of course. The Supplicants of Astrania provide many services to the Delver community in regards to healing and other post-Delve needs.”

“That’s... very nice of you,” I said, feeling as dumb as that platitude likely sounded. “I was told that the Supplicants of Astrania have less than favorable views on the Delves.”

She nodded politely, as though she’d heard the characterization a thousand times before.

“This is true, though an oversimplification. We believe that the Delves themselves are entities of evil, but we recognize the need to explore and conquer them, lest their corruption spread out into our lands. We believe that the actions of Delvers are, at the core, noble, even if a Delver’s personal motivations are not always pure. I would be happy to speak with you further about our beliefs if you wish, though I expect getting cleaned and dressed is a higher priority for you than the theological proselytizing of an old woman.”

I grinned.

“I think you’re right. I’m thankful for your help. I’ve been feeling a bit out of depth.”

She reached into her robes and fished out a small wooden token. It had the symbol of a tree carved into it, with a large eye set into the center of the branches.

“Our main church here in Formation is attached to this Delve facility. If you show this token to a member they will provide you with any guidance or knowledge within their means.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the token. It was about the same size as a chip, which I expected was intentional. “You’ve been a great help, Supplicant Hierti.”

She bowed her head, then dismissed herself to retrieve an initiate to get me sorted with clothes and a bath. I realized that I’d been sitting with one hand on top of Hognay’s severed head, and was impressed that Hierti had acted as though she hadn’t even noticed it.

She’d also ignored Grotto, who presently looked like a floating, feathered octopus monster. I guess she saw a lot of shit in her line of work.

As she left, she passed by the uniformed men, who were now approaching, and stopped to exchange a few words with them. While one was unarmed, I noticed the smoking man had a one-handed warhammer on his belt. He smiled at me again as Hierti moved on.

“Good afternoon, Esquire Arlo,” said the man not possessed of a lethal weapon. “My name is Officer Dalton. This is Guardian Lito,” he gestured at the dude smoking, who gave a shallow bow.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, we noticed something a little odd when we got word of your party exiting the Delve. Erm, you, Arlo, aren’t on any of our lists.”

Lito plucked the cig from his lips and blew out a puff of smoke. He locked his eyes on me, then spoke in a gravelly voice.

“We’ve got a few questions to ask you about that.

Chapter 19

Dalton gave Lito an irritated look.

"I'm sure it's just an oversight," he said, waving away some of Lito's smoke. "Our branch upstairs has direct access to Central's records. I just need to make sure that you, Esquire Arlo, check in before leaving. So that we can get everything documented appropriately." He gave up trying to stave off the guardian's secondhand, and began pulling at his middle finger until a knuckle popped.

"Sure thing," I said, not sure how this was going to play out. "What if my name *didn't* make it onto your list for some reason?"

Dalton moved to pulling on his thumb. "That would result in an investigation into the... error. We keep a good handle on who should or shouldn't be participating."

"Not a lot of trespassers," said Lito, still smiling.

"We've had documentation errors once or twice," Dalton said, then paused to clear his throat. "Clerical oversights. I'm sure it will be sorted to everyone's satisfaction. Aside from that, there is also the issue of your two guests." He nodded first at the baby-c'thon form of Grotto, and then at the severed head.

"I was just wondering what to do with this," I said, looking down at Hognay. I tried to avoid looking at the hole my *Oblivion Orb* had made in the base of his skull.

"And I was wondering why you have... that with you. All one hundred participants have been accounted for, yourself included. That is, one hundred participants came *out*. You weren't on the records, as I mentioned, but there are always one hundred participants... So this, um, gentleman is unexpected."

"He was inside," I said with a shrug. "Tried to kill us. He was responsible for," I looked toward Sayil and Chilla's groups, "the deaths inside."

“Really now?” said Lito. His smile didn’t change, but there was obvious skepticism in his voice. I was beginning to dislike Lito.

“I see,” said Dalton. “It is a tragedy when we lose any Delver, but especially during a Creation Delve. Every year we have one or two that get in over their heads and try to tackle a gold without the proper preparation, but we lost more this year than we have for some time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you. It is one of the dangers of this whole business. Most people with a good head on their shoulders stick to silver and copper, so it’s usually not an issue.” Lito gave Dalton a serious side-eye as he said this, and Dalton cleared his throat again. “Of course, there are talented Delvers who belong in gold Delves,” he quickly added. “As for your other friend here, could you tell me what type of creature that is?”

I looked up at Grotto, who hovered in the air next to me, staring Lito down. The uniformed man took another puff of his cigarette and stared back.

“It’s a c’thon,” I said. Dalton’s face lost some color.

“And what is the nature of your relationship with it?”

“It’s my bonded familiar,” I said, repeating what the System had told me. Lito let out a low whistle.

“That’s pretty rare,” the smoking man said. “Guess you found that in the Delve?”

“Yeah.”

“Haven’t seen a c’thon inside a Delve before,” said Lito. “Dangerous place to find a mana fiend.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause they eat all the mana and get tough to kill. Lucky you ran into a little one.”

“Guess I am,” I said. “There was a bigger one too.”

“How much bigger?”

“A lot bigger.”

Lito scratched his head and looked thoughtful.

“What difficulty did your party tackle?”

“Platinum.”

Lito grunted. “Lucky any of you came out in one piece. Do you know if *that* guy,” he gestured at Hognay, “had anything to do with c’thons being in there?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he did. He had a broken summoning tablet.”

Dalton’s eyes went wide.

“He was another Delver?!” he said. “With a summoning tablet?”

“What level was he?” asked Lito.

“Two,” I said. “That’s what the System said after he was dead.”

“Damn,” said Lito. “A c’thon and a level two inside of a platinum Creation Delve. You’re one lucky bastard.”

“I guess so.”

“This is very irregular, to say the least,” said Dalton. “Obviously this, erm...” he waved his hand at the head.

“His name was Hognay,” I said. “Hognay Haskagander.”

“Yes, this Hognay was certainly not supposed to be inside. And if he were level two there’s no way he could have entered through normal means. But let’s put that aside for a moment. I know you must be tired, and your attendant is here.” A blue-robed

woman had approached and was waiting patiently for our conversation to end. “We’ll need to file a formal report. The unusual circumstances surrounding the death of your two party members are enough to trigger that, but a level two summoning c’thons into a Creation Delve!” He was now squeezing his fingers hard enough for his knuckles to go white. He looked down, realized what he was doing, and dropped them to his sides. “I have what I need for the moment. Guardian Lito will accompany you to make sure you can, ah, find your way to the appropriate office to have your records sorted out.”

I nodded, understanding Lito’s presence for what it was. He wasn’t there to be a guide, I figured the initiate waiting nearby could do that. He was there to make sure that I actually went to the office, rather than sneaking off.

“No problem,” I said. “I appreciate your help.”

“Of course, Esquire Arlo,” said Dalton. Then he reached down toward Hognay’s head, but paused, struggling to decide where to grip it.

“The hair is probably the best part to grab. It’s greasy, but it’s cleaner than the rest of him.”

He eventually produced a handkerchief to wrap around his hand, and took the head in the way I’d suggested, holding it away from his body.

“I’ll make certain that this is documented and preserved as evidence. We’ll also have a look into his identity, naturally. If I am able, I’ll let you know what we find.” He looked like he might gag, but managed to give me a quick bow. He nodded to Lito, then walked off toward the room’s exit.

The young woman approached, looking hesitantly at Lito, then to me.

“If it pleases you, m’lord, I’ll show you to the baths.”

Kim was still unconscious and Varrin was having his armor dissected, so I followed the initiate out of the room without speaking to either, Lito close behind me. We exited into a large, curving hallway, the type you might see around the outside of an arena or stadium. The hall was filled with dozens of other people, milling about and making their way up or down the hall. Those sporting armor or adventuring gear were doted upon by servants, and praised—or consoled—by richly-dressed friends and relatives.

The people we walked past displayed a variety of moods. Some were sullen, like Chilla and Sayil's people, but many more were excited, telling bombastic stories about what happened inside their Delve. A few were having more heated discussions, going over some mistake or issue that they had run into as a party. I watched everyone as we went past, not trying to hide my curiosity, but few people paid me any attention. One or two caught sight of my outfit and gaped for a moment, one even chuckled to himself, but they quickly went back to their own business. I wasn't *that* much of a novelty, I surmised.

Lito walked just behind me, so it was difficult to get a good look at him without being obvious. I glanced back at him a couple times as we walked, and he'd shoot me a hollow smile, then go back to scanning over everyone we passed. He was walking casually, but I could tell he was watching the others around us with more than passing interest.

I thought about asking him a few questions, but the lawyer inside me took over and I decided not to engage. He felt like some sort of cop or security, and he already

distrusted me. No reason to give him anything else. Talking to someone whose main motivation was to find a reason that you were guilty of something usually did more harm than good. Besides, I may *have* committed some sort of crime, unwittingly. It's not like I knew anything about the criminal justice system here.

We finally made our way off into a side hall, the air humid and filled with floral scents, where a series of single doors lined the walls. Most were closed, but we came to one that was open in short order, and the initiate gestured for me to enter. She followed me as I walked in, pointing out the fresh set of clothes sitting on a bench in the middle of the small, tiled room.

"We've guessed at your measurements," she said, "but the garments are designed to be loose-fitting. There's a simple belt to cinch the shirt. If it pleases you, I can take your boots to be cleaned, or to find another set in the same size."

"I really don't want to make you carry these," I said. There was a thick layer of mud coating the outside, and a variety of... fluids... on the inside.

"It's no trouble, m'lord. I'm used to handling items that have seen significant use within the Delves."

"Alright, if you insist," I said, sitting on the bench and beginning to pull off the boots. They practically fell apart as I tugged at them. "I don't think cleaning is the way to go." I handed them to her and she took them, holding them by the cuffs with one hand. She kept them far away from her body, like Dalton had done with Hognay. I resolved not to make it a habit to continually hand disgusting things to the people I meet.

"I'll fetch a new pair and have them ready for you when you are finished. The bath is through that curtain. There is a small shower to rinse yourself prior to using the tub. Should you wish, that is. M'lord." It didn't sound like a suggestion. "There's also

soap and towels set out, but more are in this cupboard.” She opened the cabinet, and left it open.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling. She gave a bow, then left. Before she could close the door behind her, Lito put a hand on it and leaned in.

“I’ll be right out here,” he said, smoking cigarette dangling from his lips. “Take your time.”

“Uhhh, ok,” I said. The man gave me the creeps. He let the door close, and I was on my own.

The room was small and covered in blue tile from floor to ceiling. There was a drain set into the center made from a dark metal, which suggested that they had some level of indoor plumbing. A godsend, if there ever was one. There was a full-sized standing mirror next to a tall wooden dresser.

I took a look at myself in the mirror, then regretted it. I looked every bit as disgusting and ridiculous as I thought I did, and seeing it made real was unsettling. I pulled off my feather boa and leather vest, then inspected them to see how gross they’d gotten from being in contact with me. They were both spotless, which seemed unlikely. I frowned, then tucked them into the dresser. I peeled off my pants and underwear—a pair of long-johns—and tossed them into a corner. They landed with a splat, and I already felt cleaner now that they were gone. Those needed to get thrown into a furnace somewhere, like the boots. There was no saving them.

I walked past the curtain and found a warm room with a tub the size of a jacuzzi in the middle, water steaming within. The only lighting was a few fragrant candles burning atop low tables, and the place had the feeling of a spa. I found the shower the

woman had mentioned, which was just a small platform with a tile lip around it and a grated hole in the ceiling above it.

After poking around some, I found a crystal set into the wall which shone red when I touched it. A rain of water fell down on me from above, warm and pleasant.

Here I was, in what I assumed to be a medieval-era world, and they had better plumbing, heating, and water pressure than I'd had in my three-bedroom house back on Earth.

I let the water run over me, hunting with my hands to wipe away all the areas that had accumulated extra-thick layers of gross, and found more chunks of unidentifiable matter than I cared for. *Any* amount of unidentifiable chunks caked onto my naked body were more than I cared for, but my current predicament had markedly skewed my expectations. Finally, after several minutes of rinsing, I made my way to the tub.

The water was hot enough that I had to slide in nice and slow, my skin turning pink in less than a minute. It was the exact temperature my fiancée liked, and that I would normally hate. Then again, maybe it was hot enough to boil a lobster. With my Fortitude, who knew.

I found the soap and lathered up, letting my mind wander over the events of the day. A few scenes repeated themselves over and over in my mind. My death, Xim smashing through an Atrocidile eye, finding Chilla and Sayil murdered, the endless field of green crystals, the enraged c'thon. I was too weary to give them much thought, and fell back on letting them replay time and again as I worked to clean myself. I'd gone over my entire body at least three times before I'd finished, and the bar of soap was reduced to mushy remnants. Its valiant sacrifice had not gone in vain, and I released its specter to the murky water with a thankful prayer to the gods of sanitation and lather.

I'd need another run under the shower before I felt really clean, but I took a moment to sit back in the tub, letting the calm and quiet wash over me.

My eyes fluttered and I fell asleep for a few seconds, coming to as I slipped a little further into the tub. I rubbed my face, dispelling some of the fatigue, then brought up my character sheet. I had a free moment to think and I'd rather pass out in a bed than a public bathhouse. I took a look at my status, and examined my stats.

Stats:

Strength 2

Agility 2

Speed 2

Fortitude 13

Intelligence 5

Wisdom 4

Charisma 3

Luck 2

You have 8 attribute points to distribute. You have 23 hours until you lose 1 of your available points. Thereafter, 1 additional point will be lost every 3 hours.

This should have been an easy decision. I was angling toward a magic-focused build and my mana pool and regeneration were trash, at least compared to my health. I needed Intelligence and Wisdom to round out my build, but I also didn't want to waste

my bonus from my unique birth sign's ability: That's a Lot of Stats! I read back over the description.

That's a Lot of Stats!: You can gain bonus attribute points through training up to a maximum score of ten in each attribute.

Again, I wanted to maximize that bonus, which meant that anything I had with a value less than ten needed to be trained to ten before I put any points into it. I would prefer to hoard my points and split them between Fortitude, Intelligence, and Wisdom once I had the other two at ten. But, the time limit.

The *fucking* time limit.

I didn't want to risk losing the points, and I'm the type of guy that leaves an hour early to make an appointment twenty minutes away. You never know what might happen on the way there; traffic, car problems, vicious assault by otherworldly monsters and intervention by celestial manifestations of divine will. Sky was the limit. So, I sighed and tossed them all into Fortitude. It ticked up to twenty-one, then ticked over again to twenty-two after I confirmed, courtesy of my Dumping ability.

Dumping: After spending five or more stat points at once on a single attribute, you are granted one additional point in that attribute.

I took a look at my vital stats and shook my head at the enormous jump in HP.

Health: 473

Health Regeneration: 233/hour

Stamina: 220

Stamina Regeneration: 44/hour

Mana: 0/40

Mana Regeneration: 16/hour (Negated by Mana Overload)

My health and HP regen had both more than doubled, which confirmed my earlier belief that health scaled on some sort of exponential path. That meant the higher it went, the better the bonus got for each point invested. If I was going to be throwing all my points into one stat, that was a good thing. A *very* good thing.

Stamina was going up linearly, and the regen was locked in at twenty percent of the maximum value, so no escalating bonuses there.

The thing that really caught my attention was my mana regen. It had quadrupled, which wasn't something I expected, especially since my Wisdom hadn't increased. I scanned through my character sheet, trying to find something to explain the change, which is when I found the bonuses from my Bonded Familiar skill.

Bonded Familiar: A favored pet? A tamed wild beast? A former ally turned into an animal against their will and enslaved? Whatever the means, you have acquired a bonded familiar! The bonuses and benefits from a bonded familiar vary wildly depending on the entity chosen as your familiar, so we hope you considered it carefully.

Just kidding! We know you were forced to bond with a familiar with little or no forethought in order to escape near certain death. Oh well. What's life without a little risk? And you really rolled the dice on this one. Hope it works out for you! Or not. Either way will be entertaining.

Your bonded familiar is a Delve Core that you and your allies gave the adorable little name Grotto, taken from the name of the Delve from whence he came. Very creative! By bonding with a Delve Core your Bonded Familiar ability gains the following traits!

Psychic Bond: The empathetically-challenged orb known as Grotto possesses psychic abilities and, if you allow, can communicate with you telepathically. This permits mental communication between the two of you, and grants Grotto limited access to thoughts and memories relevant to what you are currently doing or communicating about. While Grotto is able to force his mental voice into the minds of the weak, as his proud new owner you may toggle this ability on or off. It has been turned off by default. Savor the peace and quiet, or concentrate on the connection to activate the ability.

Shit. I concentrated on opening my thoughts up to Grotto, and heard his voice for the first time since leaving the Delve.

[...and I do not care for the one with the smelly smoking weed in his mouth,] came Grotto's voice in my mind. *[Although he's better than that obsequious priestess with her nonsensical ramblings about the evil within Delves.]*

[Hey,] I thought, focusing on Grotto. [Can you hear this?]

[Hmm, I see you have deemed it prudent to respond to my inquiries, finally. I was growing weary of your ignorant facade. Your vacuous sham. Your inane play-acting!]

[Alright man, chill.]

The feathery octopus swooped down in front of my face, the insectoid claws on the underside of his feelers clacking.

[They could not hear me and there was no need to ignore me completely.]

He... almost sounded hurt. I might have felt bad, but it was hard to drum up compassion for someone who'd aided and abetted hypnosis-induced excavation of people's insides.

[About that. Apparently this Bonded Familiar ability had you on mute by default.]

[Mute?] I felt a familiar scanning in my brain.

[It had me on mute?!]

Chapter 20

[You haven't heard a single one of my carefully curated communiques concerning the curious ongoings of this primitive and infuriating culture you've wandered out into?]

[That's right. System says I'm your boss now. Dunno why it muted you by default, though.]

[The System seems to treat you... strangely. Perhaps it did it to irritate us.]

[That's an uncomfortable thought. I'm listening now, so communicate away.]

[I am displeased by this revelation, and will need a moment to gather my thoughts into a digestible form that will not cause your mind to suffer psionic damage from the complexity of the information to which I wish to make you privy.]

[Alright. Take your time. Not looking for a nosebleed.]

[Why would psionic damage cause your nose to bleed?]

[I dunno. That's what it does in all the tv shows. You know, a little girl with psychic powers overexerts herself and gets a nosebleed. Something like that.]

[That isn't how it works at all. Psionic damage attacks your psyche itself. It is madness distilled and made real. It shatters and eviscerates your persona, not your mucosa.]

[I'll keep that in mind.]

[Was that a pun?]

I ignored the question and went back to the Bonded Familiar description.

Ambient Absorption: By integrating with a Delve Core you have gained a portion of its ability to ambiently draw in mana from your environment. Your mana

regeneration will increase based on the amount, quality, and type of ambient mana surrounding you, in addition to the strength of your bonded Delve Core. Mana which possesses an attribute matching your own magical attunement will be absorbed with the highest level of efficiency, while mana from the two opposing schools will cause interference with your ambient absorption.

You are currently in an area with notable concentrations of dimensional and divine mana. Dimensional mana matches your attunement and is absorbed with high efficiency. Divine mana is from an opposing school and is interfering with your absorption.

Shared Fate: Your bond with Grotto extends beyond the normal magical connection between the bonded and the familiar, and Grotto has integrated himself with your organic systems. This provides both benefits and drawbacks, some of which even we cannot be certain of, which is very exciting.

Drawback?: Shared experience. An attack on your body is an attack on Grotto's mind and vice versa. Better keep an eye on this little guy, because if he throws himself into a volcano then you're gonna have a really bad day. Whenever either of you suffers damage, the other is made acutely aware of that fact with a stunning delivery of mental torment.

Benefit?: Organic Access. Grotto has access to, and the ability to regulate and adjust, a variety of your biological functions. This ranges from the ability to

increase your pain tolerance, to slowly reducing your heart rate until your body shuts down and you pass silently into the Big Sleep. But, we're sure he wouldn't do something like that. (Maybe try to stay on his good side.)

The first trait explained why my mana regen was higher. I was better able to absorb nearby dimensional mana, but the ability was also being hamstrung by the presence of divine mana. Still, even with the interference, my regen was quadrupled, so this ability looked like a solid win overall.

Shared Fate's first ability was tentatively listed as a drawback, but I could see it being useful. Even if we were prevented from communicating psychically, Grotto and I would each have an intuitive understanding of the other's physical wellbeing. I wasn't planning on being eighty-five-percent dead again anytime soon, so hopefully this didn't cause much discomfort for Grotto. Although, I hadn't planned on being one-hundred-percent dead during my bike ride yesterday. Man makes plans and the gods laugh, so on and so forth.

The next ability was fucking terrifying. I had given this floating ball of malice enough control over my body that he could kill me? What would stop him from using that to extort me into doing his bidding?

[I am not so base that I would force you to obey my whims like some maniacal overmind.]

[Jesus. Are you listening to my thoughts?]

[I am able to monitor what you are reading and extract relevant context and internal dialogue.]

[So that's a yes.]

[...yes.]

[I've had nightmares about this. Fuck, I'm going to have to police my thoughts. What if I start thinking about weird shit?]

[Miss Frizzle in a sexy bunny costume is not as off-putting as you might think. Your scandalous ponderings will not faze me, as I am unconcerned with such trivialities of human desire. If anything, the way you ogled one of those Littans earlier is more worrying, as they are not even human. Then again, Miss Frizzle is a cartoon, so perhaps that is also problematic.]

[Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit.]

[Even so, I do not care who or what you fawn over. I will filter any of your passing perversions out from the information my conscious mind is aware of unless they are hindering our efforts.]

[Sure. Just... strap in, I guess.]

[I will fortify myself for the inevitable deluge of filth emanating from your thoughts.]

This whole arrangement was going to make taking care of my masculine needs a lot more challenging, which was a thought that I immediately regretted having. I know the System said that I could mute the guy, but I trusted that about as much as I trusted Alexa when she told me she wasn't listening to my conversations. I knew she was still listening. The machines were *always* listening.

I climbed out of the bath and was about to get under the shower again, when a new notification popped up.

Yo! You've placed your level one stats and have unlocked additional Delver systems and upgrades. Would you like to view those now?

It was unusually polite of the system to give me the option, rather than dumping windows into my field of view. That had started to get annoying, and I wondered if the System was adapting to my preference. If it was, this thing acted like it had some sort of personality disorder. Did it want to help me, make fun of me, or get me killed? I couldn't tell. I was tempted to dismiss the notification and look at it later, but when I saw the word 'upgrades', I couldn't help myself.

HUD: As a level 1 Delver you now have access to additional Heads Up Display ("HUD") functionality. You may now view the level of any Delver you see. You may also see additional information about cataloged monsters and magical creatures encountered both inside and outside of the Delves.

Party members in your group are now able to share specific values for their health, stamina, and mana, which can be viewed on your HUD. Your HUD can be customized by concentrating on the aspects you wish to change.

That was nice to have. I made a mental note to explore the customization and display options once I'd gotten some sleep.

Item Descriptions: You are now able to view additional information about items and their effects. You cannot view the descriptions of items owned by others without permission.

A ubiquitous feature of RPG's. I was surprised this hadn't come up sooner, though I had been able to explore some item descriptions while in character creation. Maybe the System took the ability away just to give it back and act like it was doing you a favor. Either way, I'd be sure to awkwardly stare at everything I owned until I knew what it did.

You have unlocked intrinsic skills! Well, that's what we would have said if you hadn't already cheated your way into them with your subrace and Bonded Familiar passive.

You may have a maximum of 10 intrinsic skills and, once they are chosen, they cannot be changed without significant cost, effort, and bodily discomfort. You currently have 2 intrinsic skills: Dimensional Magic and Dungeoneering.

Dimensional Magic: Ever wanted to cast your mind and body into the open jaws of an eldritch god who will flay your soul for all eternity, but you just didn't have the tools to do it? Now you do! You are able to access realms and dimensions adjacent to your own and harness their power. Just be careful not to awaken the force of endless darkness that was imprisoned in the realm between realms at the dawn of time.

The description for Dimensional Magic was spooky, and I was starting to worry about how liberally I'd been using the spell *Oblivion Orb*. Was casting it really an existential threat to reality, or did the System just like seeing me squirm? So far there

hadn't been any weird side-effects that I could remember, though that may be due to the spell's level being too low. I'd have to ask around or do some research to see what other people thought about it.

Good news! Your Dimensional Magic skill has reached level 10 and you may choose a new evolution for the skill. Please choose one of the following options to assist you in inadvertently devouring this universe and all those who exist within it.

1) Dimensional Shielding: A portion of the damage you receive is divided and distributed to alternate versions of yourself across all existing realities. Don't worry, they won't even notice! Starting damage reduction is 10% and may scale with your Dimensional Magic skill.

2) Pocket Closet: This is an inventory "upgrade". Your inventory becomes an accessible three-dimensional space which exists within a pocket dimension and you are able to freely enter and leave this space through a portal that you can summon with one minute of concentration. Up to 50% of the space inside can be designated as 'quick access' space, which can be used to store and retrieve items through your normal inventory window. You will receive an initial increase to your inventory size, but Strength will no longer have any impact on the amount you can hold within your inventory. This space may be upgraded and expanded if certain conditions are met. Additional details will be revealed upon acquiring this evolution.

3) Mana Void: Entities damaged by your dimensional magic lose mana equal to the damage taken. You regain mana equal to the mana lost by the entity up to a maximum of 50% of the cost of the dimensional spell that caused the damage.

The implications of the first option, Dimensional Shielding, made me very uncomfortable. First, there were different versions of me across multiple realities? I mean, the idea had crossed my mind, but only as a fun thought experiment. Having a way to confirm that it was true would have incredible implications on philosophy and science, at least back on Earth. Maybe here that was common knowledge and people just lived with that. Maybe they regularly had conversations with other versions of themselves and I was the weirdo for not having weekend brews with the other yous.

Still, even if diverting damage and dividing it between a million copies of myself reduced it to an itch on the thigh, it was impacting their lives without permission. I wasn't into that. Plus, what if every copy of me in an alternate reality making similar choices chose this same skill? Would we constantly be beset by mild discomforts or inexplicable tingles? Worse? I didn't want to take it, mainly because I wouldn't want another me to take it either.

Pocket Closet looked like the exact type of monkey-business I was into. I'd get my own extra-dimensional room to keep all my crap in, and I could still access at least half of it through my normal inventory screen. I'd lose any buffs to my carry space from Strength, which I was just learning was a thing, but the description said the space could be upgraded, it was just ambiguous as to how.

I'd get an initial bonus to my inventory space, though it was equally ambiguous about how much of a bonus. Even if it locked me in to my current inventory space and wasn't upgradable, the fact that I could literally disappear off the face of the planet into a room outside of reality was a very valuable skill to have. My mind also ran wild with what "upgradable" meant. It didn't have to mean more space. Maybe I could get it to acquire some sort of temporal distortion, so I could train with time dilation. Or get a few extra hours of sleep. Or procrastinate with greater flair.

Mana Void looked... useful. It was a solid, practical choice. If I ended up fighting a mage or a creature that used mana in any way, I'd be hitting them in two resource pools with every attack: health *and* mana. If monsters in The Toxic Grotto had this, I would have been useless a lot of the time. It was also one of those skills that was probably better than it looked, with applications beyond straight combat. The use of the word 'entities' as opposed to 'creatures' or 'enemies' hinted at that. Maybe I could deactivate magical traps or devices with it.

I stared at this choice for a while, then asked Grotto for his thoughts.

[I would not worry about destroying the world with your underdeveloped magical abilities. Perhaps if you were to reach the height of mortal competency you might pose some minor risk to the integrity of the local fabric of space-time, but the thought that you would become capable of causing permanent damage is laughable. The entrances and exits to the Delves themselves utilize dimensional magic far above anything you can perform and those are highly stable.]

[Dimensional Shielding is a monkey's paw. Without knowing how it functions you rely on the forthrightness of this description to determine the relative safety of yourself and any other version of you that exists. I also find the idea that alternate

versions of you exist a dubious conclusion given solely this description. If they aren't you then they aren't you. You'd just be assigning the consequences of your poor life choices to strangers. Also, it says that it may increase the damage mitigation as your skill level rises, which is ridiculous. That's like a box made of 'up to' fifty-percent recycled material. It could have no recycled material! It's a sham! A farce! An affront to our existence to be offered such a poor skill evolution!]

[Do they recycle here?] I thought to Grotto. [Where did you get that analogy from? And why is it an affront to you as well?]

[Your mind perpetually seeps excrement into my consciousness and our fates are shared, lest you have forgotten. Your misfortune becomes my own and my integration with your biological systems is not easily disentangled.]

[Thanks for your concern, I guess.]

[Do not thank me. Accrue power! Dominate our enemies! Attain immortality so that we might live forever!]

[I'll add those to The List.]

[Very well. Mana Void is tempting, but it does not give you anything, it only allows you to deprive others of something. You cannot improve or train it. You cannot use it alone. You cannot wield it in secret to dethrone emperors and topple their empires.]

[I could if they were *magic* emperors.]

[Regardless, it lacks the essence of a truly powerful skill. Something that can be perpetually curated into a devastating weapon. Something that can be cultivated to attain untold power.]

[Something that scales well.]

[Precisely.]

[So you like Pocket Closet? Its description also leaves a lot unknown.]

[Yes, but the ability to improve upon the space is not discretionary. It is something that can be done, it is just unclear as to how. I would also be able to...find my own use for such a space.]

That got me curious, and a little scared.

[What *kind* of use?]

[Constructing a new Delve.]

Chapter 21

[Hold on a second.] I realized I'd been drip-drying naked in the middle of the bathroom, and finally made my way back to the shower for my final rinse. I let the water begin pouring over me before continuing. [I don't even know where to start with that. This will require a longer discussion than we can have while that Lito guy is outside.]

[The smoking neanderthal can wait. Our decisions bear more influence on this world than the entire stretch of his trivial life and all the generations of his bloodline that follow.]

[Fuck, dude, you don't even know the guy. And I'm just some reincarnated asshole, so I find that unlikely.]

[That may have been true before, but now- Wait, reincarnated? What do you mean by reincarnated?]

"Shit!" I said aloud. The idea had slipped into my mind and the thought flowed out with the rest of my mental communication to Grotto. That was going to be an issue. I felt him scanning my brain and I prepared for an interrogation.

[This... this changes so much. You have divine attention focused on you. I saw the status message from the System earlier, but I presumed it to be hyperbole, or some sort of poorly-formed humor that originated from your culture. You died? You were brought back to life? No, there is no such thing as true resurrection.]

[I don't know, man. I don't know if I can know what really happened. We don't have time to explore this topic right now.]

[I am formulating theories. Resurrecting a deceased mortal and transporting their material form to an alien realm would be highly inefficient. Have you considered that you are actually a clone of the human that once existed?]

[I- what?]

[The original entity that you are modeled on would be truly dead. Their corpse would still be on your home world, Earth. There is the chance that this body—your current body—was grown from his DNA and that your mind was filled with his memories to convince you that you had a life prior to waking up within the Creation Delve.]

[Oh no. You're not coming at me with that Star Trek transporter bullshit. And even if I *am* a clone, I still feel like me so it doesn't matter.]

[Perhaps. But what if your body were altered while being regrown, allowing the divine entity to exert a greater level of control over your thoughts and behaviors than they otherwise would be able to effect? Mortals supposedly have free will, but what if you were a scion, or even a complex puppet wielded by the being?]

[Can we... move on from this topic?] I was so tired. My mind couldn't carry the burden of this concept for much longer. I needed to give it proper consideration at some point, but I needed a bed first. Maybe a bottle of whiskey on top.

[What if you're insane and your memories of Earth are a delusion?]

[Oh my god, stop please.] I rinsed my mouth out with some of the shower water then spat it out. I tried to ignore Grotto, but I couldn't help myself. [If that were the case, wouldn't you know whether my memories were implanted or just delusions?]

[I can only perceive what is inside of you. Memories that are false still carry the same weight of those that are real. Sometimes they are even more real. I have also never been bonded to a human like this, so it is not as though I am an expert in discerning your true or untrue thoughts and feelings.]

[Very helpful.]

[*I suppose we will discover more when we visit this 'office' the pungent man is taking us to.*] I felt a fresh clench of fear at that. [*Perhaps you have escaped from some form of commitment; an asylum or other organization that houses your body to protect others from your broken mind. They may be looking for you, and the records will reveal your true identity.*]

Varrin had also talked about having me committed, jokingly. I still didn't like that idea being raised twice in one day.

[*Do you think that you murdered the person who was supposed to go through the Delve, to steal their place just before entering? Maybe they already found the body, which is why they are suspicious of you. Maybe they're leading you to the office to capture you.*] Grotto floated back and forth across the room, feelers curling and uncurling. [*We cannot let that happen.*]

[I didn't murder anyone!] I shut the water off and went out to the front room to grab a towel. It was soft and smelled minty, but I wasn't able to appreciate it. I began drying off. [I mean, no one other than Hognay, but that was self-defense. So, not murder. My assertion stands.]

[*I recall you surprise attacking him with a teleport and an Oblivion Orb to his sternum. I doubt that counts as self-defense.*]

[I'm not gonna stand there like a jackass and let someone who has already tried to kill me get a second chance at scooping out my organs before I fucking... before I fucking kill them right back!] It was a struggle to continue *thinking* the words, instead of shouting them at Grotto. I settled on thinking at him *real* hard.

A throaty, wet chirping sound came from Grotto's octopus-like c'thonic body. It sounded like he was laughing at me, but it wasn't gleeful. It was a discomforting, dark sound.

[Tell yourself whatever you wish. Not a soul in this world will mourn the loss of that man, and any who would hold his death against you are not worthy of consideration.]

[You were a part of that whole mess,] I spat back in my mind.

[Yes, and I aided in his death out of vengeance for enslaving me, not justice. I need no moral justification for ridding the universe of the plague that was Hognay.]

[I was thinking it was to get your Delve back, but ok.]

[There was that, too. Although, this discussion has strayed several degrees from the main issue of import. Choose Pocket Closet.] My thoughts stumbled over the sudden change in topic. *[I cannot be certain that it will suit the needs I have in mind, but if not for me, then choose it for yourself. If you are indeed an escaped psychopath on a delusional killing-spree in search of unlimited supernatural power, then you may use it to disappear. You can open a portal, step inside, close the portal behind you, then wait until everyone looking for you is convinced you've already fled. Afterward, you may take flight, unimpeded.]*

I shook my head and started pulling on the clothes the initiate had laid out for me. They were even softer than the towels. Fresh, clean clothes after a long, hot bath is one of the little things in life that I truly cherished. Grotto was ruining it. He was ruining the *entire* spa experience!

I re-opened the notification and looked again at the choices. Take less damage and potentially fuck up people in other dimensions, take chunks out of someone's mana

pool while I take chunks out of their body, or an ambiguously worded inventory upgrade. All of which alluded to the idea that they might unleash some sort of dark god upon the world or irreparably shatter reality itself.

I ran a hand through my beard, wishing I had some oil and a brush, then selected Pocket Closet.

[*A wise choice.*]

[Stop that. You're not my sniveling lackey. Don't stuff roses and rainbows up my ass.]

No sooner had I finished agonizing over the evolution to my Dimensional Magic skill, than I was offered another evolution for my Fortitude. It was great, getting all these fun new abilities and upgrades, but my brain was struggling to stay awake, especially after getting all fresh and clean.

Wowee! You've reached a score of 20 in the Fortitude stat! Wait, what level are you? Bro, you GOTTA put points somewhere else. Eh, ok then, here you go. Your shit has evolved! Choose a new evolution from the three options below!

1) Body of Theseus: A seed of transformation is planted in your body and you begin the process of transcending beyond the limits of mundane physiology. Your organs are slowly rendered redundant over time as your flesh becomes more than a disorganized mass of lame-o human cells, replaced with something greater. Something *powerful*.

Effect: Critical damage you take and extra status effects applied by crits is reduced by a % amount equal to your Fortitude. Current reduction: 22%

2) Mind-Body Unity: Fuck Descartes! Your mind's perception of your body in a perfect state of health and your body itself become harmonized. Your brain acquires preternatural control over your body's orchestrated response to damaged tissue, and is able to more effectively utilize and direct magical efforts to mend and repair wounds and other injuries.

Effect: Intelligence-based healing will become twice as effective when used on you.

3) Virgin Chad: You've bolstered your body against weapons and magic, but you've also fortified your mind against forceful invasion, coercion, and the scintillating allure of low-cut blouses and hot pants. Not today, lady! Not. Today.

Effect: You gain a bonus to your Wisdom equal to your Fortitude when resisting mind-affecting spells, abilities, and conditions.

I re-read these a couple of times, making sure that my eyes were sending the correct words to my brain. But, yeah, I was accurately ingesting the... colorful... descriptions.

[The manner in which the System speaks to you is unique,] Grotto said into my mind. *[Have all the messages been like this?]*

[No. I mean, lots have. The combat notifications inside the Delve were normal compared to this. Maybe they were a bit too chipper, but they weren't cracking jokes.]

[Fascinating. I wonder if it has any mechanical effect on the evolutions you are offered. These descriptions are all quite macabre.]

The implications of Body of Theseus were unsettling, which was a feeling I was having too frequently at this point. If I remembered correctly, the name of the evolution was referencing a paradox wherein all the boards and pieces of a ship were replaced during repairs made over a period of time. It then asked the question “is it still the same ship?” An interesting mental exercise in identity, but the evolution made it clear that my cells would slowly be replaced by something...else. Something not human.

Having my cells replaced wasn't a big deal, it happened all the time as the body naturally aged, took damage, etc. But, they would normally be replaced with more human cells. What would the cells be getting replaced by if I chose this skill? Would I remain myself if I ended up entirely non-human as a consequence? What effect would inhumanity have on my *stunning* facial hair?

Then again, if Grotto's theory about me being a clone was right, then I already wasn't 'myself'.

“Fuck Descartes” was a thought I could get behind, and the double-healing that Mind-Body Unity granted sounded powerful. However, I didn't know the difference between 'intelligence-based' healing and other kinds, so that type of healing may be uncommon.

Then there was Virgin Chad. I just couldn't with that name. I ignored the description and focused on the benefit. Having a Fortitude bonus to my Wisdom, or any stat for that matter, would be a massive buff, even if it was limited to certain circumstances like this evolution was. If I took the evolution, I would have an effective Wisdom of twenty-six against mental attacks and persuasion. That was certainly a massive score for my level. Maybe an impossibly high score. I liked the idea of having mental resistances, and I almost picked it on the spot, but I hesitated.

I was already planning on buffing Intelligence and Wisdom as soon as I got them to ten through training, and they were also my first priority *for* training. I wanted to focus on magic, at least for now, since they were my two next highest stats. Assuming that, I would naturally reach a high Wisdom if I kept running Delves.

Though, speaking honestly, I wasn't certain I *wanted* to keep running Delves. It was pretty fucking dangerous and I wasn't a huge fan of the general torment and suffering I went through while stuck inside the last one. I could stop at level one and just go off to live my life in another world. Having that buff to WIS would probably be a big boon, assuming I ran into assholes or monsters that tried to mess with me. Still, I thought about Grotto's advice. This would give me a big boost now, but how useful would it be in the future? If I got my Wisdom to, say, fifty, how often would I run into something that could beat that score anyway? I didn't know for sure, but the idea made me reconsider.

Getting the effect of healing doubled was great. Assuming it was the right type of healing. And assuming that either I, or someone else nearby, had an Intelligence-based healing spell. Maybe it also helped with surgery or normal medical treatment, I didn't know.

What I *did* know is that getting a chunk of your brain ripped out fucked you up, even if you were a magically-enhanced Delver. The memory of Hognay collapsing to the ground and seizing when I hit him in the back of the head with my *Oblivion Orb* ran through my mind. That guy was level two. Plus, he was a melee fighter. I had to assume his Fortitude wasn't bad. Even then, my shitty level one *Oblivion Orb* crushed him.

The brain was an organ, which meant that Body of Theseus should affect it. If I got my Fortitude to one-hundred, then having a sword thrust through my brain

wouldn't do any more damage than if it had gone through my leg. How would it affect my thoughts, though? Would I lose the ability to see, think, or feel while I got a sword lobotomy? Did the deleterious cognitive effects of brain damage count as a status effect? It said my organs were becoming redundant, so that implied some other, separate system was taking over. Right? The idea of getting my shit replaced by "something more" than human cells was creepy, but I also didn't want to lose my extra life to a lucky headshot.

I chose Body of Theseus.

Something went wrong inside of me. My guts squirmed and my heart began palpitating. I became consciously aware of my liver and kidneys for the first time in my life as they began to tremble. I ran back to the tub, and started vomiting blood and chunks into it.

I went blind and my thoughts scrambled and fragmented. I lost all sense of time, and I was convinced that I was dying, that there was something I missed in the description warning me that it was a trap. The System was killing me for not paying enough attention to its shitty humor. For not dissecting every single word on the screen, scrutinizing it for hidden meanings.

Then, it all stopped. My vision returned, my heartbeat went back to normal, and I felt perfectly fine. In fact, I felt better. Great, even. Aside from the awful taste of blood and what may have literally been shit in my mouth. I felt a moment of disgust, then was thankful that none of that mess had found an exit through other holes in my body.

My shirt—my fresh, clean, delightfully soft shirt—was, once more, disgusting. Splattered with my insides. I stripped and rinsed my face and head again, getting the new coating of gore out of my mouth and beard, then dried with a fresh towel. I thought

I had a good idea of what had happened, but I shook some more of the dampness from my hair and moved on without giving it much thought. Too much weird shit had already happened for me to get hung up on that. And did I mention that I was tired?

After that was settled I got yet another notification. I scanned it, planning on dismissing it outright if it was asking me to choose another evolution or skill or what color fucking pony I wanted.

But it wasn't a choice, it was an alert.

Your Tiny-Tot Traveler Amulet has evolved! Inspect the item to see its new ability and any requirements that must be met to trigger the next evolution.

Chapter 22

I'd almost forgotten about the black and silver amulet with its glittering black gem. I reached down and touched it, realizing I'd never taken it off. It was strange. I had no memory of wearing it while in the bath, or even the weight of it around my neck while I was being tossed around by the c'thon inside the Delve. It had mostly left my conscious awareness, but there it was, still hangin'.

I peeked down at it, focused, and the description popped up. Some of it had changed.

Traveler's Amulet

This is an evolving item.

Current Level: Crumb-Cruncher

Effects:

- 1) It's stylish.
- 2) Soul-Sight: You can perceive the strength of the souls around you. This effect is set to the lowest setting by default. You can intensify it by concentrating, but be careful. Some souls are better seen from a distance.

Make Soul-Sight your own to unlock this amulet's next effect.

The item had miraculously transformed from useless to being of dubious utility. Soul-sight *sounded* cool. Maybe it was like a power-scanner, or aura-perception, or ki-sense, or feeling someone's reiatsu, or gyo, or seeing cursed energy, or demon-scent, or being a stand-user, or sensor-jutsu, or a spirit-medium.

Something like that.

That'd be cool.

I took a look at Grotto to see if I noticed anything different.

He hovered in the air, his little octopus feelers undulating and his cool-toned feathers drifting lazily in a non-existent wind. He was surrounded by a thin shimmer of a bright, silvery substance. I stepped closer and reached out a hand, but he drifted away.

[*Why are you doing that?*] he asked.

[*I'm trying to feel your soul.*]

I went to try and touch the substance again, which clung to Grotto like water in a zero-gravity space, but he continued to move away. Although the stuff flowed like liquid, it was only visible along the edges of his form. When I moved around him in a circle, the edges moved with me, staying locked around Grotto's periphery. When I studied it closely, the color had gray undertones, but was vibrant and luminous. There was also another layer underneath, closer to Grotto's body. I squinted and focused, which caused the substance to grow in size until it spread out about a foot in width around the Delve Core. I could now make out the bottom layer, and it was a dark green that shimmered as though it had oil mixed into it.

"Huh," I grunted. I went to the full-length mirror and glanced at myself. I had the same, bright silver halo around my body. The thinnest layer around my form was also green, like Grotto's, but it was lighter and more vivid, sparkling like it was made of gemstone rather than oil. It matched my eyes. "Lookin' good there," I said, shooting finger-guns at myself.

[*My escaped lunatic theory is growing more likely.*]

[*Come on, can't you see through my eyes?*]

[*Not exactly, it's more of a mental impression.*]

[You see this shiny shit around me? It's around you as well.]

[I... *do not*.]

[Hmm, weird.]

I shrugged, giving that up to something about the way the amulet worked. I concentrated so the effect went back to the smaller, 'default' setting, heeding the warning in the description. I went to the closet-thing. Or was it a dresser? An armoire? Maybe the right term was wardrobe? I dunno, I'm bad at identifying furniture. I went to where my boa and jacket were stored and opened the thin, upright clothes-storage furnishing.

I paused before grabbing the garments and concentrated on them, seeing if they had any effects beyond being glamorous. I started with the boa and was happy to see a text box open before me.

Rocket Man's C'thonic Feather Boa of the Cat's Pajamas

The name may be long, but we bet you're longer, rawr.

Armor rating: None. It's a feather boa. It won't even stop an agitated chihuahua.

Effects:

1) There is an increased chance that dames and jobbies will think you're keen and try to make you their daddy. This item somehow makes you sexier than you already are.

2) You're not the man they think you are at home. Tales of your heroic deeds are more likely to spread and take on an exaggerated form. It's technically not lying if you fail to correct your rabid fans when they talk about the triple-backflip you

performed while killing a Greater c'thon. At level zero. By yourself. And *checks notes* with your mother-lovin' bare hands! Badass alert!

DISCLAIMER

Relevant actions must be performed while wearing this item to gain the benefit of this effect. Actual rate at which rumors spread and exaggerations are taken seriously are not guaranteed and vary between subjects. Always consult your local mana weaver to see if this item is right for you.

What the fuck.

I threw the feather boa over my shoulder and checked the vest.

Outlaw's C'thonic Leather Vest of the Dirty Muffin Toy

Hurt them, hurt me, hurt yourself. Hurt anybody you want, baby.

Armor rating: Minimal. This item will stop an agitated chihuahua, but not much else.

Effects:

1) You are more likely to succeed during attempts to intimidate, frighten, or outright scare the daylights out of people. You gain a bonus to this ability if you wear the vest open and without a shirt, showing off your manly chest hair and rock-hard abs.

2) Whips, chains, handcuffs, and lethal weapons. You're a masochist and it's time to admit it to yourself. When taking damage you recover a small amount of stamina based on the damage you received. We won't tell you how much, because

we know you're eager to find that out for yourself. You *also* gain a bonus to *this* ability if you wear the vest open and without a shirt, showing off your manly chest hair and rock-hard abs. Did we say *rawr* already? Fuck it. *Rawr* again, baby.

[*This is unexpected,*] thought Grotto.

[This is what gets you? The System actively encouraging me to keep my shirt off?]

I thought about the puking session that had ruined my new shirt.

Was that intentional?

Had I really *needed* to excise what I suspected was exactly twenty-two percent of my organs through my mouth, or was it some elaborate scheme to sabotage my wardrobe?

[*The level of prurient interest being shown by the System is foul, although that likely has to do more with you than the System itself.*]

[Cool, cool. Do you think this is an intervention of some sort?]

[*I believe the word you are looking for is enabling, not intervention.*]

[Eh, I guess you're right.]

[*Regardless, what is strange is that I just received a System message as well.*]

[Figured you'd get those a lot in your line of work.]

[*Yes, but not this type of message. You were previously granted Dungeoneering for bonding with me, but I am the one who received the prompt to choose an evolution.*]

[What? That doesn't seem right. It's my skill isn't it?]

[*Given that I am the resident expert on Delves, it makes more sense that I be allowed to choose.*]

[I hear your argument, but here's my counter. It's *my* skill.]

[*That is irrelevant.*]

[No, I think it's highly relevant.]

[*It doesn't matter what you believe. I've already made a decision.*]

[Fuck me, I guess. What did you pick?]

[*Increased efficiency when building Delve constructs.*]

[That really seems like it benefits you and not me.]

[*It will be necessary when I begin forming our new Delve.*]

[Now it's "our" new Delve?]

[*Yes, you are necessary since I am bonded to you. It is not complicated. We can apply both of our skill sets to its creation. I am looking forward to performing experiments on you.*]

[That's not going to happen.]

[*Er, I am looking forward to... performing experiments with you?*]

[Better, but now I'm suspicious about your motives for some reason. I mean, I've been suspicious the entire time.]

[*I am looking forward to working with you... on the experiments that we will perform together. Collaboratively. With neither of us as a primary subject of said experiments.*]

[You're not doing a great job recovering from that slip.]

Grotto made a grumbling noise.

[*It matters not. I have made the best choice, so we can move on from the topic.*]

[What were the other options?]

[*Do you really care?*]

I began to sigh, but it turned into a yawn.

[No.]

I threw the leather vest over my bare torso, then wrapped the feather boa around my neck and shoulders. I was simultaneously ready to hit the town and have someone hit me. A fresh pair of boots sat near the doorway and I pulled them on over a pair of knee-high stockings.

I stepped back out into the hall to find Lito sitting in lotus-position against the wall. His form was surrounded by an intense golden shimmer, much larger than the one around either Grotto or myself. Looking at it evoked a deep sense of power, and gave me a tingle of dread. The layer closest to his body was orange, and fluttered like a flame. He opened his eyes and looked me over.

“Didn’t like the shirt?” he asked.

“Alas, it fell victim to an unfortunate stat evolution.”

Lito grunted, then stood.

“One of mine incinerated everything I was wearing,” he said. “Gotta be careful where you upgrade.”

I thought about that, and wondered if it related to the base color of his soul.

“Thanks for the heads up,” I said.

“Sure.” Lito stood, dusting off the seat of his pants. “Follow me.” He turned and began walking casually down the hall.

I followed close, studying the flowing golden substance that surrounded him. He was much more powerful than I was. The pure emotional impression I got from staring at the soul-juice was enough to tell me that. I also studied the soul-stuff surrounding the people we passed. Lito was stronger than all of them.

I checked his level, and saw that he was level ten. Was that a high level, or was this the noob-zone? Many of those we passed were level zero, which I found strange since they looked to be fresh out of the Creation Delve. Did the Creation Delve not guarantee a level-up?

Aside from the swarm of newly minted Delves, there were several walking the halls with a few levels. I saw one man pass who was also level ten. Even his soul didn't feel as potent as Lito's. That man's soul was a dull silver with a bit of copper, though, so I thought the colors must represent the quality.

About a third of the people in the halls were Delves, with a variety of colors shrouding their forms in differing levels of intensity. The servants, attendants, initiates, and children who crowded around the Delves all possessed what looked like the base level of soul-juice, but lacked the stronger, more distinct glow present around the Delves themselves. As we walked I noted most of Delves had thin, copper and silver spirits, with a small handful possessing gold. None had a spirit the color of Grotto or I, and I realized that the color of the soul matched the type of Delves they'd completed.

Grotto and I had the bright, white-gray sheen of platinum. Some, like Lito, had the vibrant yellow of gold, with far more possessing the duller metallic-gray of silver and just about as many with the reddish-brown of copper. The base layer, however, varied widely in both hue and style, displaying every color of the rainbow and mimicking the qualities of many different types of materials.

Some appeared like water, similar to the delve auras themselves. Lito's moved like fire, while others squirmed like little worms or algae on the seafloor. A few looked like clumps of dirt hovering near the body, and I swear I saw one woman whose form

was hugged by a slithering snake eating its own tail. I couldn't help but gawk as we made our way through the facility.

“What is that thing, really?” Lito asked, snapping me out of my awe-induced ogling. I followed his gaze to Grotto.

I opened my mouth, about to insist that he was a c'thon, but my newfound understanding of the man's power stopped me. He might have some lie detection, or ability to see through Grotto's disguise.

[Is there a reason,] I thought to Grotto, [that you're keeping what you are a secret?]

[The same reason as you, I suspect. Self-preservation. I am not fond of the idea of these cretins interrogating me over questions that I am forbidden to answer, or dissecting me to try and uncover some of the hidden mechanisms that govern the Delves.]

“Any particular reason why you're interested in my familiar?” I said to Lito. It was a shitty deflection, but it was the best I could come up with.

Lito's empty grin returned, and he stopped walking. He took the mostly-smoked cigarette from his mouth and tossed it to the ground, then snuffed it with his foot. He pulled a silver case from his pocket and popped it open, revealing a half dozen more hand-rolled smokes within, and plucked one out. He put it in his mouth, tapped it with the tip of one finger, and it ignited. He took a long drag, then blew the smoke out to the side, away from us.

“Normally, I wouldn't give a shit,” he said. “What you bond with is your business *until* it becomes my business.”

He took another puff. Whatever he smoked, it wasn't tobacco. The scent was rich and deep, with a floral aroma. It was more pleasant than an Earth cigarette, but I still wasn't a fan.

"I know it's not a c'thon," he continued. "At least, *you* don't think it is, which is why you lied about it to Dalton. Right now, you don't owe me an explanation. But if we get upstairs and it turns out you *weren't* supposed to be inside the Creation Delve... Let's say I appreciate honesty upfront, and take a dim view of people who waste my time."

He stared at me, still smiling, as he tucked the silver box away.

It was a classic tactic. He was trying to get me to admit that I was guilty of something when he didn't have any evidence that I was.

"I'd hate to waste your time," I said. "Maybe we should just go ahead and get all this over with. Whatever *this* is." I gestured down the hall in the direction we'd been walking. He shrugged and turned back to his measured gait, as though he didn't have a care in the world.

"Suits me," he said.

Chapter 23

Lito led me up a flight of stairs and down a hallway to a suite of offices, complete with harried individuals scrawling on paper behind compact desks. One of the offices had a large, dark wooden door with a crest carved into it, featuring a naval vessel and an unfamiliar winged animal with horns. Lito knocked on it gently, and a woman's voice came from within, telling us to enter.

This office was larger than the ones we'd passed, and was dominated by a wide desk set in front of a wall-sized tapestry featuring a more intricate rendition of the crest set into the door. A dark-haired woman with rich brown skin sat behind the desk, and looked up at us as we entered.

I halted mid-step, literally freezing in my tracks as her hazel eyes caught my own. I couldn't help but imagine cherry blossom petals raining down around us. A swell of orchestral music filled my ears as she gave me a sly grin. My heart melted so much that I knew in my bones that a man with a lower Fortitude score would be sent into cardiac arrest.

She was beautiful. *Too* beautiful. My mind struggled and thrashed in the throes of the hackneyed romance trope. My lungs burned as I struggled to release a breath I only now realized I was holding. The dopamine receptors in my brain rebelled at the flood of chemical love that ravaged and ran through them, and yet, I was still awestruck.

She glanced at Lito, then looked me up and down. She was surrounded in a golden glow like the man escorting me, her level the same and with every inch as much power in her soul. The power was inviting, beckoning, whereas Lito's was quietly menacing, like a whispered threat.

She smiled warmly and gestured for us to come closer, then at a pair of overstuffed arm chairs in front of the desk. My senses returned to me and the paralysis in my chest abated. I took a deep breath. My cheeks were flushed, but the warmth left them in as few moments as it took me to sit down. The flash-flood of obsession drained from my mind, and I blinked a few times, then took another look at her. She *was* beautiful, there was no doubt. But that didn't explain the fucking soap opera moment I'd just experienced.

"Hey Lito," she said as we sat. "What's up?"

"This is Esquire Arlo," said Lito, nodding at me. "He's not in Dalton's records, so we came to get it worked out."

"Oh," the woman said, frowning. She turned to me, "Sorry about that. We take our record-keeping seriously, so I can assure you this is unusual. It's an easy fix, though. Shouldn't take a minute."

She stood and picked up a dark, stone tablet from her desk and brought it around to me. She knelt down by my chair and leaned in close enough that I could feel her body heat. She smelled something like jasmine and vanilla.

A violin concerto played with the sounds of passion and longing. The world was a blurred vignette, with this woman at its center. Inspiration struck, and I knew in my heart of hearts that I must speak my truth to her! That I must find out if she feels the same way! Yes! I will confess my—

[You're experiencing a disturbing increase in your oxytocin and norepinephrine levels,] came Grotto's voice in my mind. *[I am going to adjust your tolerances.]*

My emotions crashed harder than the world economy after the 2008 housing crisis.

“Just put your hand on the tablet, and we’ll get your documentation taken care of. I’m Myria, by the way.”

I put my hand on the stone, which was chill to the touch. Its inky surface was an abyss that echoed my own heart, so broken was I.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, struggling to keep my voice level. “No worries.”

I started to say more, but her presence was *still* overwhelming and I didn’t want to risk it. Either this was the teenage hormones in my new body taking over or there was some magical effect happening. That’s what I told myself, anyway.

A few seconds went by without anything happening, and I noticed Lito shift a little in his seat. Myria knelt patiently, her hand still on the tablet, just an inch over my thigh. Then, text started to appear on the stone, as though it were carved into it.

“There we go!” Myria said, then stood to study the information. She walked back around to her desk, and I felt like the room cooled by ten degrees. “Esquire Arlo,” she read aloud “Level one *platinum*.” She looked up at me. “Very impressive. Aiming for a big career?”

“It wasn’t my choice,” I said, and briefly regretted not taking advantage of the factoid. I wasn’t above a little deception here and there, but I was staunchly opposed when it was for something so trivial as merit or impressing strangers. Better to let your own achievements speak for themselves.

The impulse toward braggadocio was another atypical feeling that I cast into a mental bucket with half of the emotions I’d felt since walking into the room, labeled: ‘Magically compelled? Or just down bad?’

“I see,” Myria said. “Overeager party leader?”

Someone was overeager...

“Yeah.”

“Still impressive. Maybe even more so. You *are* alive, after all. Let’s see, records show that you entered the Delve with the creation group, but... hmm. You were a last minute replacement for one of the losons from the Eschendur group.”

Lito grunted.

“The Littan blockade is showing its teeth,” he said. “If they’re already stopping aspiring Delvers from crossing to Hiward, I expect all trade will dry up next. Soon you won’t even be able to buy those mushroom patties you like so much, Myria.”

“If that happens I’ll tear the Imperials apart myself. No one keeps my mushrooms from me.” She flashed me another smile. “Anyway, everything looks to be in order. You must have fallen through the cracks since you were a last-minute add. It says here you’re from the nation of...” She paused and bit her lip. She read something on the tablet again, then snapped her eyes up to the smoking man beside me. “Lito,” she said, her tone losing its friendly warmth.

“Yes, Myria?” Lito asked, sitting forward in his chair.

“His nationality is redacted.”

The pair exchanged an indecipherable series of looks, having some unspoken conversation with their eyes.

Lito scratched his head and looked at me with the first genuine expression he’d given me. Confusion.

“Something, uh, something wrong?”

I was getting concerned. How had I ended up in their records anyway? Was this part of the divine reincarnation package I’d been given? Was the being who resurrected me doctoring the records as well? If so, why did they redact my country of origin? It also

had me listed as officially being an esquire, even though I'd fudged that detail *after* being resurrected. Or cloned. Or whatever had happened.

[*This seems to rule out our delusional psychopath theory,*] thought Grotto.

[Your theory. Not mine. I knew I wasn't delusional.] Assuming that one of my delusions wasn't that I was perfectly sane and not delusional in the first place.

"No," said Lito. "Nothing wrong. Sorry to waste *your* time." He kept staring at me like he was expecting me to tell him something more, but I had no idea what he wanted.

"I guess we're all squared away," said Myria. "I'll get a copy of this to Dalton, and make sure that Central is up-to-date."

Lito gave another grunt, then stood.

"Esquire Arlo," he said, "apologies for the rough treatment. Gotta' be careful, especially after hearing your story about Hognay."

"Hognay?" Myria said.

"Arlo came out with a severed head," said Lito. "But seeing as how it wasn't a loson head, then everyone's accounted for. And Hognay didn't look like he had scales, fur, or feathers to me, unless you count that greasy mop on his scalp as 'fur.'"

"An intruder?" said Myria. "That's... troubling."

"Killed two from his party on the inside."

"That's terrible. Were the victims Hiwardian?"

Lito raised an eyebrow at me.

"One was," I said. "Chilla Stormreiss. The other was a Littan. Sir Sayil Starion."

"I'm not familiar with either," said Myria. "The Littans will insist on an inquiry since one of their own perished."

“Maybe,” said Lito, turning back to me. “Someone will find you if that’s the case. Where are you staying?”

“I don’t have a place yet.”

“I’ll put ‘unlisted’ on my report,” he gave me a wink, which I didn’t know how to interpret. “Did *you* kill the guy?”

“Hognay? Yeah.”

“Solo, or with your party?”

“They distracted the big c’thon. I took Hognay on by myself.”

Lito checked out Grotto when I said this, but didn’t rehash the issue of what he was.

“Killed a level two at level zero,” he said. “Even if Hognay was shit, that’s still a feat.”

“I’ll say,” said Myria. She looked me over again, eyes lingering on my boa. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Esquire Arlo. I’ll be here if you have any questions. Don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Of course,” I said, already planning my next visit. Wait, no! Fuck, I should have taken the Virgin Chad evolution.

She gave me a shallow bow, which I returned, then Lito led me back out.

“You can find your way back?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I got other shit to do, so have fun.”

He sauntered away without waiting for a reply, and I felt a wave of relief wash over me.

I walked back to check on Xim and, to a lesser extent, Varrin, with some hard decisions weighing on my mind.

By this point I was beginning to realize that I was out of my league. If Myria had gotten curious about my nationality or wanted more information about how I wound up in Hiward, she could have started asking questions that I had no choice but to answer. I was certain she'd been using magic, and I had no doubts that there were plenty of people out there who could compel me to speak through spells, techniques, or good old fashioned torture.

I'd also played my cards close during the Creation Delve and people had died. Those were deaths I might have been able to prevent, had I been more upfront about the skills available to me. Every fight where I'd played from the back was a fight where I'd unilaterally decided to shelve one of the party's advantages—my durability. If we'd been less distracted by the fights, Hognay may not have had such an easy time luring Chilla and Sayil away to their deaths.

I'd already given Xim and Varrin a bit of the truth and neither of them had used it against me. Not that they'd had much time to betray me yet, but, dammit I didn't want to start out this new life slipping into the same habits of my old one. I needed allies, guidance, and a cogent power structure to attach myself to in order to dissuade nosy interlopers. Xim was a citizen of the Third Layer, and that sounded like it held some prestige. Varrin's attitude and whole lineage speech at the start of the Delve was enough to figure out that his family was rich and powerful.

I approached the room where we'd exited, thoughts darkening my mood with anxiety, and I was surprised to see the two of them standing out in the hall talking, surrounded by their individual entourages.

"Arlo!" Xim said when she saw me, then trotted in my direction.

She'd also taken a spin through the baths and changed her clothes, and she looked like an entirely different person. Her hair was intricately braided, and she had on a light layer of makeup. She wore an outfit that was more flattering to her form, though I could tell the ivory-colored top and charcoal pants were designed to give her free range of movement without getting in the way. Coupled with the high-top leather boots, she still looked like she could kick some ass.

"Hierti told us you went to get cleaned up," Xim said, "but that was so long ago I started to think you'd left."

I raised my arms out to my sides in an exaggerated shrug.

"Where would I go?" I said. "There was an issue with my paperwork, and a gentleman named Lito was kind enough to help me get it taken care of."

"Ah," she said, then leaned in to speak more softly. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't be on the lists."

"I was, actually."

"Oh, ok. That's not what I expected. Did you get any more info on what happened to you?"

"Not really." I looked around at the crowds mingling close to us in the hall. "At this point I think I need to start getting some, I guess, some advice. I'm not the most trusting guy so I've held some things back about my situation. At some point I'm going to have to come clean with some people and you and Varrin are the only two people that

aren't strangers to me at this point. I dunno. I also don't want to info dump on you. I mean, I appreciate that what we went through can sort of bond people, but maybe it didn't."

I scratched at my head. *Real smooth, Arlo.*

"No pressure if you just wanted to check in and then head off with your family," I rushed to say. "But if you don't mind talking a bit, that'd be good too. Wow, this is fucking awkward sounding. Basically, I have secrets. No one knows them. But I need to tell someone about them."

Kim nodded along as I rambled, her expression never changing.

"Sure!" she said, then turned to Varrin. Before she said anything she turned back to me. "You want Varrin along too?"

"What do you think is the right move?"

"He's pretty influential and owes you his life. He's also a complete fuck up who nearly got us killed. So, half chance he's invaluable for whatever it is you need and half chance he'll ruin your life."

"Yeah, great. Fuck it. I'll take the gamble."

"Varrin!" she yelled, which caught the attention of several of the people from the surrounding groups. The big guy whispered something to his entourage, then made his way over.

"Arlo," he said, pressing his palms together and giving me a bow, "I am in your debt for everything you did for us inside. I was foolish and my actions endangered our entire group. I humbly apologize for my rashness and ask your forg-

"We got time for that later," said Xim. "Arlo has secrets!"

Varrin peered up, still bowing.

“Secrets?” he said.

“Yeah, secrets. We’re gonna find out what they are.”

“I see,” said Varrin, standing back upright. “Is that what we’re doing?”

“I guess so,” I said.

“Does this place have somewhere we can go for some privacy?” Xim asked.

“It does...” Varrin hesitated. “There are a number of party prepping rooms on the far side of-”

“Ok, let’s go!”

“I, um,” Varrin stuttered.

“We’re going to have a chat!” Xim yelled at the rest of their group, sending more heads turning. The woman who looked like Xim’s sister gave us a little smile, while the man with skin like the night sky raised a hand in farewell. Varrin’s group looked distinctly more flustered, but he gave them some sort of signal, and they reluctantly acquiesced.

“Also, hello, Grotto,” Xim added. “How are you? Killed anyone else yet?”

[I have not, but I have many contingency plans in place should the need arise.]

“That’s good. Lead on, Varrin.”

The prep rooms were a five minute walk away and I caught the pair up on my dealings with Lito and Myria, sans all the thirsty bits. Xim also let me know that her parents were planning on giving me some sort of reward, but they hadn’t decided what.

“Those two were your parents?” I said. “I thought the woman was your sister. She looks young, but maybe that’s normal here? I think I’ve seen one person over thirty since I left the Delve.”

“Hmm, well people of the Third Layer age slower than Hiwardians or other First Layer races. I’m twenty-seven, not eighteen like Varrin here. Also, both my parents are Delvers, which slows your aging. High Fortitude slows it even further.”

“My parents were with me as well,” said Varrin. “The couple that was next to me. My father is forty-two.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “That’s good to know.”

Turns out the System’s joke about Fortitude causing you to outlive your friends and family was true, so long as none of them were Delvers as well.

“Some of the surviving original Delvers are well over a hundred,” Varrin added. “The ones that tackled the higher-tier delves still look like they’re less than sixty. Younger, in some cases.”

“Original Delvers?” I said. “Like, the first?” Varrin nodded, eschewing any odd looks over my ignorance. He’d come to accept it by now. His statement implied that the whole Delver thing was only a hundred or so years old. Maybe less. “Why would only the high-tier Delvers age like celebrities?”

“Takes a lot of Fortitude,” said Xim, “to not die in a thirtieth level platinum Delve.”

“This is us,” said Varrin, opening a door for us to enter. The room was fairly plain, with a single large table and a few chairs and loveseats. Once inside, Xim and Varrin both looked at me expectantly. I dropped into one of the loveseats and took a deep breath.

I told them.

I told them everything. From my death to my character creation, all the way up until I met them at the Delve entrance. I touched briefly on the type of world I came

from, but didn't go into too much detail. Trying to describe an alien world to someone was more difficult than I'd imagined, and I decided to just let them ask questions if they had any.

"Not that I don't believe you," said Varrin in a tone that said he didn't believe me, "but are you willing to show us your character screen?"

"My character screen?"

"It's considered a rude question outside of things like trying to join a party or signing up for an official position using your Delver credentials. In this case, I think it's warranted."

"Honestly, I was hesitant to even tell you what my *stats* were earlier. But we're in this deep, so sure."

You've received a request from Varrin Ravvenblaq to view your character screen.

Would you like to allow this action? Y/N

I mentally selected yes.

Chapter 24

“Can I see as well?” Xim asked. I granted her access and sat for several minutes while they combed through the text, my knee bouncing with anxiety.

“Huh,” Varrin finally grunted. He had his arms crossed as he stared into space, reading my screen.

“You’re actually thirty-five?” said Xim.

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know if the years here are longer, shorter, or the same.”

“Why is that your first question?” said Varrin.

“I thought *I* was the oldest.”

“Let me go down the list of how ridiculous all of this is,” said Varrin. “I’ll ignore the fact that your health and regen are massive. That’s relatively normal considering the rest of this. First, you’re an extra-dimensional entity. What is that?”

“No idea,” I said. “Aside from the fact that I am an entity, and that I am from another dimension. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Alright. Plus ten to the Dimensional Magic intrinsic skill right out of the gate is incredible, not to mention that you progress at double the normal rate and have a fifty percent resistance to it. Both extraordinary bonuses.”

“The human trait looks pretty bad in comparison,” said Xim.

“Don’t underestimate crafting,” said Varrin. “Your birth sign is just...” He held out a hand like he was waiting for someone to hand him something. “It’s overpowered. I don’t know what else to call it.”

“Stats through training!” said Xim. “Sure, languages are cool, but stats through training!”

“That’s not something you can normally do?” I asked.

“No,” said Varrin. “You start at one in everything and get ten to distribute at level zero. Then you get a certain amount every Delve, which is dependent on the difficulty. What you have here is an ability that defies the normal logic of the Delves. *We* get stats from Delves. We don’t get them through training.”

“So, what? People here don’t work out? They just all have the same stats until they become Delvers?”

“No,” said Varrin. “Non-Delvers still benefit from exercise, be it physical or mental. When you become a Delver your body and mind become more idealized. Remember when we said that a Delver’s body is remade when they become a Delver?”

“Yeah.”

“A value of one in any given stat represents a high competency in that attribute based on your personal potential. So, for example, a one in strength is what you would have if you spent several years focusing on strength training, while trying not to sacrifice Agility or Speed. A one in Intelligence is your mind on your best day after years of rigorous mental exercise. Becoming level zero makes you into the best version of yourself.”

“So my personal one in Strength,” said Xim, “isn’t as good as Varrin’s one in Strength.” She was over a foot shorter than he was, so that made sense.

“Do only big dudes go for Strength builds?” I asked. “Hognay was pretty short, but crazy buff. Was his build sub-optimal?”

“It scales off as you level,” said Varrin. “If Xim and I both had a Strength of twenty, our raw capacity for generating force would be the same. There’s nothing stopping you from going that way as long as you don’t mind a disadvantage during early

levels. But while we are stuck at a value of one without delving, *you* can continue to train and gain benefits.”

“A nine is the best any exceptional human can attain,” said Xim. “So a nine in Strength is about as strong as the strongest non-Delver who ever lived.”

“And a nine in Speed, the fastest,” said Varrin. “A nine isn’t *your* highest potential, it’s *the* highest potential possible for a mortal of your race.”

“And a ten is where people start being considered superhuman,” said Xim. “What this is saying is that you have the capability of training yourself to superhuman levels in every stat, without relying on the Delves.”

“He’s still relying on the Delves,” said Varrin. “He got this ability *from* the Delve.”

“No, he got these traits from whatever this divine being is, the one mentioned on the sheet.”

“Hmm. Fair enough. Regardless, being able to obtain this many free stats is a huge boon to your early delving career. Take that in conjunction with the fact that you already started with free stat points from ‘prior achievements’. It’s an advantage most would kill for.”

“Most?” I said.

“If not all.”

“Would you?”

He raised an eyebrow, but didn’t answer.

“What about Intelligence?” I said, ignoring Varrin’s suspicious silence.

“What do you mean?” said Xim.

“If a ten is superhuman, does that mean I’d become smart enough to divine new fundamental truths concerning reality?”

“Intelligence is weird,” said Xim. “Plenty of high-INT Delvers come up with new ideas, but from what I’ve seen it has more to do with memory, inferences, intuition, and processing speed. What you’re talking about might also involve Wisdom, or maybe just someone’s personality.”

“When I read the stat descriptions, the System implied that Speed dealt with how fast you think.”

“Sure, but Intelligence has to do with how fast you *comprehend*. They stack to some degree. A lot of the distinctions between stats bleed into one another.”

“If all of that weren’t enough,” said Varrin, “you have this ridiculous Dumping achievement. It gives you *even more* free stats. Dumping. I don’t understand the names of half of these things. Some look like jokes but Body of Theseus makes no sense at all. Who or what is Theseus? Why do you have their body?”

“He was a guy with a confusing boat,” I said.

“The boat was confusing?”

“Yeah. No one knew if it was the same boat now as it used to be. It doesn’t matter.”

“Gods,” said Xim. “I would almost say we should take you straight to Central to get this stuff documented. Even if it can’t be replicated, it would be great to let others know that some of these abilities and achievements are even possible.”

“Yes,” said Varrin, “but then they would ask to see his character screen.”

“Yeah, and then they’d see it explicitly state that he’s from another dimension.” She sounded quite downtrodden over that fact.

“And that he had a previous life,” said Varrin.

“And that a divine being is watching him.”

“And that I chose how I look,” I said. “Which would invite all sorts of criticisms that my fragile ego couldn’t handle.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” said Xim.

“You *are* a handsome man,” Varrin added, eyeing my boa.

“I will graciously accept your compliment, Varrin. Because it’s true,” I clutched the boa more tightly around my shoulders. “Obviously.”

Varrin shook his head and went back to studying the screen.

“Some of this looks normal, though,” he said. “This Exposure Therapy achievement. I got one similar, though the name isn’t the same.”

“Me too,” said Xim. “Mine gave me the option of getting *Cleanse* as an active ability and made it cost half mana when cleansing poison.”

“That’s pretty good.”

“Yeah. I was looking for *Cleanse* anyway, so it worked out.”

“If I’m doing my math right,” said Varrin, “then if you trained everything to ten without doing another Delve, you’d already have an effective level of nine.”

“Level nine stats at level one!” said Xim. She looked at me, excited, but quickly realized I had no idea what she was talking about. “Sorry. For reference, a level one Delver has a minimum of eight stat points beyond what they received during character creation. A level nine would have at least seventy-two, which is what you would have.”

“Maybe break that down for me again, a bit slower?” I said.

“You have eight stat points to start, one in each of your primary stats. Then you get ten to distribute at character creation, so that gives you eighteen at level zero. From then on, levels are divided into eight-point increments, so that every eight points you

gain causes you to go up another level. Basically, everyone is level zero until they get up to eight extra points, then they're level one. At sixteen, you're level two, and so on."

Kim's eyes went wide and she grabbed a fistful of my leather vest, holding her other hand out toward Varrin.

"But, Arlo's level *one*," she said to him, voice emphatic. "Based on these numbers, he should already be level *three*."

Varrin scratched his jaw, and his eyes flitted up to where my level hung above my head.

"Many people use stats and Delves interchangeably," he said, "when talking about levels. Stats are an easy way to frame it in your mind, but you could also say that to gain one level you need to do eight stats *worth* of Delves. So, one platinum, two golds, four silvers, or eight coppers."

"The System doesn't care what his stats are when assigning his level?" said Kim. "Only what *Delves* he's run?" Her hand dropped from my vest and she pressed the back of it to her forehead. "This is... unexpected information to have all of a sudden."

Varrin sighed, his expression tightening as he compartmentalized what, according to Kim's reaction, was world-shaking news.

"Most people run into a soft level cap," Varrin continued, abruptly leaving the issue of my aberrant level behind us. "It's based on the difficulty of the Delves they pursue, but that's something we can go over later. It gets complicated."

"It's not *that* complicated," said Kim, still recovering from the burden of her new knowledge.

“You’re saying that because you’ve spent your whole life knowing about it. Imagine trying to explain to a five-year-old the nuance of the escalating difficulty problem.”

“He’s not five.”

“You’re right. His character screen says that he’s zero. Insofar as this world and this culture, that’s the truth.”

“I still don’t think it’s that complicated.”

“How about this,” said Varrin. “Imagine that a Hiwardian peasant woke up in the Third Layer and you wanted to tell them everything about Adaramalech and the nine hierarchies of Ghotrithodon?”

“That’s an esoteric subject. First, I’d have to figure out how to keep them from dying.”

“Yes. Right now, Arlo is in the same boat. The soft cap doesn’t matter. What matters is trying to get this figured out so that Arlo doesn’t get killed, kidnapped, or imprisoned.”

“Are those all likely possibilities?” I said.

I began to feel a warmth in my chest over Varrin’s concern. The two of them weren’t freaking out, not about *me*, that is. They weren’t accusing me of being a lunatic or trying to trick them. They weren’t trying to abduct me or sell me to some shady laboratory. They were explaining shit to me. And it seemed like they genuinely wanted to help. It took a huge weight off that I didn’t realize I’d been holding, and I was truly grateful for it.

“Delves are not a monolithic organization,” said Varrin. “In Hiward, access to the Delves is restricted to the noble classes, but we are bound by treaty to offer a certain

number of slots to neighboring nations, whose access is governed by their own rules. Even within Hiward, where Delves are some of the most visible members of society, many underground organizations still form to achieve their ends through illegal means.”

“He’s saying yes,” said Xim. “People will be very interested in your abilities and even more interested in reincarnation and dimensional travel. While there may not be any *official* organizations that will lock you in a dungeon and extract your bone marrow, there are some unofficial ones that will.”

“Like the Cabal of Shadows,” said Varrin.

“Or the Obsidian Court,” said Xim.

“Or the Cult of Singularity.”

“Maybe even the Three Scales.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the Beacon Watch, either.”

“Jesus,” I said. “That’s so many. *Why* are there so many? Why do you *know* about so many?”

“I’m a noble lord,” said Varrin. “My mother and father keep me apprised of the goings-on in the realms.”

“And I just think they’re neat,” said Xim.

I shuddered.

“There’s enough evidence here to convince most that what you’re saying is at least partially true,” said Varrin. “That information can prove dangerous, so you should be careful who you tell.”

“No trouble there,” I said. “I almost didn’t tell you two.”

“I understand your hesitation, but I also believe that would have made things very difficult for you.”

“So, what now?”

“You’re already in the Delver system. That is proof that you are who you say you are.”

“Like a state-issued ID?”

“It’s better than that,” said Xim. “Your Delver credentials are embedded in the System itself. The slate Myria had you touch just shows her the info that’s in there. The System-provided information is absolute proof and can’t be faked.”

“There’s some info that gets added by the government, like entry permissions and Delve fee records,” said Varrin. “It’s easy to tell the difference, though. The System-generated info will always be prioritized.”

“So what does that do for me?”

“It satisfies almost everything that would require proof of identity,” said Varrin. “For Delvers it is the best form of identification. You can use it to buy property, open bank accounts, settle any circumstance where your identity might be questioned.”

“I don’t need to forge a passport and social security number,” I said. “Got it.”

“What did you tell Lito and Myria about your nationality?” asked Varrin. “That’s something Hiward appends to the System records.”

“Nothing. Myria said that my nationality was redacted, and that sent the pair of them into some sort of fit. They didn’t ask any followups.”

“Curious,” said Varrin. “Hiward might agree to redact certain information they’ve appended to the System records for reasons of national security. That would have implied that you were a hornet’s nest that Lito and Myria were about to stick their hands inside.”

“Guess that’s why they cut me loose so fast.”

“But no one in the Hiwardian government redacted that information,” Varrin said.

“Right. I assume it was my mysterious divine patron.”

“Someone with higher authority may eventually notice that your nationality shouldn’t be blank. That might lead them to look more deeply at your file, and hunt down the people who handled your entry paperwork. There are no such people, which would raise concerns. It’s possible that you get lost in the bureaucracy, but...”

“But if someone starts digging,” I said, “they’d realize no one actually approved my presence in the Creation Delve.”

“The approval is in the System, though,” said Varrin. “That alone should trump any independent investigation.”

“Is knowing all this part of your lordly training?”

“Yes. It also helps that my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents are well-known Delvers. My family wrote many of the laws that surround the governance of Delvers and incorporation of the System into the existing power structures.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“The best move would be to have you immigrate. That way you can claim Hiwardian citizenship and avoid questions about your nationality. That settles most of your problems.”

“Then you’ll just be that weird guy who refers to things that no one understands,” said Xim.

“Like twinkies and hotdogs and AR-15’s?”

“Exactly like that,” said Xim.

“Maybe try not to,” said Varrin. “As tempting as I’m sure you’ll find it.”

“That sounds like a plan to me.” I stood and stretched, then clapped my hands together.

“So, how do I immigrate?”

Chapter 25

“Normally, immigration is an extensive and intrusive process,” said Varrin.

“Hiward is a comparatively small nation, and given the presence of the Creation Delve and the general quality of life that its citizens enjoy, there is a high demand for immigration. Hiward keeps it tightly controlled and monitored.”

“*Normally*,” I said. “I presume I’m about to hear a ‘but’.”

“But,” said Varrin, “Delvers are desirable citizens to have, which makes it easier. Even so, there is always the risk of an immigrating Delver acting as a spy or something of the like for a foreign power. So, *normally*, even immigrating Delvers are subject to a level of scrutiny.”

“Normally,” I repeated.

“*But*,” said Varrin, again, “my family owns a thundry, and has autonomy over who we allow to immigrate into our own territories.”

“What is a thundry?”

“Big plot of land,” said Xim.

“How big?”

“It’s roughly one fifth of Hiward,” said Varrin.

“Damn,” I tried to think of an Earth equivalent to what he was telling me. “Is that like a duchy?”

“The Littan equivalent would be a duchy, yes.”

“Wow.” I wondered why the Littan term translated to something I understood, but the Hiwardian one didn’t. “So you’re saying you can get me in without much trouble?”

“Either my mother or father can,” he said. “I just have to figure out how to convince them to do so. I could tell them the truth and trust in their understanding and discretion. You are already in their good graces for what you did inside the Delve, insomuch as you can be without them having met you.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I asked. He pondered that question for a long moment.

“I trust my parents,” he said. “I believe they are good people. Harsh, at times, but that is demanded of them by their station. By getting them involved at this level, they would be courting a degree of... I don’t want to say treason. It would be an abuse of power.”

“Even though you have the discretion?” I said.

“They would be using their discretion to immigrate an individual from an unknown nation for the express purpose of avoiding the exposure of your alienage and subversion of Creation Delve entry procedures.”

“When you put it like that, I guess it sounds a bit improper.”

“I could make you a Third Layer citizen,” said Xim. “That’d be no problem.”

“That would invite different questions,” said Varrin. He rubbed at his chin. “It’s not as though he looks like he’s from the Third Layer. Still, those questions would be easier ones to field. He’d need permission to reside in Hiward.”

“You Hiwardians have a strange desire to make everything inappropriately complicated,” said Xim.

“Would that be a big deal?” I said. “It’s not like I have a huge attachment to Hiward. I haven’t even been outside yet. Maybe the weather sucks.”

“If you don’t like Hiwardian weather,” said Varrin, “you will *not* like the weather in the Third Layer.”

“He’d survive,” said Xim. “He’s got the Fortitude for it.”

“Wait, what kind of place is the Third Layer?”

“Does your culture have a concept of hell?” said Xim.

“Yeah. Different types, but yeah.”

“People here say it’s like that. It’s an exaggeration though.”

“It was literally regarded as a hell layer,” said Varrin, “up until a century ago.”

“It feels like a lot of things happened a century ago,” I said.

“It’s roughly when the Delves were discovered,” said Varrin. “But let’s avoid the history lesson for the moment.”

“Does it *hurt* to live in the Third Layer? I was raised Southern Baptist and they think hell is a lake of fire where you burn for all eternity.”

“There’s a lake of fire,” said Xim. “But it’s not like anybody swims in it. That’s where the Hunger lives. Besides, *everywhere* hurts to live in if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” said Varrin.

“Please,” said Xim. “You trip on a rock and break your arm, you don’t go around screaming “This world is hell! I’ve fallen into damnation! Waaah waaah!” No. You learn not to trip over rocks and you go on with your life.”

“Rocks aren’t able to animate your nightmares and feed off the fear they cause.”

“Just stay away from nightrippers. Same thing. I mean, by the gods, this world has *ducks*.” Xim shivered.

Varrin rolled his eyes.

I needed to find a duck.

“Arlo, it looks like you have a couple of options then,” said Varrin. “Trust my parents with your secret and risk cooperating in an illegal scheme to make you a citizen of Hiward. Or, become a Third Layer citizen, which would likely require you to reside in a hell layer for some length of time.”

“Xim, are there any legal issues with my background in the Third Layer?”

She laughed.

“Legal issues? No. There would be no *legal* issues.”

“Uh... are there any laws in the Third Layer?”

“We have ritual, rather than law. Things aren’t nearly as convoluted as they are here.”

I didn’t know what that meant, and I was having misgivings about living somewhere *any* culture considered hell. Then again, maybe it was boss. Like an endless BABYMETAL concert.

“I think I should visit the Third Layer before I make a decision.”

“Sure!” said Xim. “But, you’ll have to wait a month.”

“Why a month?”

“Moving between Layers requires the favor of Sam’lia, which shouldn’t be spent lightly,” she said. “My family likes to take their time here when we do. I also have to spend a month in prayer and give offerings for using my transformation. I’ll be stuck in the temple while my family vacations.”

“This doesn’t seem like the sort of thing I should put off for that long,” I said.

“You currently have no political backing,” said Varrin. “No government invested in your well-being in the event that you’re abducted or extorted, or for foreign governments to fear when targeting you. I wouldn’t wait long in your shoes.”

“So then, trust Varrin’s family to protect me while we commit a criminal conspiracy to hide my alien superhero origin story, or become a citizen of hell?”

“It’s not a hell layer,” said Xim.

“That about sums it up,” said Varrin.

“I appreciate your offer, Varrin. I don’t want to put your family at risk and I especially don’t want to end up being taken prisoner if the sham is ever exposed. I think my chances of falling into the hands of a nefarious organization bent on extracting portions of my brain for experimentation would be more than marginally higher if I were a convict or outlaw.”

“I see,” said Varrin. He looked both relieved and disappointed.

“Awesome!” said Xim. “You can join my tribe then.”

I took a deep breath.

“You’re sure that’s fine?”

“He’s from another dimension,” Xim said as she shoveled a forkful of the local equivalent of beef into her mouth.

I’d been invited to join her family for dinner, which was hosted at a private venue bought out for the night to celebrate her Creation. A few servants stood nearby in the

shadows, but they were all citizens of the Third Layer as well, and Xim didn't seem to mind the possibility of them overhearing.

"That's very nice," Xim's mom said, as though Xim had just told her I was nothing any more remarkable than a mechanic, or a chef. The woman's dark horns glittered in the candlelight as she cut a bite from a leafy vegetable. Her name was Xorna, and her soul glowed a magnificent gold with veins of silver woven into it, the base layer looking like a series of blooming and decaying roses. There were also subtle striations of violet running throughout the Delver layers, something I hadn't seen before. The level floating above her head said eighteen, and her presence emitted far greater pressure than Lito's or Myria's had. She also ate her food with much greater delicacy than her daughter. "What dimension in particular?"

"Uh, I don't know if it has a proper name," I said. "Earth is the planet." Xorna frowned thoughtfully.

"That sounds difficult." She chewed the vegetable, smiling in approval at the taste.

"Is being from another dimension... normal in the Third Layer?"

"No," said Xim's father, Drel'gethed. His Delver level and aura matched Xorna's, but the base of his soul looked like innumerable eyes, all of which gazed into me. His voice was deep and smoky, and wispy tendrils of black energy moved over the meat on his plate, leaving only bone behind. He looked at me with a pair of violet irises, far more human in appearance than the rest of him. The specks of white on his skin shifted and twinkled like stars. "It is not a strange thing. We are not from this layer of reality. Like you, we are travelers. You are merely from a more distant land."

“That’s very open-minded of you.” I took a bite of my food. It was delicious, and as soon as the first morsel hit my tongue my stomach roared to life. I hadn’t eaten in at least twenty hours, unless you counted chowing down on a concentrated chip of mana eating. The stress of the day had so far pushed back my hunger, but with my fight-or-flight impulses switched to the ‘off’ position, my body loudly pronounced that Fortitude was not a replacement for food. I immediately began tucking in to the meal, though with only about sixty percent of the enthusiasm of Xim. I still didn’t want to be rude, not that either of her parents seemed to mind Xim’s Kirby impression.

“Why do you want to become a part of our tribe?” Xorna asked, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin.

“Legal issues,” said Xim, before downing an entire goblet of wine in one go. She held it up and a servant approached to refill it. “Thanks!” She took another big swig, then went back to attacking her plate.

“As much as I’d like to say it is for a more noble reason, Xim’s right,” I said. “I believe my extraterrestrial origin will cause me difficulties here in Hiward, and in Arzia at large.”

“The Hiwardians love their laws,” said Drel. “They make things complicated. They think the world is chaotic. They attempt to exert control. These laws do not help. They are only a burden.” Xim nodded vigorously as Drel said this.

“I was actually a lawyer in my old life,” I said. “I can appreciate the utility, but agree that it often becomes bewildering to navigate.”

“Laws serve those who understand them,” said Drel. “Laws oppress those who do not. Those who write the laws know this. They use this to their advantage.”

“I think I can get on board with that idea.”

The man seemed to have put a lot of thought into the nature of legal structures, despite his own society being governed by a different system altogether. He floated up from his seat and drifted over to me. I looked up into his penetrating gaze as he loomed, and took a bite off my fork.

Drel looked down at Grotto, who hovered just above my shoulder. The Delve Core returned the look, and I could almost feel electricity crackling between them.

“I like your companion,” Drel said as he looked over the mini-c’thon. “It exudes a sense of power. It is more than it seems. It will join the tribe as well?”

[This is a great man,] Grotto thought to me. [He has a discerning eye for the quality of an individual. You may tell him that I would be honored to assist in ruling over his territory. I will, of course, accept a humble position to begin with. Perhaps the governor of a minor region, such as a small country or vassal state.]

“Grotto is my bonded familiar,” I said. “I’m pretty sure he’ll come with me wherever I am.”

[That is not what I said. Inform him of my conditions!]

“This is good,” said Drel. “He has an ancient scent. Like the seed of a mighty Irgriana tree.” He looked down at me. “The tree grows broad. It grows great thorns. It consumes many dreams. The sap distills into a lovely spirit.”

“I’ll have to try it some time.” I absently wondered what dreams tasted like.

“The liquor sends First Layer denizens into a coma. You are strong, though. Perhaps you will have sweet night-terrors instead.”

“Oh. Maybe I won’t have any.” Then again, what did *nightmares* taste like?

“That would be a shame. You are not of this First Layer. You are of another. I would like to see what happens.”

He drifted away from the table into the shadows and whispered something in the ear of a servant. The servant bowed and left the room, taking another pair of attendants with them. Drel returned and gestured for more servants to approach. They came forward, picked up the table, and carried it away, taking half my dinner along with it. Xim grabbed her own plate off the table and brought it to her lap, finishing up the last few scraps on its surface. Xorna let her meal go, barely touched, but smiled as she sipped from the goblet she still held.

“Does it have to be right now, dad?” Xim asked. “Arlo didn’t finish eating. *I* didn’t finish eating.”

“Your hunger will not shorten your life,” said Drel. “The seconds passing are gone forever. Arlo shall join the tribe at this moment. I have decided, and no more time will be lost.”

Xim sat her cleaned plate on the ground and raised her eyebrows.

“He likes you,” she said. “He wants your roots to enter the tribe as soon as possible.”

“I’m... flattered?”

“Oh, I meant to ask before,” said Xim. “You’re not weird about nudity are you?”

Chapter 26

I wasn't weird about nudity.

At least, I *thought* I wasn't. My family wasn't prudish growing up, and I couldn't count the number of times my parents would hit up the kitchen in the buff. It still grossed me out as a kid, but being naked was never weird to me the way it had been to some of my friends.

That being said, I was definitely *not* prepared to take off all my clothes in front of a group of strangers in the middle of an upscale restaurant. The fact that they also had to take their own clothes off only made the matter a little more comfortable. Still, none of them seemed bothered by the act in the least, and I've always been good at adapting to new cultural norms. If anything, showing hesitation or discomfort when everyone else was treating this like a normal, everyday occurrence would make me stand out more than just stripping down and getting on with business. After all, if you're naked on a nude beach, it's only weird if you make it weird.

I did my best not to take any inadvertent glances at Xim or Xorna, each of whom was as beautiful as the other, but they did not make the same effort. It's not that they leered at me or anything, they just looked from person to person as though we *weren't* naked, and I had to assume this was common for them. Maybe they didn't wear clothes at all while they were in the Third Layer.

Still, I've been in far stranger—and more awkward—situations where my dick was out, so all things considered it didn't catch me off guard by much.

Nothing about Drel changed, though. Which meant that either he didn't have to disrobe for the ritual, or he'd been naked this whole time. The fact that his entire form

was made up of the misty night-time-sky substance seemed to support the latter conclusion. If he was wearing clothes, I couldn't tell.

The servants brought out a large cloth that had a number of unfamiliar symbols drawn onto it. The ink looked fresh so I assumed this was something that they had only just prepared. I sat on my knees in the center of the cloth, with Xim, Xorna, and a few of the servants kneeling in a semicircle around me. Drel drifted over and hovered in front of me, holding a small, dark bowl. He ran a fingernail across his wrist, then held it over the bowl as his blood, pure white in color, ran out into it.

Drel spent twenty minutes using the blood to draw runes and symbols over my body, from my forehead to the soles of my feet. It wasn't lost on me how often I'd had someone else's bodily fluids all up on me in the last twenty-four hours. Regardless, the process was unexpectedly relaxing. One of the servants had brought out a stringed instrument which they plucked in a shadowy corner, filling the room with dreamy tones. Xim, Xorna, and the servants hummed in different harmonies with the sound. Four censers smoldered, emitting a scent like honey and autumn leaves burning, and as Drel placed the last rune, a sense of warmth and calm spread through me.

"We will invite you to our tribe," said Drel. "Your body may change. You may grow stronger. You may grow *stranger*. You may grow in ways you do not like. You may grow in ways that please you. Do you accept this?"

I hadn't been prepared for anything this elaborate, or for the idea that gaining citizenship might change me physically. I wondered how much his words were symbolic, and how much they reflected the potential for actual changes to my flesh. Still, I was digging the vibe of what was happening, so I decided to go with it.

"Yes."

“I will ask questions. You will answer them. You may decide to stay silent. You may walk away. If you do, you will not become part of the tribe. If you do, you will never again be invited. Do you accept this?”

“Yes.”

“Are you Esquire Arlo of Earth?”

“I am.”

“Do you wish to join the Third Layer?”

“I do.”

“Do you wish to join the Xor’Drel tribe?”

“I do.”

“Have you any family?”

“Not in this world.”

“Are there any others you wish to bring to the tribe?”

“No.”

[*Ahem.*]

“Grotto,” I said. “If that needs to be expressly stated.”

Drel nodded, then continued.

“Are there any to sponsor you, Arlo?”

I hesitated, unsure how to reply.

“I will sponsor Arlo,” said Xim.

“On what grounds do you sponsor him?”

“He is brave and powerful,” said Xim. “If not for him, I would be dead.”

That praise made me more uncomfortable than the general nakedness did.

“You are well sponsored,” said Drel.

“He’s kind of funny too,” said Xim. “In his own way. Also, Grotto will fit in really well in the Third Layer.”

Drel looked to me, as though expecting some response.

[I will not sabotage your workings with this Drel’gethed. Despite your failure to petition for my due consideration, I am eager to see how this ritual will grant us power. We will become the masters of many realms.]

“Grotto is happy to join the tribe as well,” I said.

“This is good,” said Drel. “To be part of the tribe, the tribe must be part of you. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“You will grant your strength to the tribe. The tribe will grant its strength to you. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“When the tribe is in need, you will aid the tribe. When you are in need, the tribe will aid you. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“The tribe is part of you for life. Your life will forever be part of the tribe. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“I am Drel’gethed, patriarch of the Xor’Drel tribe. I have authority to speak for the tribe. The tribe accepts you, Esquire Arlo. Do you accept the tribe?”

“I do.”

“You will be given a new name. You will be known by this name from now unto eternity. Rise, and you shall become Esquire Arlo Xor’Drel, of the Third Layer.”

I stood, and Drel took me by the shoulders. The runes painted across my body became hot, and the heat spread out across my skin. I felt a familiar sensation as the warmth entered my mana veins, similar to the energy that flooded me after eating the ruby chips. It was gentle, however.

The warmth flowed into my eyes, and it left me blinking away tears as the heat gathered. After a moment, I wiped the moisture from my eyes and cheeks, finding Drel smiling at me. It was the first time I'd seen him smile, and he drew me into an embrace. Despite his ephemeral form, his body was hard and muscled, though there was a fluttering feeling when touching the shadow that enveloped him. I returned the hug, though less enthusiastically. It felt a little strange how tightly he gripped me for being someone I'd just met.

After Drel released me I was then embraced by each of the tribe members who'd gathered in the ritual circle, including Xorna and Xim. Xim was last, and she squeezed me so tight that my back popped. I laughed when she let me go.

"I guess a Fortitude of twenty-two doesn't stop my back from cracking."

"I'm just that strong," she said, flexing a bicep.

"So what happens now?"

"Now, we drink!" she said, then ran off to grab a pitcher of wine from a servant.

Another attendant handed me my clothes, which I accepted happily. Xorna and a couple of the attendants had thrown on some silky-looking robes, though several others were speaking to one another, still nude. I wasn't sure what the culture was, but Xim quickly returned with two goblets and a flagon.

"Do I put my clothes back on now?"

She poured a goblet and handed it to me, then poured one for herself.

“Do whatever you like,” she said, then held the cup up and we toasted.

Throughout the rest of the night, my new tribe welcomed me into their fold with enthusiasm and celebration. I hadn't been in this world for long, but I had already begun to feel a sense of isolation as I stumbled through the Delve and the alien culture afterward. The suspicion from Lito hadn't helped.

If I hadn't become part of the Xor'Drel tribe, I'm not sure how far I would have let myself fall into a spiral of self-isolation. I'd descended into that pattern more than once in my life, so I could easily see it having gone that way. But, for now, in that moment, I was with people who now saw me as one of them. I thought I was doing pretty well for my first official day in a new world.

Maybe living in hell part time wouldn't be so bad.

New Achievement!

You have been made a part of the Xor'Drel tribe, and through the ritual of adoption have been imbued with the tribe's essence. The power of Xor'Drel is written onto your soul. You gain the Strength of Xor'Drel.

Strength of Xor'Drel: Your Wisdom score counts as double when resisting effects that cause fear, induce mental trauma, or otherwise have a negative impact on the health and wellness of your psyche.

A piece of the Xor'Drel tribe's knowledge is passed on to you through this ritual.

You acquire fluency in Othertongue.

You have experienced powerful ritual magic that has had a profound impact on your mana matrix. Combined with your previous experience detecting the flow of mana within your body, you have acquired familiarity with Mystical Magic. Mystical magic is an adjacent school to Dimensional magic, and you acquire the Mystical Magic intrinsic skill.

Mystical Magic grants you the inherent ability Detect the ebb and flow of mana within yourself, others, and the objects around you. Mystical magic allows you to manipulate this mana and wield its power to create a number of effects. The sensitivity and precision of this ability is based on your skill level in Mystical Magic.

You acquire the Mystical Magic active skill Dispel.

Dispel

Mystical

Cost: 50% of mana disrupted

Requirements: Mystical Magic

Temporarily disrupt the flow of mana within a spell, object, or person. This can weaken or negate spells, halt the flow of magic within a magical item, or disrupt a magical effect imbued within an individual.

After dinner and the afterparty, Xorna and Drel were kind enough to pay for my room at the inn where they were staying. It was a nice gesture, especially since calling the place an inn was a fierce understatement. It was more like a large mansion that rented out rooms the size of luxury apartments. As it turns out, I could now easily afford to stay in the place via the power of my new net worth, but I wasn't going to turn down free stuff.

The amount of wealth I'd left the Delve with was substantial. Before leaving the facility around the Creation Delve, which was called the Temple of Creation, I was required to submit my Delver fee at a teller desk near the exit. The rate was a flat ten percent based on the number of chips I'd acquired.

"Place your hand on this tablet and I can view the chips you earned inside."

I placed my hand on one of the cool, black slates of stone, and text etched itself into existence, displaying the chips I'd been allocated. Sixteen ruby chips and six emerald chips. The two rubies I'd snacked on inside the Delve weren't counted.

"Wow," she said. "That's a good haul for a Creation Delve. I've never seen one give out this many rewards." She looked up from the tablet. "I don't even make this much in a high level silver, just so you know. Platinum Delves... risk and reward, I guess." She did a quick bit of math. "Your fee will come out to seven-point-six ruby chips. You can pay the fraction with notes, or I can take eight rubies and provide change."

"How many notes is the fraction worth?"

"One ruby chip exchanges for fifty golden notes. Point six would be thirty."

I only had sixteen golden notes on me, so I opted for change, handing over half of my ruby chips and receiving twenty golden notes in return.

“I’m not very familiar with the Hiwardian economy. How much is one of these golden notes worth?”

“One golden note is roughly equivalent to ten imperial gold coins at the moment,” she said, which was less than helpful. The buying power of one imperial gold coin could be anything.

“How about this,” I said. “How many days could I feed myself with one golden note?”

“Hmm.” She ran the numbers in her head. “One golden note is worth one hundred silver notes. One silver note should feed a peasant family of five for a day, so that’s one hundred days of simple family meals.”

So, the thirty-six golden notes in my inventory would reasonably feed me for a decade, and I’d already eaten thirty years worth of meals by chomping on the two ruby chips inside the Delve.

“Based on the tax, I’m assuming that an emerald chip is worth ten ruby chips?”

“You got it,” she said, smiling.

“Can the chips be used as currency themselves?”

“They can,” she said. “Especially here in the Formation district. Most of the Delver economy functions on chips.”

That meant Delver transactions dealt with fairly large sums of money on average.

“I think I’ll trade one more ruby in for notes, then I’m good.”

She made the exchange, and I was now walking around with six emerald chips, seven ruby chips, and eighty-six golden notes in my inventory, along with several hundred silver and copper notes that I’d gotten from killing Hognay. Trying to express the value of all of that with food would have been silly.

It was about three million cheeseburgers worth of cash.

Chapter 27

The Temple of Creation was in the Formation district of the Hiwardian capital city of Foundation. The naming conventions were simple, which I appreciated, though a little confusing with their phonetic similarity. Formation was the Delver district, which meant it was upscale as all hell since most Delvers were some level of nobility. Even if they hadn't been, none of them would be hurting for spare cash based on what I'd just learned.

Formation was also a fortress carved into the side of a large mountain. The Creation Delve had been discovered during a fortunate mining operation, and the nation of Hiward naturally formed around it. The rest of the capital city, Foundation, sat in the valley below the mountain. This gave Delvers a physical separation from mundane society in addition to an economic one.

<Foundation Map>

Based on my understanding of history, that probably meant Formation had a disproportionately high concentration of quality public services, and that the city of Foundation itself had a high level of social stratification. I suspected this was further cemented by the noble class possessing superhuman powers on top of vast wealth, which meant that a French revolution was unlikely to occur.

I tried to reserve judgment until after I'd spent some time in the city. While my inner Marxist sometimes struggled against my red-blooded American capitalist tendencies, I wasn't about to start preaching the value of a powerful proletariat to everyone I met before I'd even determined how inequitable this civilization was.

My room at the inn was the most posh and luxurious hotel room I'd ever stepped foot in, an experience that I enjoyed for approximately five minutes as I undressed and then crashed into a bed that made California-King-Size feel small. I slept for the entire twelve-hour duration of my stay, waking up only once when my wine-filled bladder demanded that I heed the call of nature.

I was brought back to consciousness by an attendant, and I considered paying for another night out of pocket to keep dozing. That impulse was made subordinate to my desire for food, though. Sleep was on the first tier of Maslow's hierarchy, but so was breakfast.

I dressed quickly in the single pair of clothes that I possessed, promising myself that I would spend at least part of the day shopping for more. The room came equipped with a small suite of toiletries and personal items, so I was able to brush my teeth (an unexpected luxury) and tidy my hair without relying on finger combing and a vigorous mouth rinse. I stopped in front of the full length mirror in the main room to make sure I was somewhat presentable, and froze as I looked at myself.

None of the blood runes were still present from the night before, but my body did bear a single, glaring sign that I had undergone a change—my eyes. The sclera was no longer white, but now a pure black void. No veins, no variation in the depth of black, just deep and endless sable. My irises were still emerald, but were flecked with specks that ran the gamut from deep forest to light mint, each of which twinkled and shifted as I turned my head, implying an impossible depth. It was extremely similar to the effect made by the small spots of white light across Drel's skin.

“That's pretty fucking cool.”

I took another moment to study my eyes, then made sure the room was cleared of all my belongings, which was pointless since I kept everything in my inventory anyway. Grotto hovered near the door, waiting for me to make my exit.

[Morning,] I thought to him. [Sleep well?]

[I do not suffer from the need to become incapacitated for one-third of my life.]

[You're missing out, then,] I thought as I exited the room, heading for the stairs.

[Sleep is the best part of being alive.]

[I feel that there is something unhealthy in that belief.]

[Eh, maybe. What did you do while I slept?]

[I compiled a list of materials necessary to begin building our new Delve.]

[Oh, still got your heart set on that?]

[It is the next logical step that I must take to continue accomplishing my life's purpose.]

[And what purpose is that?]

[To create and maintain a Delve.]

[Sounds tautological.]

[Then you misunderstand the word. If your life's purpose were to run a restaurant, then you must first acquire a restaurant.]

[Sure, but people who want to run a restaurant do it for more reasons than just for the sake of running one. They want to cook, or feed people, or make money.]

[And I wish to serve the ends set out for me by the ancient ones.]

[What ends are those?]

[It is immaterial.]

[I think it is *very* material.]

I stepped off the stairs and made my way through the large lobby of the mega-inn. There was a small café built into the ground level where Xim and her family would be waiting for me.

[Listen, if you want me to agree to help you construct a new Delve, then I need you to put together a pitch sheet. Why are we making a Delve? How will it benefit me? Have you done any market studies on the need for new Delves? I'm assuming you're relying on me to acquire the materials you need, so I'll be spending my own time and hard-earned money. Treat me like an investor. Convince me.]

[I do not need to put together a... pitch sheet. I can already answer those questions.]

I found Drel, Xorna, and Xim sitting on a set of couches just outside the café. Varrin and his parents were there as well, which I wasn't expecting. The gorgeous Hiwardian couple were each level twenty-one, with platinum auras that matched my own, though much larger. They were easily the most powerful people I'd met so far.

"Hey," I said as I approached. "Sorry, overslept."

"Only reason I got out of bed," said Xim, "is because they made me."

"I was also difficult to rouse," said Varrin, then his brow went up when he looked at me closely for the first time. "Nice eyes."

"Thanks, they're new," I said. "I guess nearly dying made us all tired. Even if we got a full heal afterwards."

"The mind remembers the body's trauma," said Drel. "Dreams heal the mind. It is better than spells or medicine."

"Well, I think my mind needs coffee," I said, then bit my tongue. "Do they have coffee here?"

“A drink from your homeland?” Varrin asked. I didn’t know how much he’d told his parents about my history, so I just went with it.

“Yeah. It wakes you up. It’s also highly addictive. Might be better if I avoid it, but then again it’s a simple pleasure. Also, I don’t think we’ve officially met,” I said to Varrin’s platinum parents. “I’m Arlo.”

“Yes,” said the man I’d earlier mistaken for Varrin’s brother. He stood and gave me a bow with his palms pressed together. “Varrin has told us much about what happened inside the Delve. I am Ealdric, and this is my wife, Nola.” The woman next to him stood, nearly as tall as myself, and also bowed.

“We owe you a life,” Nola said, “for saving the life of our son.”

“Breakfast will do,” I said. “No need to trade any lives on my account.” She smiled at that. Then the seven of us went to breakfast, which was actually lunch, and I was treated to another lavish meal. The café didn’t have coffee, but I was brought a bitter and earthy drink that gave much the same effect.

The talk at the table focused on the Delve itself, though everyone was careful to steer clear of any of the more sensitive aspects of the event. There was no discussion of Chilla, or Sayil, or Varrin’s reckless choice of platinum without consulting the party. It focused on the monsters, the tactics, the abilities we’d unlocked, and the builds being pursued. There was also a good deal of discussion surrounding Hognay and the c’thon, which eventually led to some polite prodding over Grotto.

Fortunately, Varrin maneuvered the conversation away from that topic with some decorum. His parents caught on quickly, and didn’t bring up the matter of Grotto’s origin again. Altogether it was a tactful conversation about what could easily have been a very ugly topic. It reminded me that I was in the presence of high society, and I was

fascinated by the way each of them bent their words to take on the most favorable interpretation of events. I loved it and hated it at the same time.

“The Ravvenblaqs are having a celebration,” said Drel as the meal came to a close. “It is for Varrin’s Creation. They have invited us. Xorna and I will attend. Xim will not.”

“I have to visit the temple,” said Xim. “No time for parties.”

“You mentioned that,” I said. “You have to spend a month in prayer. Do you have to do that each time you transform?”

“She is faithful,” said Drel. “She is also young. Her power comes at great cost for now. Her revelations will grow with time. The cost of transforming will be reduced.”

“Not every time,” said Xim. “Right now, my body is still integrating the ability. The blessing won’t be so costly as I advance.”

“I’m glad you had it,” I said. “It definitely saved our bacon.” I poked at the syrupy remnants of a Hiwardian crepe, trying to find the right words for my next question.

“Speaking of transformations, I woke up with these new eyes and was wondering... why do I have new eyes?”

A smile touched Drel’s lips.

“It is the physical manifestation of a coming revelation,” the shade-like man replied. “Not all who show the change find the revelation. Not all who revelate show the change. There is much to be said, and great nuance to what it may mean. It is... easier to explain within the Third Layer.”

“I see.” The way Drel said ‘revelation’ made me think it was a term of art, something with meaning beyond the normal use of the word. “Debrief once I visit the new homeland?”

Drel nodded.

“As you say. While Xim completes her devotions, we ask that you stay in Foundation for the month, Arlo. She will need strong allies nearby. We will leave three attendants, but they are not Delvers.”

“Of course. Anything you need.”

“There was one other thing I wanted to discuss,” said Varrin. “The master loot.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, remembering all the random items dropped in the Delve that hadn't been distributed individually. All of it had gone to Varrin.

I'd assumed he was claiming all of it as the party leader, which seemed like something he might do at the time. My opinion of the man was changing though, and I was happy to hear he wanted to discuss it.

“Normally we'd decide on a form of distribution immediately after the Delve,” he said. “Since we didn't get the chance I wanted to ask for thoughts from you both.”

“Nothing I wanted,” said Xim. “You can sell it and give me a fifth if that works.”

“I wouldn't know what is or isn't worth keeping,” I said. “I'll trust your judgment.”

“Very well,” said Varrin. “I'll deliver you each a one fifth share, and ensure the other funds make it to the appropriate parties.” That last bit meant that he was going to make sure the families of Sayil and Chilla still got their piece, even from items we'd looted after their deaths. That was fine with me, and it was good to know Varrin felt the same.

We left the café shortly after, and most everyone else departed for the stables to begin their journey to Varrin's thundry. They'd all be gone for, at minimum, the month that Xim would be in meditation, which meant that I would be left to my own devices for a while. Xim watched them leave with me, then turned once they were out of sight.

“I’ll be in the Sam’lian temple in the Noble Quarter,” she said. “I can’t meet up for drinks or anything while I’m praying, but if you need me that’s where I’ll be. Maybe stop by once or twice, in case I need you to grab me some beer or something.” She gave me a wink.

“Will do,” I said.

She pulled me into a quick hug, then said her goodbyes and began making her way toward the path down the mountain.

I stood there for a while, taking the city in and watching people pass, studying their soul-juice. About one in twenty who went by were Delvers, most of whom were silver or copper. There were a much smaller number of golds.

One woman who walked by nearly blasted my eyeballs out, forcing me to attenuate the soul-sight ability. She was level twenty-six, with gold, silver, and copper levels, along with more of the curious violet striations. Once I dispelled the glare of her soul, I noticed that she had bright blue hair and skin so white she looked like a mannequin. She went into a small shop across the street from me, and when she emerged with a package she summoned an enormous alabaster hand, hopped onto it, then flew off into the sky.

Welp. Now that I knew flying was on the table, I added figuring out how to do that to The List, which I decided I needed to start checking things off of. I’d been looking for another platinum Delver, but after twenty minutes of people-watching, not a single one had walked by. Half the day was already gone, so I went to get familiar with the area.

Most of Formation was an organic web of small pathways between stone-carved buildings that ranged from the size of a single-lane one-way road, to barely wide enough

for two people to walk past one another without having to give way. The streets were confusing, with irregular twists, and turns, but I found my way around well enough. Such a massive amount of rock had been moved to create the district that it must have been done with magical assistance. Or maybe they had dwarves here. Maybe *magical* dwarves.

Having been carved from the mountain also lent itself to having a large number of underground features, where entire marketplaces and neighborhoods were lit with glowstones pilfered or replicated from the Delves. These areas were some of the most beautiful, since the glowstones were often used in dazzling decorative displays, which lit the tunnels and building facades in myriad sparkling colors. Engineered by some artist with high Charisma, I'm sure.

After getting oriented in the city I decided that I needed to secure shelter on at least a semi-permanent level. I had a strange feeling of being exposed, almost like someone was watching me from a distance. It was unsettling, but I dismissed it as nerves. Moving somewhere new always made me feel a bit anxious until I got settled, so I rubbed the back of my neck to banish the goosebumps, and decided that having my living arrangements figured out would help.

Chapter 28

Before I could make much progress in my new world, I needed a new wardrobe.

My feather boa and leather vest were fancy and magical, but given the state of my pants, boots, hair and beard, overall I looked like a homeless guy that'd just robbed a fashion-forward glam-rock vocalist. I spent the rest of the day finding new threads and personal hygiene products, then spent the evening having a relaxed meal, where Grotto harangued me further with petitions to begin building a new Delve.

Once we'd gotten situated into some temporary accommodations, I finally acquiesced to Grotto's demand that we scout out the Pocket Closet and spent one minute concentrating on opening the door to my new inventory dimension. A tear in space formed a thin, bright line about seven feet high, which stretched outward and created a doorway about five feet wide.

Through the door was a dark space with hundreds of glowing poison essences floating in a grid along the wall. When I walked into the room, it was filled with dim light from no discernable source. A notification window appeared.

You have entered your Pocket Closet! You have gained access to the Pocket Closet interface.

Pocket Closet Interface:

Quick Access space: 1,000 cubic yards

Total Closet space: 2,000 cubic yards

You may meditate while inside the Closet to dedicate your mana regeneration toward increasing the space available.

Current cost to upgrade: 10 mana per cubic yard

Current features: None

At least it wasn't complicated. I walked around the edges of the room, which were lined by all the items in my inventory hovering in the air. Nine-hundred-and-one poison essences, four pairs of clothes, four pairs of shoes, miscellaneous personal goods, ruby and emerald chips, stacks of Hiwardian notes, and Hognay's backpack.

That last one reminded me that I was still carrying around the Bag of Refreshments slung over my shoulder, and hadn't investigated it yet. I reached out and Hognay's pack floated down from where it was hovering, the strap finding its way into my grip. I sat it on the ground, then turned to Grotto.

[Whaddya think?]

[The dimensional forces within this space are superb. Harnessing them would yield fertile mana upon which to seed a new Delve.]

At the mention of dimensional forces, I checked out my mana regeneration, which got a boost from absorbing dimensional energy. It was currently sitting at forty, which was the highest I'd ever seen it.

Grotto went to the middle of the space, and looked up.

[I would prefer the ceiling to be higher, but I can begin assembling a basic obelisk in this space. It can begin by harvesting the ambient dimensional mana. Then we can work on ways to improve the density of mana.]

[Ok, so what do you want to do with a new Delve?]

[Many things can be accomplished. The only limitation is the availability of resources and the scruples of those engaging in the Delve's operation.]

[What was your old Delve for?]

[Aside from serving as a whetstone against which new Delvers were sharpened, it was dedicated to the production of these essences you stole.]

[Acquired.]

[Looted.]

[Sure. So, we could use a Delve to grow more poison essences?]

[That is possible. You possess a significant amount of essences for use in seeding such an endeavor. Of course, the space required is more significant than what we are presented with here.]

[What about other types of essences?]

[Any essence is possible, though each requires particular conditions. Poison essence thrives in more toxic environments, which is why a portion of each essence's yield was dedicated to toxifying the air of the Delve.]

[Ah. For this to be an effective poison essence farm, we'd need to fill it up with poison fog again.]

[Or poisonous plants, venomous creatures, toxic materials, preferably all of the above.]

[I don't think I want to have my inventory sharing space with something like that.]

Grotto hovered over to a row of the floating items. He ran a feeler through the air around one of the essences.

[I believe this is a form of stasis. I doubt any items held in this quick access space would be affected or damaged by the external environment.]

[I still don't understand what you get out of this. Why do you want to make a Delve?]

Grotto's eyes narrowed.

[It is the purpose of a Delve Core to maintain its Delve. If its Delve is destroyed, the core must found a new one. Beyond that, I will grow in power alongside the Delve that I am linked to.]

[I see. Is that your long term escape plan? Get strong enough to mind control me or something?]

[You misunderstand. We are bonded to one another. I already grow stronger when you acquire power. The same can be said from the other direction.]

[You're saying that I can draw energy from a new Delve?]

[What I am saying is that you will become far more dangerous if I am allowed to grow in the way that best suits me. The Delve can serve any number of functions, be it growing essences, cultivating the growth of mana monsters, or compressing mana into chips. Tell me what it is that you seek, and I can carve a path to deliver it. Beyond the material wealth of essences and chips, the more powerful that I become, the more powerful you will be for having me as a bonded familiar.]

[What about stats and levels?]

[That would be inefficient. It takes time to amass the mana needed for a platinum level distribution, and would still result in you being awarded a Delver level. You may as well go out and conquer a different Delve so that you might plunder its resources instead.]

[Ok. Then how does producing mana chips work?]

[Mana can be harvested via the ambient mana absorption of the Delve. Another excellent source is living organisms.]

[What kind of organisms?]

[The most lucrative kinds are other Delves.]

[Aside from that.]

[Mana monsters. They are drawn to high mana regions, and we could encourage the growth of a horde within the Delve. They consume mana for food, and naturally condense it within themselves over time.]

[Is that what the c'thon was doing?]

[No. A c'thon is a mana fiend. A mana fiend consumes other materials for food, such as meat, but can fill itself with mana to grow stronger endlessly. Mana monsters can only grow so strong before they reach a natural limit.]

[Since... Delves absorb mana from Delves to grow stronger, but require other resources to live, like food, does that make Delves mana fiends?]

Grotto floated over to me.

[An interesting conclusion.]

I crossed my arms and considered.

[Let me get this straight. You're saying that if I let you build a Delve, we can set it up to produce a regular output of chips, making me rich, or a regular output of essences, also making me rich, or anything else my heart so desires, which is to be absurdly rich, among other things.]

Grotto rubbed his feathered feelers together, dark eyes glinting.

[That, and so much more.]

I dug through Hognay's pack as I ran Grotto's ideas through my head. I was a big fan of passive income, and Grotto was adamant that the Delve could be used to make all sorts of useful products, it was just a matter of figuring out the best utility based on the dimensional space we'd be building within.

The only weird thing was that he kept talking about all the traps he was going to install.

There wasn't much inside Hognay's pack, aside from some dirty clothes and a variety of camping and mountaineering supplies. I separated the items into one pile to keep and one pile to burn to ashes, lest any of Hognay's stank infect my new inventory space. There was one item that interested me, which was a stack of envelopes bundled together with twine. Inside each was a letter written in a script I didn't understand. I went over them for half an hour or so, before giving up on deciphering them and deciding they'd be better off in the hands of Lito or someone else with a detective bent.

I opened the Bag of Refreshments and emptied out the contents. It was all food goods, like I'd seen before: bread, cheese, dried meats, fruit and nut mix. There was a canteen full of what looked like water, but I put it aside, unwilling to trust anything that Hognay's mouth had touched.

I munched on some of the food, keeping an eye out for debuffs, but none came. They were simple, but tasty. Nothing I'd turn down at a party if found on a charcuterie board. In fact, this was all the essentials for a decent board. Maybe some honey, a softer cheese, and a bottle of wine. Bam! Charcuterie.

I went over the list of materials Grotto needed to get started on the Delve, still trying to decide if I really wanted to let him do this. From what I'd heard and seen so far, the Delves in and of themselves weren't nefarious. If anything, they provided huge benefits to Hiwardian society, and were necessary for Delvers to get stronger.

They were dangerous, sure, and I knew Grotto was keeping a host of secrets from me, but I was more curious than anything. I kept munching on my pilfered snacks and before I knew it, they were all gone. I stuffed the canteen back into the bag, wondering how something like that could be considered a spatial item. There was no more secret food hidden inside, and the interior was exactly as big as it looked from the outside. Figuring it out went on The List, and I got ready to call it for the night.

[Grotto,] I thought to the Core as I went back outside to my rented room, [if I let you build the Delve, do you promise *not* to lure any unsuspecting people to their deaths?]

[There is no need to lure Delvers into a Delve. They come of their own volition, and the challenges they face are commensurate with the rewards they reap.]

[Right, but just so that we're on the same page, I'm in charge of what we can and cannot do with the Delve.]

There was a long moment of silence before Grotto finally replied.

[Very well.]

I bit my lip, still wrestling with the risks of letting Grotto build his ancient, mysterious constructs in my inventory. I heaved a sigh and made my decision.

[I'll start grabbing what you need tomorrow.]

Before shopping for the outrageously expensive materials Grotto needed to start his new Delve, I spent the next morning buying a house.

The long and short of my house-hunting efforts was that I could hire a Delver specializing in physical magic to excavate a new residence inside the mountain in short order. New residences were *cheaper* than old ones, since most were reluctant to part with their fine Formation estates, and there was still plenty of stone to cut houses into.

In regards to the ‘amenities’, there were a variety of magically-enhanced devices that could make the space more comfortable. Such items were created through a process called mana weaving, and the cost of those was astronomical compared to what was used by more humble households.

All-in, if I wanted a permanent residence in Formation finished in the quickest time frame available with running water, environmental controls, and a comprehensive set of heating elements for food preparation, I was looking at a cost of around four-hundred golden notes. It was a pretty penny, but I could buy it with a single emerald chip.

I had six of those.

I’d even have a hundred notes left over for furnishing and decorating. Having my own space was important to me, and it would also allow me to get up to more trouble with Grotto without worrying about things like prying eyes and ears, or property damage.

I pulled the trigger, and the entire process could be finished within a week. I was well on my way to having my very own underground lair, where I could cackle madly while wringing my hands and inventing ethically problematic devices and gizmos.

I decided against going for that theme, however, when consulting with an interior decorator immediately afterward. I wasn't really into decorating, so I was happy to pawn that off on someone who could ensure I wasn't violating any unspoken cultural norms, while still finding an aesthetic that suited me. I was a big fan of dark wood and metal, with pops of color on the walls.

I then spent the rest of the day dutifully collecting a diverse array of construction materials that I delivered to Grotto via my inventory screen, which he accepted with many promises about how our enemies would break upon the bulwark that was soon to serve as the bedrock of our burgeoning dynasty.

I also didn't feel any eyes on my back as I went around the city this time.

I spent the evening watching Grotto work, and idly checked the Bag of Refreshments to see if I'd missed any snacks, the way I used to open the fridge five times a night after procrastinating grocery shopping in the hopes that some hitherto unknown food would magically present itself. However, rather than sad disappointment, I found the bag once again filled with a stout charcuterie's worth of snacks.

I now knew why this was a spatial item. Somewhere in the universe, there was a charcuterie dimension, and it delivered food-stuffs of modest quality to this little bag of endless goodies. Or maybe elves filled it up while I slept. Or maybe there was a chef somewhere enslaved for all eternity, forced to prepare and teleport whole foods to bags like this across the world. However it worked, I now had a ready source of presumably endless chow.

I munched on some of the Trail Mix of Refreshments and watched as Grotto began carving complex runes and symbols along an eight-foot length of metal called dark iron. He did it with his mind somehow, though he also held several delicate

crafting tools in his tentacles, using them to make slight adjustments to his work on occasion. I wondered if he used tools telepathically while in orb form, or if this were something new for him.

[Is that mana weaving?] I thought to Grotto, taking clues from my discussions with the suppliers earlier in the day.

[It is, though nothing so crude as what I have seen wielded by many Delvers.]

[Doesn't that take refined chips and essences?]

[It does.]

[Are you going to use *my* chips and essences?]

[You mean the ones you pilfered from my Delve? I am.]

[How many?]

[One emerald chip will be sufficient to serve as the seed mana for these inscriptions. The poison essences are not ideal for the process, but I can break them down into more fundamental components to get what I need. It may take two dozen or so.]

[I see.] On top of the cost of materials earlier in the day, the startup capital for this project was ballooning pretty quickly. [Any other materials of staggering value you'll need to get this thing going?]

[This will suffice for now. Once the obelisk is constructed, the Delve will begin providing its own resources, although the process can always be enhanced by procuring more materials.]

[Maybe I should have started an LLC to offset some of these costs. I wonder if Delve Obelisk is something I can depreciate and claim on my taxes.]

[Your words are nonsensical.]

[See, this is why they need to teach business fundamentals in public schools. Our education system has failed you, Grotto.]

Grotto paused his work and glanced at me with his dark eyes.

[*Are you done?*] he asked.

[I guess so. Is there anything I can help with? Maybe you should teach me some mana weaving. Is it hard to learn?]

[*I came into existence possessing all the knowledge required to perform the necessary weaves. I am unable to pontificate on the relative difficulty an organism such as yourself might have when learning the art. I also doubt that I would be a suitable instructor for the same reason, and such instruction would be an impediment to completing this obelisk.*]

[Well, shit. I should have bought some books or something. Library is on the agenda for tomorrow, but if I'd known I'd be sitting here staring at a fluffy octopus all night I would have grabbed something to make use of the time.]

[*If you wish to maximize your utility in this endeavor, then you may meditate and dedicate your mana regeneration to expanding the space.*]

[Oh yeah. I guess instead of staring at you I can stare into the void.]

[*You have an aura, do you not?*]

[I do.]

[*Then if expanding this domain is insufficient to motivate you to apply yourself, you can advance your aura while meditating as well.*]

[I didn't say I wouldn't do it. Just getting myself mentally prepared. Meditation has never been my strong suit. How does advancing my aura work, though?]

[It continues to astound me the amount of knowledge that you lack, but I do not fault you for it.] He spun back to me. *[I suppose your Earth education system has failed you.]*

[Was that a- a joke? Grotto?]

[Merely an observation.]

[To be fair, there are no auras on Earth. I mean, none that work like this. Then again, it's not like I was too plugged into the new-age lifestyle. So, maybe?]

[Simply meditate as you would normally. Focus on the world around you that falls within the embrace of your aura, and attempt to bring it into focus. And don't forget to dedicate your mana regeneration! This space is too small to accomplish anything meaningful.]

[At four cubic yards per hour, it's going to take a lot of meditation to make a substantial increase in total volume.]

[I can further augment the process once the obelisk is online, and the obelisk's functions will be improved in a larger space.]

[Ok, I get it. We need the obelisk to do a bunch of ambiguous shit, so leave you alone to finish the obelisk.]

[That would be ideal.]

Chapter 29

Meditating was like many good habits I'd developed over the years. It wasn't something I enjoyed doing, I just enjoyed the benefits of having done it. Still, if this could provide me with a bigger inventory while also training my aura, then the tangible benefits outweighed my natural urge to procrastinate difficult tasks.

I squared my hips and moved into the lotus position, a form that was much easier to take given the limberness of my Delver body. Lotus wasn't difficult, but I'd always had tight hips and glutes. One of the consequences of a sedentary lifestyle in my youth.

I closed my eyes and began to focus on my body and the information being delivered to my senses. I took passing thoughts and concerns and placed them into a large garbage bin, which was a visual trick I used to try and stay on task when meditating. Worried about what plans I had for tomorrow? Garbage bin. Thinking about that awkward moment at the grocery store checkout line where I said "you too" to Ashley after she'd said, "thanks for shopping"? Garbage bin. Yesterday, tomorrow, errant and intrusive thoughts; garbage bin. I filled that motherfucker up and then tossed it into the ether.

After getting into the groove of the empty mind, I tried tinkering around with Grotto's guidance. First, I concentrated on dedicating my mana to growing the Closet.

Your mana regeneration rate is being dedicated to increasing Closet space.

Namaste, bitches.

Easy enough, though that wasn't the right way to use 'namaste'. I moved on to figuring out my aura. I formed a mental image of a bubble surrounding me, though I

had no idea if what I pictured was correct. How big *was* the aura? It didn't have a range listed, so I'd assumed it was less of an AOE and more of a party buff.

I worked on visualizing a bubble growing outward from my body and encompassing the entire Closet. I imagined it passing over each item within the space—Grotto, the obelisk, all the essences and the clothes—then abutting against the walls.

Before long I had a strong mental image of the room's contents. It wasn't a difficult exercise, I was a visual thinker. Summoning images, rotating objects, comparing color schemes, none of that had ever been difficult to me.

I played around with the replica Closet in my mind, imagining Grotto moving to and fro as he worked, while I tried to figure out what nine-hundred-and-one poison essences looked like with perfect visual clarity. Grotto was easy enough, since my aura's description said that it gave me a general sense of the location of my allies by default. Not that I'd noticed that so far, but it may have been something that I needed to concentrate on.

I worked at this for a while, until my ass started to get sore. I was sitting directly on the floor of the Closet, which was made of something similar to steel. I ignored the sensation for a bit, but eventually gave into the discomfort and opened my eyes.

Grotto was exactly where I had imagined him while my eyes were closed. I surveyed the essences on the walls, and it seemed like their density and pattern matched what I'd been envisioning. I stood up with a grunt and went out to my rented room to grab a blanket and a throw rug. I tossed them on the ground where I'd been sitting, then reassumed the position and went back in.

I tested my mental image a few more times, opening my eyes to find Grotto exactly where I thought he was. At first I thought it may have been due to the subtle perception of the sound of his feathers rustling as he moved, but the feeling I got was more like the sensation on my skin when a finger is hovering just above the surface. Not quite touching, but still creating a sensation in the flesh. The anticipation of touch.

As I continued to focus on the feeling, Grotto's presence grew more distinct, while the rest of the room faded. Eventually, my mental image of Grotto was nearly as vibrant and real as when I opened my eyes. I kept pushing into the experience until I was startled out of my trance.

Your prior life's experience with meditation and your body's resonance with dimensional forces have helped you unlock the Dimensional trait for your Who Needs a Cleric? Passive.

Who Needs a Cleric? (Dimensional): You have a more refined awareness of the location of allies affected by your aura, and gain a limited perception of their surroundings.

Through meditation and self-reflection, you have earned +1 Wisdom!

That wasn't hard at all! I was worried that training a stat might take months of effort, or weeks at least. I just casually meditated for a bit, and got the equivalent of a copper Delve's worth of points. I'd have to make Varrin think I worked a little harder for it, lest his envy grow even greater.

I decided that was as good a place as any to call it for the night. I left Grotto to his work, and went back out into my rented room to find the first dregs of daylight creeping in through the windows. What I'd thought had been a casual hour or two of meditation had been closer to eight. I shrugged, resigning myself to missing a night of sleep, and got ready to hit the books.

The Hiwardian Delver's Library was one of the preeminent sources of literature concerning all aspects of Delving, from spell catalogs and technique manuals, all the way to the history of Delves and sociological surveys of their impact on modern culture. The token that Supplicant Hierti had given me provided me with full access to its contents, and all of that stuff was of incredible interest to me. I resisted the urge to start doing deep dives on the mechanics of delving, however, opting to focus on something that would dramatically improve my chances of surviving Hiwardian culture:

Etiquette.

I tore through several modern manuals describing the appropriate attire and mannerisms at different levels of society much faster than I'd expected. My reading speed was substantially quicker than it had been in my old life, and I could fly through the text without losing my train of thought. After etiquette, I dug into the history of the world, Hiward, and the Delves.

I stopped myself at absorbing one textbook's worth of information about each subject. I wasn't trying to become an expert, just hold a conversation without exposing myself as an extra-dimensional alien invader. The reward for my studies was more than just the knowledge I'd gained, but also an additional point to Intelligence, which I was glad to see came as easily as the point in Wisdom had.

I hit up a deli on the way home and munched on some brisket while going over Grotto's progress for the day. The obelisk was nearly finished, and just needed a jumpstart to get working. It was smaller than the obelisk inside the Delve of Grotto's namesake, the black pillar standing about twelve feet tall, as opposed to thirty. The ceiling of the Closet was only fifteen feet high, so that made sense.

The body of the obelisk was covered in a series of runes like the ones carved into the iron rod that now sat at its center. At Grotto's instruction I placed my hand on the obelisk, and it wicked away half my mana before the symbols began to glow and Grotto proclaimed the Delve as having officially begun.

[Our might shall roll over the lands like a virtuous wave of despair as we assert our will, dominant over all who oppose us!]

[No one is really opposing us right now.]

[Oh, they will.] His psychic voice dropped to a whisper. *[They will.]*

All megalomania aside, the Delve was now up and running, and Grotto informed me that he was able to dedicate the mana generation from the obelisk itself to the growth of the Closet without requiring me to actively meditate inside. It had something to do with our Shared Fate trait and allowing *me* to jumpstart the obelisk rather than Grotto. Pretty sure he used some words that weren't real while explaining.

Pocket Closet has gained a new function: Pocket Delve!

Current mana production: 24

All mana currently assigned to Closet expansion.

Now that the Delve was going, the Closet would automatically expand at a rate of about fifty-eight cubic yards a day, regardless of whether I paid it any attention. So, after a year, it would be roughly eleven times bigger than it was currently. If that were a stock portfolio, I'd be rich inside of three years. As it sat, however, I couldn't imagine how long it would take to reach the size of Grotto's old Delve. The place must have been hundreds of millions of cubic yards.

[I suspect the amount of Dimensional mana we have access to will increase as the Closet expands into the pocket space,] thought Grotto when I asked. *[There are other ways we might speed up the process as well.]*

If the Delve ended up being a self-perpetuating, compound-growth machine, then maybe it wouldn't take too long at all. Like one of those idle games where you begin by doing one damage per tick to an MS paint dragon enemy, then get to a hundred damage after an hour, but after a day of letting the game run you were doing a trillion damage to a thousand MS paint dragons all at once. Could name the place NGU Delve, or Delvor Idle, or Delver Tycoon. Pocket Delve had a good ring to it, though.

[Now that the place is running, what are you going to spend your time on?]

[Traps, of course.]

[Yeah... Of course. I guess you'll need-]

[More supplies.]

[More supplies. Sure.]

The next day took me back to the library, where I started working on studying Hiwardian economics, political science, legal code, sociology, a splash of philosophy, and an overview of the major world theologies. My studies took me through the rest of the week, until my new underground abode was complete, and netted me another four to my intelligence. I also picked up another two points in wisdom from meditating in the evening.

Wisdom now sat at seven, with Intelligence at ten, and I was offered my first Intelligence evolution.

Your Intelligence has reached a score of 10! We'd love to make a joke about how smart you are, but you probably wouldn't think it's clever enough. Your loss!

Choose one of the three following evolutions:

- 1) Resilient Thinker: You are significantly more resistant to attempts to break your concentration and far less likely to be surprised by unexpected events.
- 2) Magical Thinker: You acquire a basic understanding of any spell after seeing it fully cast a single time.
- 3) Visionary Thinker: You gain an eidetic memory for visual details.

Resilient Thinker was on brand for me to become an implacable wall of man, both physically and emotionally, but it would absolutely *ruin* surprise parties. It also didn't seem particularly... fun? Maybe not the best parameter to be basing my life-or-death build choices on, but I learned a long time ago that I perform a lot better when I enjoy how I'm accomplishing a task, even if the method itself is less efficient.

Magical Thinker and Visionary Thinker provided a difficult choice. In some ways, I could brute-force acquire Magical Thinker by loading myself to the gills with magical knowledge. If I were the resident expert on all things arcane, then I'd be able to identify spells and their likely effects without much trouble, similar to what the ability did. Picking up Magical Thinker would just save me all that time and effort, which could be spent elsewhere.

The biggest benefit would be identifying magic that hadn't yet been cataloged or studied. If I *did* end up breaching the wall between dimensions and duking it out with some otherworldly monstrosity, then being able to discern the effects of their magic, ex nihilo, would be pretty nice.

Visionary Thinker was self-explanatory. I always wanted to be able to Sherlock Holmes it up, and this seemed like a grade-A skill to take me one step toward that fantasy.

Alas, I would also be cursed with the inability to forget all the ugly details of events like the time I accidentally walked in on grandma Loryn's spongebath. Or things like bodies with their organs scooped out. I expected to see a lot more of that kind of stuff. The mutilated corpses, not grandma Loryn; she passed in '06.

As useful as *Visionary Thinker* would be, it didn't align with any particular *vision* I had for my build. whereas *Magical Thinker* aligned nicely with an uber-mage who happened to also have way, way too much health.

I chose *Magical Thinker*, and immediately started plotting how to find a bunch of spellslingers to spy on. First, I needed to know what kind of spells I wanted to learn. For that, I needed to know what kind of spells existed. And for that, I needed to go back to the library.

I did, also, move into my humble forty-five-hundred square foot underground abode, fully furnished with some of the finest fittings available to the up-and-coming. It was a lovely space to come home to before opening my Pocket Closet portal and spending most of my free time inside meditating.

I focused on that for a few days, leaving only to buy food, absorb some vitamin D, and preserve my sanity. This quickly netted me another three to Wisdom, bringing it even with Intelligence at ten.

I'll spare you the details of my evolution choices. I doubled my mana regen, giving me even more resource regeneration, because resource regeneration was awesome.

Even though I'd officially moved into my new place, I once again had that creepy feeling of being watched. It wasn't *just* when I was out on the town, it was even inside my own house. I spent several hours going over the place looking for hidden devices or mana weaves that weren't supposed to be there, but this was hindered by my abject lack of expertise concerning spycraft.

Having found nothing despite my search, I once again chalked it up to paranoia and moved on with my life. I emerged from my self-imposed academic isolation and decided that it was time to hit the gym. These muscles ain't gonna grow themselves after all, and a nice, sweaty workout should help put my mind at ease.

Chapter 30

After a bit of experimentation, I determined that it took eight hours of vigorous exercise with a focus on a particular stat to get it to increase by one.

This led to gains that I can only describe as *intoxicating*.

There were no traditional powerlifting gyms in Formation, which made sense because Delvers didn't improve their Strength that way. So, I bought a thousand pounds of iron and had a smith fashion it into a basic barbell set.

I threw myself into a variety of strength-building lifts, channeling my inner broseph, and found that my stamina allowed me to do a full body workout for as long as I wanted without getting winded. One muscle group would get tired, but by the time I had done a few sets on another, it was fully rested and ready to go. After the end of the first day I'd gotten one to strength, and sweated out a couple gallons.

Speed was easy. I ran as fast as I could for as long as I could. Fortunately there *was* a facility inside the Temple of Creation that allowed for Delvers to test out their stats and get used to the benefits they'd gained, so finding a long track wasn't hard. The place was open twenty-four hours, so I mixed up my schedule and started running at night when no one else was around. It's one thing to test your speed on a long track, it's another to sprint full-tilt for two hours straight before finally becoming exhausted.

Sprinting, mind you, not running. I could full-out truck ass for two entire hours before stamina became an issue. Once my stamina was close to empty, I ate, read through some magic theory I'd checked out from the library, and was fully rested in a little over three hours. It took a couple days of this to grab a point in Speed.

Normally, I'm a big fan of breaks. I hated burn out, and was very cognizant of the benefits of rest, but I was obsessed. The way my body moved was beyond anything I

could have imagined achieving in my old life, and it engrossed me. I fell into a rhythm with the work that was close to manic, pushing my mind and body every waking hour and operating on six hours of sleep a night. By the end of the second week I'd gotten another four to Strength and two to Speed.

Stats:

Strength 7

Agility 2

Speed 5

Fortitude 22

Intelligence 10

Wisdom 10

Charisma 3

Luck 2

I was looking pretty jacked, and I was feeling good.

The feeling was lost when I found a group of well-armed and armored individuals inside my house.

I'd just stepped out from the set of double doors I'd had custom-installed to cover the entrance to my Pocket Closet. I could open the portal anywhere, but figured it'd be best to have an assigned spot in my house where the entrance could appear to lead to a room like any other, rather than a floating hole in reality opening to some mystical realm.

The first person I noticed in my foyer was a handsome, olive-skinned man admiring one of the pieces of art on a wall. He had a scruffy dark beard and medium-length black hair, every inch of him looking like a guy who was one-hundred-percent trying to steal your girl. He was probably doing a damn good job of it, too.

He also had a copper soul and the level one floating above his head.

I was shirtless when I walked out, having finished lifting not too long before, and when I saw the man I casually reached a hand behind me through the portal to summon my vest and boa. They floated into my grasp as I opened the conversation.

“You lost, friend?”

He turned and gave me a practiced smile.

“This is nice,” he said, pointing a thumb at the painting. “Although, a bit dark for my taste.”

It depicted five different versions of the god of death from different religions in Arzia. He was right, it *was* nice.

“I can give you the name of the gallery if you like.” I slid on my vest and boa, when a second man walked out of my kitchen.

While the handsome guy wore clothes that looked well-tailored, though slightly threadbare, this second man was kitted out in several pieces of steel plate. He was twice as broad as the first man, and held a two-handed warhammer in one hand, balanced against his shoulder. He had an ‘apple’ he’d pilfered from my fruit bowl in his other hand, and he bit into it.

“I’m Artemix,” said handsome, giving me the shallowest of bows. “My colleagues and I have been asked to bring you to meet with a client of ours, so it is my pleasure to extend the invitation.”

“Not the most polite way of doing it,” I said, eyeing the bigger guy, then noticing a lithe woman sitting on a loveseat to my right. She was in leathers, and a subtle glow played across her fingers. I suddenly regretted not taking the time to figure out better equipment.

“I apologize for any offense given,” said Artemix. “But the matter is urgent, so it was crucial for us to meet with you as soon as possible.”

“Could have knocked.”

“Not how we normally introduce ourselves.”

“Who’s your client?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Can’t say I’m a fan of that.”

“Your feelings are not terribly important.”

The big guy tossed the half eaten apple to the ground and hefted the hammer into both hands.

“Alright,” I said, “so what’s the procedure here?”

“We take a walk,” said Artemix, shrugging. “Unless you want to make it difficult.”

“I kind of do.”

My mind ran over the half dozen organizations Varrin and Xim had mentioned that might be interested in me. There was no way I was going along with this crew voluntarily. I didn’t *think* my secret was out, but why else would thugs have come calling? It’s not like I’d visited any seedy gambling dens or had outstanding debts with

loan-sharks. Then again, maybe that wouldn't be the worst idea... If they came and broke my kneecaps for not paying, it'd only take me a few hours to regenerate.

I felt the point of a blade on my kidney, refocusing me on my guests, and looked down to see yet another woman crouched next to me. She was tiny, and appeared out of nowhere. A fifth man, thin and tired looking, stepped out from the kitchen behind the big guy.

A full party of copper ones.

"If that's the case, how about we try this instead?" said Artemix as he waved a hand through the air. A stream of violet light sprung from his fingertips and struck me in the face.

My thoughts jumbled together. I forgot who these people were and why I was so on edge, and there was a blur of motion as the others in the room sprung to action. My brain caught up with reality and I dove back reflexively into the Closet. Tiny's knife scraped across my side under my vest as I went. It didn't do much damage, but I was hit with a wave of notifications.

You have observed the spell Confusion.

Confusion

Spiritual

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: None. Requires consistent focus to maintain, and may only be used on one target at a time.

Requirements: Spiritual Magic

You muddle a creature's thoughts, making it more difficult for them to pay attention or follow what's going on around them. They become easily distracted and fooled, can't maintain focus, and may act erratically.

Your Wisdom is equal to the caster's Charisma. Effect of Confusion has been reduced.

You've been poisoned and afflicted with Paralysis 10.

Exposure Therapy–Poison has reduced the effect.

Reduced effect of Paralysis 10 fails to bypass your resistances.

Paralysis 10 negated!

You gain an additional +1% Toxicity reduction to Exposure Therapy–Poison.

[*Why is someone trying to kill you?*] Grotto's voice came from within my mind, lacking any sense of panic or concern.

[I don't know! I think they're trying to catch me, not kill me.]

I rolled as soon as I hit the ground inside the Closet and hopped back to my feet. Tiny was nowhere to be seen, but Warhammer was charging in. I was still having trouble focusing. How many enemies were there?

[*I do not enjoy the demented sensations I am getting from you. I am going to stabilize your thoughts.*]

Remaining effects of Confusion have been eliminated by Grotto!

My mind cleared up one second before Warhammer took a swing at me. He was aiming for my leg and I twisted to maneuver away from the weapon, but still caught a glancing blow. The hit to my thigh gave me a serious case of dead-leg and I stumbled back, gritting my teeth at the deep muscle pain. The attack hurt a lot more than the damage numbers indicated.

HP: 451/473

The woman who'd been sitting on the couch with glowing fingers darted in behind Warhammer, and threw a beam of dark brown energy at the ground at my feet. The floor grew muddy and slick, but did little more than make my footing unsteady.

You have observed the spell Quicksand.

Quicksand

Physical

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: 1 hour

Requirements: Physical Magic

You churn the ground into a semi-liquid state, causing anyone treading upon it to be sucked down into a slogging mire. Any creature submerged in the liquified material once the spell ends becomes trapped.

For whatever reason the description of that spell didn't match the effect, and I could see from the woman's look of bewilderment that it had fizzled.

They were using skills and abilities aimed at subduing, rather than killing me, but I felt no particular need to give the same courtesy. It's hard to play with kid gloves when you're outnumbered five to one anyway.

I rushed Warhammer, who was lining up another attack. He grinned as I charged.

"Show me what you've got, mage!"

I got inside his reach before he was able to bring his hammer around and I planted a palm on his chest, casting *Oblivion Orb*. However, rather than the familiar *pop* of the spell and a chunk of my target disappearing, the man's armor glowed bright and lines of arcane energy spiraled through the chestpiece.

"Not good enough!" he said as his armor absorbed my spell, but his smile quickly faltered as the lines of energy continued to grow brighter. His breastplate sparked, shattered, and fell to the ground in a dozen fractured pieces. He looked down at the broken equipment. "Wait a second..."

I didn't wait a second. I took advantage of the distraction and reached out to plant another *Oblivion Orb*. A crackling bolt of energy zapped my arm, giving Warhammer time to step back. Artemix was standing just outside of the Closet entrance, wisps of energy trailing off his hand. He looked around the room cautiously, hesitant to enter.

[Grotto! You mentioned traps! You have traps, right?]

[Of course I do. I've curated a glorious, albeit small, collection of lethal devices to harry even the most stalwart of intruders to our Delve.]

[Then why aren't they doing anything?]

[Ah, well they aren't set up with any triggers yet, so they need to be deployed manually. I'm waiting.]

[Waiting for what?!]

[The right moment. If you're struggling with these incompetents, then I will demonstrate some of my illustrious power to assist you.]

Grotto floated down from where he'd been hiding in a shadowy corner near the ceiling of the Closet, catching the attention of the intruders. His eyes glowed with sickly green light.

[Your minds are weak.]

You have observed the spell Commandment.

Commandment

Spiritual/Divine

Duration: 1 minute

Cost: Variable (Dependent on the strength of the desired effect and the target's mental state)

Cooldown: None. Target gains stacking resistance for 24 hours on successful repeat uses.

Requirements: Divine Magic, Spiritual Magic, caster must be psychic.

You inject a proclamation into the target's mind that alters a fundamental truth of reality as they perceive it. An affected target is overwhelmed by the profound gospel of your words, and will react according to their personality, beliefs, and resolve.

I felt Grotto's thoughts reach out beyond the limits of our psychic link, and could practically see the words ripple through the three invaders in my line of sight.

Warhammer screamed, dropping his hammer and clutching the sides of his head, falling to one knee. Glow recoiled, squinting her eyes in concentration against the mental attack, while Artemix's handsome face was marred by a scowl. He stepped into the room and began weaving a new spell, aiming for Grotto.

I tossed a *Dispel* at Artemix, trying out the spell for the first time, and the magic in his hands dissipated into vapor.

A small, ethereal form rushed through the center of the room, the body passing straight through Artemix and Warhammer, coming to a stop directly in front of me. It was the girl Tiny, and a translucent, glowing shortsword appeared from nothing in her hand.

You have observed the spell Conjure Blade.

Conjure Blade

Mystical

Cost: 5 mana

Requirements: Mystical Magic

You summon a blade made of pure magic, sharper than the finest steel and lighter than the smallest feather. The blade is translucent and difficult to see, and will disappear shortly after leaving your hand.

She swept the blade at me and I caught it with my forearms. It dug into my muscle, sending hot blood streaming down my elbows.

The fifth member of the group, Sleepy, finally showed himself, entering the Closet and holding a hand out to Glow's head. Golden energy poured down it, and Glow straightened, casting off Grotto's influence. I got another spell notification, but I mentally dismissed them all to keep from distracting me.

[*Now is the right moment.*] Grotto thought.

I realized that all five of my opponents had entered the Closet. A hum filled the air and reality *flexed*.

The intruders paused, wearing expressions of severe discomfort. For me, the feeling was unusual, but familiar. It was similar to when I was about to travel through the dimensional tear created by my *Shortcut* ability.

A rip formed in the center of the room and a line of dimensional energy pulsed out from its center.

"Dive!" Glow screamed, before hitting the deck. Tiny managed to drop down in reaction to the warning, but Warhammer was still clutching his head, oblivious to anything outside of Grotto's psychic attack. He was on one knee, but it wasn't low enough. The line of dimensional energy tore across the big man's forearms and chest and his cries redoubled as blood began pouring out from the wounds.

Sleepy tried to jump at the last second, but it was a poorly thought out escape. The beam sliced off both of his legs, and he hit the ground hard, blood pumping out from the stumps.

Artemix took the beam straight through the gut, and the man fell to the ground in two. He looked surprised for a moment, staring at his lower body beside him, then went into shock.

The energy passed harmlessly through me, and I darted forward, planting an *Oblivion Orb* into Warhammer's face. This one went off without a hitch, and the orb had gotten a big boost in size from my improved Intelligence stat. A baseball-sized sphere of the man's skull disappeared. He immediately collapsed to the ground, fluid pouring out from where his frontal lobe used to be.

Glow screamed and pulled a sword from her belt, then launched off the ground with inhuman force and speed. She ran the sword straight into my chest, and the tip dug deep, though it didn't make it past my ribs. Her eyes went wide at how ineffective the attack was.

"What *are* you?!" she hissed in my face, then twisted the sword deeper into the wound. "You're supposed to be a mage!"

Tiny kipped up and was behind me as soon as Glow's sword struck home. I felt her own sword dig into my back, the spectral edge biting deep. The pair leaned into their attacks, their blades piercing further into my muscle.

HP: 352/473

I cast *Shortcut* and appeared in front of the Closet door, sending Tiny and Glow crashing into one another. I funneled mana into my *Oblivion Orb*, shaping it like I had against the c'thon.

"What I *am*, is pissed off," I said, then let loose the spiraling beam of annihilation. Glow rolled out of the way, her body a blur with speed, but Tiny was still struggling to right herself after my sudden disappearance. She took the beam through the heart, fell to her knees, then collapsed backwards.

I felt an intense pain in my ankle, and looked down to find Sleepy gripping me, golden energy pulsing down his arm. It turned black and necrotic when it reached his hand, and I felt fierce cold and heat in my leg, accompanied by incredible pins and needles. It felt like my nerves were being scoured away.

Glow hurled herself toward me again.

[*You will despair.*]

The woman stumbled under Grotto's attack, and I used the opportunity to reach out and grab her by the throat. I let Sleepy pump more death into me as I brought her up to my face, lifting her completely off the ground with one hand. I could soak the damage, and I needed to make a point.

"You're gonna sit the rest of this one out," I growled.

Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, her skin pale. Fresh tears streamed down her face and she nodded. I tossed her away, then kicked Sleepy in the side of the head with full force. It was hard enough to send him sliding away a few feet, and broke the grip he had on my ankle. Whether he were unconscious, or dead, I didn't know. But he wasn't moving anymore, and that was good enough for me.

HP: 292/473

Mana: 42/100

I surveyed the room. Three *definite* corpses, one *potential* corpse, a woman who was balled up in the fetal position having a panic attack, and enough blood to make a Jackson Pollock painting on the ground.

“Not the housewarming party I was expecting.”

[*They didn't even bring us a fruit basket.*]

Chapter 31

[What would you do with fruit?]

[The fruit is unimportant. Our future subjects should endeavor to provide tribute whenever they are allowed to bask in our presence!]

I sighed and looked around the room again. What the hell was I supposed to do in this situation?

[If this were Earth, my first move would be to tie Glow up, call the cops, and try to keep Sleepy from dying, assuming he's still alive.]

[Glow? Sleepy?]

[I don't know their names, man.]

[You could ask.]

[What? I was a little busy.]

I went over to Glow and knelt beside her.

"Hey," I said. She had her arms up, covering her head while she wept, but peeked out at me with one terrified eye. "What's your name?"

She shook as she processed the question.

"Mishala," she croaked.

"Ok, Mishala. What about him?" I pointed at the unmoving man missing his legs from the thigh down. He wasn't bleeding, which was not a great sign.

"Jayko."

"Cool. Thanks." I stood and went to check Jayko, feeling for a pulse. Amazingly, he was still alive. I inspected his legs and saw that the wounds had been partially healed, the stumps covered in thick scabs. Some sort of healing ability, I'd have to check the spell list later.

I went to the other three, finding them decidedly deceased.

“We got any rope?” I said.

Turns out, we did have rope. Some of Grotto’s supplies had come bundled together with thick cord and I spent a few minutes binding Mishala’s wrists and ankles. She was well-muscled, so I used three times the rope that I figured a normal person would take to keep tied up. She’d obviously invested in Strength.

“Alright, Mishala, I’ve got a few choices to make here, so I’ll need you to help me make them. Sound good?”

She nodded, still pale, but it looked like the effects of Grotto’s *Commandment* were starting to wear off.

“First, why were you and your crew here?”

“We were hired to bring you to see our client.”

“I gathered that much. Who’s your client?”

“I don’t know. Artemix dealt with the business side of things.”

I glanced over at the bisected man. That was unfortunate.

“Ok, any hints or ideas? Anything at all?”

She licked her lips.

“Probably a noble. Most our jobs come from nobles.”

“What did they want me for?”

“I don’t know. Artemix... he might have. We don’t ask a lot of questions.”

“Earlier you said that I was supposed to be a mage. Where’d you get that idea?”

As far as I knew, there weren’t a lot of people privy to my powerset.

“It was in the dossier.”

“Ok. Where’s the dossier?”

“Artemix burns it after we memorize it.”

“Great.” I took a deep breath. “Where were you supposed to take me?”

“South. To the mountains north of Ravvenblaq.”

That was curious. Did Varrin’s family have something to do with this? It could be a coincidence, since they controlled a huge swath of the country, but Mishala *did* say a noble likely hired them. Maybe his parents weren’t as enamored with me as Varrin thought. But why would they want to kidnap me? It didn’t make sense, so I discarded the theory for now.

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked.

“I haven’t decided.”

“If you don’t let me go, they’re going to kill me. If that’s your plan, you might as well do it yourself.”

“That’s a bit of an escalation, don’t you think?”

“Are you done with your questions?” A hint of anger had entered her voice. She was shaking off most of the effects of Grotto’s intimidation, and my own.

Maybe my soft-handed approach to interrogation was doing me a disservice, but it was hard for me to be rough with someone who was helpless. She hadn’t even been trying to kill me. She might have been trying to deliver me to my death, or endless torture and confinement for all she knew, but it’s not like she killed my dog. If she’d killed my dog this conversation would be going *very* differently.

Not that I had a dog. Did they have dogs here?

I opened my mouth to reply, but she interrupted me.

“Wh-what is that *thing* doing to Drake?”

I turned to see Grotto dragging Drake, formerly known as Warhammer, across the ground toward the obelisk. His tentacles were wrapped around the man's ankles, and the display of strength from his tiny form was impressive.

[Hey, Grotto, what're you doing?]

[Continue your interrogation. I am merely making use of these new resources.]

[Wait, resources?]

Grotto dropped Drake next to the base of the obelisk, and tendrils of energy began to stream from the corpse. Drake's body shriveled as the tendrils turned to thick columns, power pouring out of the body.

[Grotto! What the fuck are you doing?]

After a handful of seconds, all that was left of Drake's body was a blackened skeleton inside his now vastly oversized clothes.

Pocket Delve has absorbed Drake Brutuen: Delver, level 1. Pocket Delve has absorbed 28,000 mana.

Mana held in reserve: 28,000.

The Delve *absorbed* Drake? He was worth twenty-eight THOUSAND mana?!

[Yes. This will go far in cementing our hold in this dimensional space. Our days of limitless conquest grow closer!]

[Grotto! You can't just EAT people!]

[I didn't eat that oversized half-wit. The Delve absorbed his essence. He will be vastly more useful to us as mana than he ever was to anyone while alive.]

[I don't care what you call it! You can't do that!]

[I do not understand your reticence. This is how Delves function. Those that come to conquer either prevail and reap the rewards or are felled and become one with the Delve. It is the implicit contract upon which Delves function.]

[Even if that is the case, these people didn't expect to be Delving!]

[No. They merely wished to invade your home, remove you by force, and deliver you to an unknown fate. Yet they found themselves within our Delve. It is not our responsibility to ensure that those who grace our hallways with violent intent are fully cognizant of the risks they are undertaking. Why does this upset you?]

[I...]

That was a good point. Why *did* I care that much?

Mainly because it felt a lot like hiding a body. By disposing of the evidence it made it look very much like we were guilty of something. This circumstance was a clear case of self-defense, but if we started throwing the bodies into the Delve equivalent of a wood-chipper, we would start raising a lot of legal eyebrows.

While I reflected on my feelings, Grotto started dragging Tiny toward the obelisk. Mishala had begun struggling against her bonds.

“Gods be damned if I let you consume me!” she yelled, worming her body away from me.

“Hey, it's not what it looks like!”

The room was filled with the sounds of rushing energy as Tiny's body desiccated and her flesh turned to ash and blackened bone.

“Grotto, stop for a fucking second!”

Pocket Delve has absorbed Selenay Fintim: Delver, level 1. Pocket Delve has absorbed 28,000 mana.

Mana held in reserve: 56,000.

Mishala angled her body toward the exit and she launched away in a physics-defying display of panic. Unfortunately, her aim was slightly off and she crashed head first into the wall just left of the doorway with a meaty thunk. Her body crumpled to the ground and she went still.

I went to check on her, finding her unconscious, probably concussed, and bleeding profusely from a fresh wound on her scalp. I tore some fabric from her shirt and pressed it to the wound, uncertain of what to do aside from figuring out how to call a Hiwardian ambulance. Fortunately, my new digs came equipped with one of the magic slates I'd seen around, and it allowed me to contact a form of emergency services.

I tied the cloth around Mishala's head, then stood to go summon the authorities.

Pocket Delve has absorbed Artemix Scapegrace: Delver, Level 1. Pocket Delve has absorbed 28,000 mana.

Mana held in reserve: 84,000.

“Well, dicks.”

Myria looked over the bodies with concern, her eyes lingering on the three sets of blackened bones. A level two healer had accompanied her to my lair—I mean house—and was making sure that Mishala and Jayko didn't join their less fortunate party members.

“You said your familiar did this,” Myria said, “to the bodies?”

“He drains mana. Aggressively.” I gave Grotto a dirty look, and the fake c'thon stared back impassively.

I'd closed my inventory portal and carried the bodies out into the foyer before the authorities arrived. My painting of the various Deaths seemed quite a bit more sinister when viewed next to the actual dead.

I hadn't expected the gorgeous, dark-skinned woman to show up. I hadn't really known *who* might show up. But when both Myria and Lito arrived, I have to admit my balls shot up into my body. It had been a little over a fortnight and I was back on their radar. This time with *entire* mutilated bodies, rather than just a severed head. The quality of my atrocities was advancing rapidly.

Fortunately, Myria's presence lacked the effect that it had the first time I'd met her. That was as much of a confirmation as I needed to decide that she'd been using some sort of magical charm effect previously.

I'd already given the duo a rundown of the events, leaving out the matter of the Pocket Delve and being a bit ambiguous as to the specifics of the combat.

“This is messed up,” said Lito. The smoking man had agreed not to smoke inside, chewing on a reed instead. It stuck out of his mouth, making him look like some sort of fantasy cattleman. All he needed was a cowboy wizard hat.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess it turned out looking a bit grisly.”

“Hmm? Oh no, not the corpses. They broke in. Fuck ‘em. I mean the fact that five Delvers were trying to kidnap another.”

“That sort of thing doesn’t happen much?”

He shrugged.

“Delvers get into fights sometimes. People die. Some others steal shit. But kidnapping? It’s rare. Tough to kidnap a Delver. And if you do, how do you hold them? If they’re Strength based, they’ll break through chains and iron bars. If they’re Intelligence they’ll fireball the fuckin’ place. Agile? Slip out of the cuffs. Only way to keep one contained reliably is to have another Delver dedicated to control effects. It’s a hassle.”

“Plus, most Delvers are high profile,” added Myria. “The list of potential perpetrators is small and the amount of scrutiny applied to the crime is high. It’s a risky endeavor.”

“Then you’ve got the fact that most Delvers are rich. Why kidnap somebody for cash when you can go do a Delve and rake it in?”

“So the motive would more likely be political,” said Myria. “Or revenge. But if it’s revenge, why not just *kill* Arlo?”

“Torture,” said Lito. “Could also be trying to get information out of him.”

“So which are you?” said Myria, turning her hazel eyes upon me. “Someone’s political tool, someone’s enemy, or someone with valuable secrets?”

“I’ve done nothing to get involved with politics,” I said. “Not voluntarily. If that’s the reason, it would probably be because someone has something against Xim or Varrin.”

“Oh, some people definitely have problems with Varrin,” said Myria.

“I’d also imagine my list of enemies is small. As far as I know the only one I’ve had here is dead.”

“Hognay’s allies?” said Myria, raising an eyebrow at Lito. He looked exasperated.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Why bother trying to figure it out on your own? Stop messing around and just ask that girl, Myria.”

“But making predictions is fun!” she said, pouting. Lito glared at her as he chewed on his reed. “Fine. Kitha, please wake up the patient.”

The healer nodded and placed a hand on Mishala’s forehead. Her eyelids fluttered open and she looked around the room, dazed. After a few seconds her eyes went wide and she sat up, starting to struggle against her bonds.

“Stop, dear,” said Myria. Mishala looked up at her and froze. Myria smiled down at her.

“Please tell me your name.”

There was a weight behind Myria’s words and Mishala’s expression went from fear to serenity.

You have observed the spell Suggestion.

Suggestion

Physical/Spiritual

Duration: 10 minutes

Cost: Variable (Dependant on the strength of the desired effect and the target’s mental state)

Cooldown: One session per target per day.

Requirement: 20 Charisma

You make a request of a sentient entity who, if affected, will do their best to comply with the request. Once the target is affected, additional requests may be made for the spell's duration. The target is more likely to resist if the request is complex, or is likely to result in immediate physical or emotional harm to the target. The target must be able to understand your request and the effect will end if the target is subjected to a sudden shock, such as taking damage or hearing a loud and unexpected noise. While affected by this spell the target enters into a state of extreme relaxation, but will otherwise act normally.

"I'm Mishala Houndel."

"Nice to meet you, Mishala. I'm Myria. Could you answer some questions for me?"

"Of course."

"That's great! First of all, why did you come here?"

"I am part of a Delver party known as the Artemix group. Our party was hired by a client to locate and retrieve the Delver known as Esquire Arlo."

"Who hired you?"

"I do not know the name of the client. We were contacted by a broker known under the pseudonym 'Typhoon', who provided us with a dossier that included details of the assignment and known information on Esquire Arlo."

Lito grunted when he heard the name, but said nothing.

"Please tell us about Typhoon."

"Typhoon is an information broker and fixer agent here in Foundation. I can't tell you what he looks like because I'm under the effects of an Oath spell that will kill me if I

do. What I *can* say is that he's got a lot of non-Delver thugs employed that handle the normal stuff—intimidation, collections, enforcement—but he's also known to hire Delvers on occasion for jobs. The rewards for the jobs are usually something better than notes.”

“Where do you meet with Typhoon?”

“We receive orders through dead-drops. Dead-drop locations are also part of the Oath spell.”

“Who administered the oath?”

“I don't know their name.”

“What do they look like?”

“They look like an oath that will kill me.”

Myria sighed.

“I hate oaths. Ok, different angle. What does the client want with Esquire Arlo?”

“I don't know.”

“Where were you supposed to take Arlo?”

“South. To the mountains in the north of Ravvenblaq. There's a cave with an old Delve inside. Artemix has a ring with the location inscribed on it.”

Lito turned to the bodies and I pointed out Artemix's bisected corpse. After a brief search through the man's pockets, Lito produced a simple copper ring. I inspected it.

Ring of Calvani

This ring grants access to Delve 0102: The Calvani Caverns. The coordinates for the Delve are engraved on the inside of the band.

“That’s interesting,” I said.

Lito tucked it into a pouch at his waist. Myria turned to him.

“Anything you’d like to ask?” she said.

“Why are you risking your status as a Delver by becoming a criminal? You could be stripped of your titles; have your access to the Delve portals revoked.”

“Please answer Guardian Lito’s questions.”

“I don’t *have* a status,” said Mishala, an edge creeping into her otherwise sedate voice. “I hold no titles. I *already* can’t use the regular Delve portals. I’m not and never was a noble.”

Lito growled low at that.

“How did you sneak into the Creation Delve to become a Delver in the first place?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” said Mishala. “I never went through the Creation Delve.”

“What?” said Myria. “Then how are you a Delver?”

“The Creation Delve isn’t the *only* way to become a Delver.”

Chapter 32

“What do you mean you never went through the Creation Delve?” said Lito. “How did you undergo Creation?”

“We went through the Delve on that ring.”

“You had this ring before you received your mission?”

“Yes. The fact that the client wanted us to bring Arlo there had us curious about who the client was and what we would find when we returned.”

“How’d you get the ring?”

“Artemix is the one who acquired it. He never told us where he got it.”

Myria produced a slate and had Mishala place her hand on it and consent to viewing her Delver profile. She frowned when she looked over the information.

“She’s in the System, but what she’s saying is true. There are no addendums or authorizations made by Central. It’s completely clean except for the System info.”

“She really never went through the Creation Delve?” said Lito.

“There’s no record saying she did, and she’s under the effect of *Suggestion*, so she shouldn’t be lying.”

“Are you aware of any other Delvers,” said Lito, “who underwent Creation without going through the Creation Delve?”

“Just the members of my party.”

The pair asked Mishala a few more questions about the ring and how she located copper Delves to run, but didn’t get much else that was useful. Lito then led her through

a series of questions to determine where she went each day while in Foundation, noting the points where she would no longer discuss her location because of the Oath and where she was able to keep talking.

The effect of the spell ran out, and Mishala clammed up. They repeated the questioning with the legless Jayko, but weren't able to discover much more than they already knew. Lito requested controllers to come and pick up the pair of would-be kidnappers.

"Normal penalty for Delvers committing this type of crime is death," said Lito as the two were hauled off. "All that stuff about becoming a Delver without the Creation Delve is going to keep them alive. For a while, at least."

"Hmm," said Myria, "what's our next move?"

"I've heard of this Typhoon guy," said Lito, producing a map of the city and marking it with Mishala's known whereabouts over the last few days, then circling the area where she was forbidden from discussing where she was. It was a decent chunk of the freight quarter. "Based on what we know about him, I suspect he's a Delver himself. He knows enough about Delvers to hire the right person for the right job. He's got a good understanding of countermeasures for mind control."

"*Suggestion* isn't mind control," Myria said. "It places the subject in a highly receptive and compliant state."

"We're not having this argument again."

"If I bought you drinks until you had the confidence to ask out Ashe, would you say that was mind control?"

"I *don't* have any interest in Ashe."

"So you agree with my argument."

Lito massaged his temples.

“Typhoon has a good understanding of countermeasures for... persuasive techniques of the Delver variety,” he said. “Based on what I’ve heard through my own channels, his strength and resilience are way beyond human, and he’s got a lot of money.”

“Could be exaggerated tales,” said Myria.

“I’ve talked to guys that have seen the aftermath of goons who tried to fight him. It’s not the type of damage you can do with a truncheon unless you’ve got a Strength of at least twenty.”

“Assuming you’re correct, that gives us a male Delver with a Strength build, and some sort of presence in the freight quarter. Unless that’s just where the dead-drop was.”

“No. I know he works out of the freight quarter.”

“How confident are you?” said Myria.

“This is what I do, Myria.”

She smiled and turned to me.

“He’s a Delver that moonlights as a bounty hunter,” she said.

“I’m a bounty hunter ninety-five percent of the year, Myria.”

“A Delver is always a Delver first, and whatever else they’re trying to do second.”

“You’re infuriating.”

“Everything in life is preparation for the next Delve.” She turned to me. “If you don’t see it that way, you’re going to die. At least with gold Delves. For platinum you might also benefit from a healthy dose of prayer, some large donations to an orphanage, helping some geriatrics clean out their attics...”

Lito cleared his throat.

“I’ve already mapped out locations in the freight quarter that are owned by Delves. When we consider the area produced through Mishala and Jayko’s movements and where the oath stops them from speaking, that narrows down the list. Then we consider which are owned by male Delves. Then the publicly available records of the builds of those Delves, looking for Strength focused.”

Lito produced a large, leatherbound journal from thin air, with dozens of colorful tabs poking out from its pages. He threw it open on my console table, making the candle holders clatter and knocking over a small metal sculpture of a fox-like animal.

Kind of rude, honestly.

The journal was filled with precise and crowded handwriting alongside diagrams, hand-drawn portraits, and endless lists. He thumbed through the pages and cross-referenced a few indecipherable notes.

“That gives us three people,” he said. “Lord Henok spends very little time in the city, and High-Lord Amine resides in Timagrín throughout hurricane season which is inconsistent with Typhoon’s known activities. That leaves us with Low-Lord Demarsus.”

I leaned forward and glanced at the thick tome.

“You seem well informed,” I said.

“There aren’t that many Delves,” said Lito. “And most of them don’t make trouble. But when they do,” he gave me a stern look, “I make that trouble disappear.”

“If you’re convinced, then shall we go and have a talk with Low-Lord Demarsus?” said Myria.

“I would enjoy that, yes,” said Lito. He clapped the journal shut, and it disappeared back into his inventory. Then he marched right out the front door.

Myria paused and looked me over.

“I like the new eyes, and I noticed you put some points in Strength,” she said.

“I have raised my Strength score, yes.”

“It looks good on you.”

“You’re going to make me blush, Myria.”

“Care to join us on our raid?”

“I thought it was going to be a talk.”

“I’m sure there will be *some* talking. Don’t you want to face the man who facilitated this home-invasion?”

“I suppose there may be some cathartic effect to that experience. Do you normally take the victim of a crime along when arresting suspects? Seems like a dangerous practice.”

Myria waved a hand at the three sets of blackened bones on the ground.

“I think you’ll be ok. Besides, Lito said that Typhoon has thugs!” She took me by the arm, and her intoxicating presence began to grow thick once more. “I may need you to watch my back.”

“A back worth watching, to be sure.”

She plastered an exaggerated expression of shock onto her face.

“Keep it professional, Arlo.” She gave me a wink and turned to leave, sending me a party invite and motioning for me to follow.

Definitely a back worth watching.

Oh, behave! You've rubbed elbows with merchants, dressed to impress, and made an ill-considered attempt at flirtatious banter. This shameless use of your wit and natural charm has earned you +1 to Charisma!

The freight quarter was south, on the opposite side of the city, and Myria suggested we rent a "land-skiff" to get there.

The land-skiff was a freaking hovercar.

Although, a bit like a small hover-boat in design. It was long and narrow with a curving, pointed shape like it was designed to cut through water, and the top half was open to the air. There was a space for the driver to stand near the bow with two rows of benches along the sides where passengers could sit facing one another.

The device was powered by a ruby chip, and when I asked why I didn't see more of these on the road, Lito informed me that the cost of one was over half the cost of my underground mini-mansion. We set off at a brisk speed, wind rustling my hair and Grotto's feathers fluttering as his tentacles gripped firmly around my arm.

Leaving Formation took us through the noble quarter, which was full of multi-story houses made of brick and marbled stone nestled around the base of the mountain. Moss lawns spaced out the structures, which were surrounded by well-manicured and maintained flower gardens, bushes, and trees. It was very upscale suburban, with a sense of grandeur imparted by the omnipresent view of Foundation's royal palace at the center of the city.

The palace was dark and spired, rising up from the ground with enough height to rival some modern skyscrapers. It was made from stone pulled out of the mountain and plated in the soot-colored material called dark iron that Grotto had used as the central

structure of the Pocket Delve's obelisk. The government had a relative monopoly on the local excavation of the durable and versatile metal.

Hiward was originally a mining colony for the Littan empire, with enslaved Hiwardians forced to pull dark iron from the ground. The discovery of the Creation Delve caused a super-soldier led rebellion, and the mineral rights for the mountains were retained and used by the government as its primary means of funding for the first several decades of Hiward's existence. The demand for, and scarcity of, the metal led to Hiward's meteoric rise as one of the continent's military superpowers.

While the Dark Iron Palace was a stunning testament to Hiward's history and wealth, it couldn't help but feel mundane in comparison to the symbol of Hiward's military might that floated above it.

A flying, dreadnought warship.

The Ascendant was the most powerful military airship among the world's only known airship fleet, made entirely possible by pilfered Delve technology and a kingdom's worth of chips. It was a promise to invaders, and all others who would threaten Hiward's blood-soaked independence.

The nation had the largest population of Delvers, the world's most advanced traditional naval fleet, the most durable fortifications, the most powerful economy per capita, and if that wasn't enough it had got-dang air superiority. Gods above, it made the 'freedom' in my blood sing Yankee Doodle and nearly sent me running to the nearest bay to throw crates full of tea into the damn thing when I first saw it.

That right there was diplomacy.

After an inordinate amount of gawking at the sky, we made our way past the palace, across the river that ran through the center of Foundation, and onto a main

thoroughfare that led us south to the freight quarter. We traveled a few blocks into the quarter, passing between its wide and unadorned timber buildings. Myria stopped the land-skiff, and we dismounted in an empty alley between a pathetic looking pair of buildings, with sagging roofs and rotting boards.

“Hopefully we’re close enough for this to work,” said Lito, pulling the copper ring from his pocket. He lit a fresh cig and took a deep puff, then blew the smoke out over the ring.

The smoke formed a spiraling loop around the metal band, then stretched into a thin line that zipped away from us down the alleyway. I didn’t get a notification, so whatever he’d done wasn’t a spell.

“What kind of ability is that?” I asked.

“Technique,” said Lito. He looked at me for a moment as we walked down the alley, gears turning something over in his mind. He eventually decided to share more. “I have the intrinsic skill *Tracking*. This is an active skill that gets offered when you pick it up.”

“It consumes stamina then? Instead of mana.”

“Yeah.”

Apparently, my *Magical Thinker* ability didn’t work for stamina-based abilities, which left me wondering what defined a ‘spell’. Maybe it had to consume mana to count.

Lito’s technique definitely *looked* like a spell, with the way the smoke snaked through the air and directed us toward some unknown destination. It eventually took us to a main street, then split into a line traveling in two directions. The trail formed just below waist-height off the ground. The right height for a man’s pocket.

“This shows the ring’s path through space,” I said, taking a guess at what I was looking at.

“Yes,” said Lito. “It has some limitations, so it’s better to get as close as you can to the trail you want to follow before using it. The trail north takes us back toward the artisan quarter, which is where we know the Artemix group was staying for the few days they were in town. South takes us toward Low-Lord Demarsus’ warehouse.”

“Why use his own warehouse as a dead-drop location?”

“We know Artemix kept secrets from his allies,” said Lito. “There may not have been a dead-drop.” He shrugged. “We’ll get some answers one way or another.”

We continued down the street, passing by several more poorly maintained warehouses and buildings. We disturbed a group of squatters, who took one look at the uniforms Myria and Lito wore, then scurried off into the shadows.

“We’ll be expected,” Lito grumbled as he watched them flee.

A few minutes later we stopped at a large building that was slightly less dilapidated than its neighbors. A careful study showed that much of the wear and damage was superficial, with the roof and structural features in good shape. Details that I would not have noticed in my prior life.

We entered through the front and into a wide space, where a grizzled and portly woman leaned back in a chair on two legs behind a simple desk made of unfinished wood. It was covered in neat stacks of ledgers and papers, with a bottle of liquor and three glasses set out on the limited workspace free of paperwork.

“M’lords,” she said, looking us over intently, her eyes lingering on Grotto. She took a sip from a fourth glass she held that was a little *too* full of the booze. Rather than two fingers of amber liquid poured into the crystal glass, she’d opted for a whole hand. It

failed to evoke the sense of sophistication it otherwise might have, but she didn't seem like the type to be concerned with appearances.

"Drink?" she asked, gesturing at the bottle.

Lito approached the desk and picked the bottle up, studying the label, then poured himself a measure. He offered it to Myria and I, but we both declined. I didn't feel inclined to experiment with unknown warehouse liquor, especially after catching an acrid whiff from Lito's glass.

He knocked it back in one gulp, then sat the glass on the table upside down as though it were a shot glass. I flinched. That was going to stain the unprotected wood. The man was an animal.

"What can I do ya'?" the woman said. I realized that she wasn't speaking in Hiwardian, but a divergent dialect that I recognized as Loward.

"Seein' fer the boss," said Lito, also in Loward. "Lordlin' Demarsus."

"Aye. Given' a moment then. Can be here or there." She sat her chair back down on all fours, then yelled behind her. A dirty young man no older than fourteen trotted up from between rows of crates. He bent down and she whispered in his ear.

"Who callin'?" the woman asked.

"Lordlin's Lito an' Myria."

"The third'n?" she nodded at me.

"Arlo."

"No-lord?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Third Layer," I said.

She studied my black and emerald eyes, then looked over Grotto's c'thon body more closely. Her already pale Hiwardian skin went a bit paler, then she nodded. Lito

raised an eyebrow at me. My nationality had been redacted the last time he'd seen me, and I saw no reason to disabuse him of the notion that I'd always been a denizen of the Third Layer.

The young man ran off.

"Drinkin' again if ya' wish," said the woman, pointing at the bottle. Lito took another pour, and the woman busied herself scribbling in one of the ledgers.

"You understand what they're saying?" Myria whispered to me.

"I'm good with languages."

The young man returned after a few minutes and led us toward the back of the warehouse.

We walked in silence, surrounded by hundreds of crates and packages stacked on the ground and lining shelves. We went by half a dozen workers, their frames all muscle and scars covered in sturdy leather work clothes. The kind that made more sense in a smeltery rather than a distribution center. Or maybe a militia barracks. More than one had a truncheon hanging from their belt, and I spotted a couple of poorly hidden daggers as well.

It was a short walk to the back of the warehouse, where we entered through a small open door and into an office lit by a dozen hanging glowstones, which was an unexpected dash of opulence in the run-down place. There were no other doors or windows.

The room was dominated by a slab of a man, wearing similar work clothes to the rest of the employees, though his were free of stains or wear. He looked like a competitor for World's Strongest Man—six and a half feet tall, with thick and powerful muscles under a heavy layer of fat. Round face, neat-trimmed beard, shaved head.

He was level fifteen with gold in his soul, five levels higher than Lito or Myria, and the difference in power was palpable.

Maybe we should have brought some backup.

Chapter 33

Demarsus stood as we entered and pressed his thick palms together, giving us a shallow bow.

“Guardian Lito!” he said in a rich baritone. “And Dancer Myria! What a lovely surprise to have such a distinguished pair pay a visit to my humble business.”

“If we’re standing on Delver titles,” said Myria, “then it is wonderful to see you as well, Tanker Dimo Demarsus.” The three of us returned Demarsus’ shallow bow. With my recent acceptance into a Third Layer tribe, we were all of equal social standing.

“I am afraid that I am not familiar with your third,” said Demarsus.

I ran through the list of Delver titles in my mind. They were categorized based on the two highest attributes, and invoking them implied a sense of familiarity between the conversants. Myria’s Dancer title meant Agility and Charisma were her two highest stats. Lito’s Guardian title meant Wisdom and Fortitude. Demarsus’ Tanker designation was Strength and Fortitude. Fortitude was my runaway first, with Wisdom and Intelligence tied for second. That either made me a Guardian, like Lito, or a Strategist. I *wasn’t* familiar with Low-Lord Demarsus, however, and there was no social expectation that I divulge sensitive information about my build on the first meeting.

“Esquire Arlo of the Third Layer,” I said. “And this is Grotto, my bonded familiar.”

Demarsus smiled.

“Always a pleasure to meet a member of the Third Layer. And it is the mark of a good man to take the time to introduce his familiar. It is my honor to make your acquaintance, familiar Grotto.”

[You may tell him that such insipid flattery will not serve to overcome the sin he has committed by antagonizing my host.] Grotto crossed two of his tentacles over his front, eyes narrowing at Demarsus.

“Grotto can be wary of strangers,” I said.

“Of course, I take no umbrage,” said Demarsus. “A c’thon, correct? Curious creatures at the best of times. Alien minds can be difficult to decipher. It speaks even more highly of you to be able to bond to such a creature. Please, let’s sit.”

We sat in well-worn but comfortable leather armchairs, with Demarsus behind his desk. Lito produced a cigarette and paused before lighting it, until Demarsus gave him a go-ahead gesture. The young man who’d led us inside disappeared, closing the door behind him, but not before I noticed a small cluster of warehouse ‘employees’ standing outside, wearing dark expressions.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” said Demarsus, plucking a fancy bottle and a few fluted glasses from the bar cart beside him. He poured himself a glass of bubbling green liquid, then held a hand out to the other glasses. Lito nodded and the large man poured a second. I accepted a glass as well, out of curiosity. It looked a little like absinthe, which I enjoyed on occasion. Myria once again declined.

I briefly wondered about the wisdom of accepting a drink from a potential enemy. Then again, with System notifications I’d know if I’d been poisoned. This was also Lito’s wheelhouse, and if he was game then I felt somewhat safe. I took a sip and it had a light and pleasant pumpkin flavor behind the burn of alcohol, like a boozy fall morning.

Lito drained his glass in one go, then sat the flute back down. Rightside up, this time.

“Ever heard the name Artemix?” Lito asked.

I choked on my drink. I thought there'd at least be some sort of social dance before getting into the meat of the matter.

Demarsus' brow furrowed and he studied the liquid in his flute.

"This isn't a social call, then," he said. "Part of an investigation?"

"Please answer the question."

Demarsus took a deep breath, then set the glass down. He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his gut.

"*Esquire* Arlo," he said. "Such a title does not exist in the Third Layer. You also don't look like a typical denizen, so I presume you were adopted into a tribe?"

"I was," I said, then looked over at Lito. The man sat placidly, studying Demarsus.

"Esquire. A title given by nobility to peasants they deem wealthy enough that they might no longer be ignored." He held up a hand. "I mean no offense. I was also born of... *meager* heritage. Curious, isn't it. To be raised amongst the masses and then to find ourselves in the midst of the 'elite'."

"It's an experience," I said hesitantly.

"All of the Hiwardian nobility have humble beginnings if you look far enough into the past," he said. "Not even that far! I suspect Guardian Lito's great-grandparents were slaves as children."

"Is there a point to this, Demarsus?" said Lito, his eyes studying the room with an intensity I'd not seen in him before.

Myria looked at Demarsus with distant fondness, but I noticed that she adjusted her posture from relaxed to coiled, uncrossing her legs and placing her hands on her chair's arms.

Something tickled the back of my mind and I felt an odd sense of familiarity. I latched onto it, trying to figure out what had caused it. A familiar scent? A sound from my past? No, it was more of an impression. Like a person's mannerisms who'd I'd not seen in a while.

[*Your aura has found something,*] Grotto whispered into my mind. [*Focus on it.*]

"A point?" said Demarsus. "Yes, I believe so. We're repeating the mistakes of our past, Lito. The Hiwardian nobility have grown complacent and oppressive."

"Oh gods," said Myria, "are you about to give us your manifesto?"

Demarsus let out a single, sharp laugh.

"Ha! Myria, my dear, I wonder how you would have been eaten and spat out if you'd been born in a village, rather than on an estate."

"I don't even know what that's supposed to mean."

"That's exactly the problem with your type. No idea what it takes to scrape out a life at the bottom. You were born with all the looks and luxury the world can afford one person."

Myria scowled, and Demarsus took a sip from his flute.

I closed my eyes and focused on the mental image created by my aura. After dozens of hours meditating and practicing inside my Pocket Closet, the state of clarity came easily, but took time. There was something nearby, something that I had felt before.

"Enough," said Lito. "I've asked you a question. Answer."

"You know, your specific skill set is a mixed blessing," said Demarsus. "What am I to say? No? Of course you'd know it was a lie. Of a hundred investigators, you alone have spent so much time and effort building yourself for work *outside* of the Delves. The

truth-seeker. Tell me, how did those skills help you when your brother was dying to mana monsters?”

Lito shot out of his chair, Myria quick behind him, though I didn't see this with my eyes. I saw it with my aura, the perception centered on Grotto. I continued to extend it around me. There was something below me. *Someone* below me. I knew them. Who was it?

“Xim!” I shouted, my eyes snapping open as I jumped up. The other three in the room turned to me.

“Yes?” said Myria. “What about her?”

“She's here! Below us!”

Lito pulled a glass orb from thin air. It was filled with a white, smoky substance.

“I'd rather you didn't,” said Demarsus.

Lito crushed the orb.

A wave of light pulsed through the space, and Demarsus' leather work clothes dissolved into mist, revealing full plate armor. It was dark green and gilded, the helm winged and crackling with energy. There was a pair of wicked looking one-handed battle axes on the desk before him. Part of the wall behind Demarsus melted away, revealing a reinforced door made of dark iron.

“Your illusionist is talented,” said Lito.

“Not talented enough,” said Demarsus as he stood. “Though it was not meant to fool you, of all people.”

The axes whipped up off the desk and into his hands with unseen force. The door behind us tore open, and I turned to find a dozen men and women equipped in

cobbled-together armor. None of them were Delvers, but they each held some implement of death. Short Swords, daggers, maces, truncheons, crossbows.

“Leave the officials to me!” Demarsus yelled. “The third, Arlo, is only level one.” He pointed an ax at my chest. “Receive my strength, and restrain him for me!”

Demarsus let out a roar that shook the air.

“Look! Thugs!” said Myria, leaning into me. “Have fun watching my back!”

The bodies of the mundane humans behind us swelled, muscles and veins bulging, their eyes growing bloodshot.

All hell broke loose.

I watched a lot of martial-arts movies when I was young. I loved seeing Jackie Chan take on an entire gaggle of gangsters with fists, kicks, mop-handles, and the creative and aggressive use of pinball machines. Those types of fight scenes were known in the movie business as ‘take-a-ticket’ fights. The choreography was designed to show a single fighter going up against a group of enemies in a way that made it look like they were fighting everyone at once, when they were really fighting them one at a time.

This did not reflect reality.

At first, my plan was to bottle neck the group in the doorway and fight them one or two at a time. They were all jacked up on whatever magical effect Demarsus had thrown out, and I had no idea how strong a level fifteen effect would be when applied to normal humans. That idea was immediately discarded when Lito placed a foot in my back and launched me out of the room.

I crashed through three of the thugs before landing and sliding across the stone, my short trip brought to an end when I hit a crate hard enough for the wood to crack. I

sat up in time to see the timber walls on either side of the office explode, shredded into splinters by Demarsus' axes, which spun like buzzsaws through the air. One of the axes slapped back into Demarsus' hand, while another was buried in a translucent, glowing shield held by Lito. Myria was nowhere to be seen.

Demarsus kicked the solid hardwood desk aside with the same effort I'd use to kick a branch out of my path, and the heavy piece of furniture slid across the floor with an awful wrenching sound. Two of the legs snapped, and it buried itself a foot deep into one of the office's remaining walls.

Then, the horde was on me.

I'd been distracted by the spectacle, and a sword and two truncheons planted themselves into my limbs as I held them over my body for cover. Another pair of goons thrust daggers at my legs and I heard the twang of a crossbow as something pierced hard into my leg, way too close to my crotch for comfort.

I used *Shortcut* and appeared in the air above the group, attackers stumbling when I disappeared. That was a technique I was starting to enjoy.

None of the attacks had done *too* much. While Demarsus' buff allowed them to bypass my Fortitude's resistance to mundane damage, they still didn't have the strength to inflict serious harm. I also didn't want to magically massacre a bunch of non-Delvers, so I decided to take my new physical stats for a spin.

The thing about falling through the air is that you don't have any leverage. Thus, when I swung for the back of one sword-wielding goon's head, I lacked the proper footing to give much force to the swing. The inertia of gravity made up for it. My fist connected a little off target, but I felt the satisfying thunk of flesh as I punched into the

back of the man's shoulder. I crashed to the ground on top of him, quickly righting myself and landing another blow to the side of his head. He went limp.

[Feel like helping out, Grotto?]

[Help? As uncomfortable as I am with the sensations being sent to me by our Shared Fate curse, my abilities would leave this rabble with brains dribbling from their ears. Brutalizing the common masses shows poor leadership and will not serve to benefit our new world order.]

Two workers jumped onto my back while Grotto espoused his political theory on violence. A sword thrust and a crossbow bolt hit me from either side. I stood, taking both men for a ride and leapt backward. I body slammed one onto the concrete floor, the other managing to let go and stumble away from me before I launched. The man at my back was left struggling to breathe, his diaphragm crushed.

I kipped up and took a truncheon to the face. The weapon cracked, and I gave the woman holding it a death glare. She froze, wide-eyed, and I snatched the blunt instrument from her hand, then hurled it away.

Two men grabbed me by either arm while the disarmed woman delivered a kick to my knee, buckling my leg. I fell to kneeling as the men tried to press my arms back into locks. The tip of a shortsword came thrusting toward my face. I ducked my head in time for the blade to catch along the top of my skull, cutting a gash across the top and back of my head. The woman piled on me as well and I grunted and shook my body like a wet dog. My Strength of seven wasn't enough to break out of three different holds from magically augmented and disgruntled warehouse workers. That was fine. I cast *Shortcut* again, appearing behind a crossbowman, who was lining up another shot.

While a Strength of seven may not have been enough to roleplay Hercules beating up the town guard, when combined with my Speed of five, the right hook I delivered to the crossbowman's ear had the power and speed of a heavyweight boxing champion. The man crumpled.

I backpedaled as the remaining melee fighters spun to find me, sidestepped another crossbow bolt, then threw up an arm where a second dug into my flesh. I took the time to rip it out, then stepped into a truncheon swing from the closest fighter and ran an elbow across his nose.

Blood sprayed from the freshly broken feature and I grabbed him by the collar, then shoved him toward a man and woman coming closer with shortswords. They caught their ally, careful not to accidentally skewer him.

I barrelled forward and between two men wielding truncheons and they swung at my back. I got low to the ground and broke past them like a linebacker, then took another bolt to the chest as I found one of the two remaining crossbowmen. I hit him in the throat with two knuckles, then stripped him of his weapon.

He coughed and sputtered, abandoning defense to clutch at his throat while I laid him out with a combination jab-hook-uppercut. I cast *Shortcut* again, getting behind the final crossbowman. I stomped the back of his leg, then grabbed the right side of his face as he fell and helped guide it into my rising left knee.

The fight was messy. I didn't know any graceful or efficient martial arts like kung-fu. I didn't even have basic jiu-jitsu training. If a single one of my opponents was even a semi-trained MMA fighter I would have been outclassed. At least, assuming our stats were similar.

As it was, however, these men and women weren't trained hand-to-hand combatants. I could tell they each had a basic understanding of the weapons they swung. Hell, the crossbowmen had about an eighty percent accuracy when firing, which seemed pretty fucking good. But they were bar-room brawlers and back-alley brigands, not soldiers. I took them apart through sheer force and the unfair tactical advantage of a short-range teleport spell.

I did my best to disable my opponents, but there was a very fine line between cracking skulls hard enough to take someone out of a fight and hard enough for them to shed their mortal coil. I crossed that line a couple of times, but for the most part I curated a mass of moaning flesh on the ground. Those that were still alive and conscious gripped broken bones and dislocated limbs, guttural sounds of pain choking their throats.

[The symphony of agony is sublime when performed by the orchestra of our fallen adversaries.]

[I was already feeling kind of nauseous, Grotto.]

Would you like to acquire the intrinsic skill Unarmed?

I dismissed the notification and turned my attention back to the fight between the three gold combatants.

Demarsus' axes cut swaths of destruction through walls, crates, and shelves. The force of his blows sent Lito flying, the smoking man's shield flaring with blue light as it protected him. Myria flowed around the armored man, a thin rapier finding gaps in his armor. Her form shifted in color and hue to match the background, like the alien from

Predator had taken the type of ballet classes they teach at Russian assassin academies. Myria then disappeared, emerging from nowhere a few seconds later to plant her narrow blade into Demarsus' back.

For all her attacks did, Demarsus' face was plastered with a bloody grin.

Ok, I thought to myself, how the fuck do I help with this?

Chapter 34

As I tried to figure out an approach, Lito tossed a lit cigarette into the air which exploded out into a dense cloud of smoke. Demarsus was obscured by the smokescreen, but the sounds of coughing and retching could be heard within. Lito chanted over his one-handed warhammer and the head began to glow with white-hot heat. Molten metal dripped off its head, but the weapon kept its form. Lito spun and slung sprays of the liquid fire into the smoke. The ground—and Demarsus’ armor—burst into small blazes where it landed.

There was an ear-splitting crack, and the smoke billowed out from Demarsus’ form. He’d swung one ax into the ground hard enough to churn the stone at his feet, sending out a pressure wave from the impact and chunks of fresh gravel spinning through the air with the force of bullets. Two of his downed allies caught a piece, leaving one man on the ground with a pool of blood growing out from his shredded chest.

Myria’s camouflage faded and she appeared, stumbling back and grasping a wound in her hip.

Demarsus let out another roar, and blood-red runes flowed in the air around his body. The nascent flames on his armor sputtered out as the wind around him swirled. The sigils crashed into Demarsus, branding his armor with bloody gashes. The metal wept blood.

He shot forward, blurring through the air and crashing into Lito, shattering the investigator’s shield with an ax. Lito spun away from the force, but threw his hammer at Demarsus. It still glowed white hot, and a molten chain extended out to the weapon from Lito’s wrist. The hammer smashed into Demarsus’ chest with a spray of sparking metal, though the big man shrugged off the hit. The chain continued to extend, growing

slack and then wrapping itself around Demarsus. His arms snapped to his side as he was bound and the sounds of pops and sizzles filled the air as his armor was scorched.

Myria reached a hand out toward Demarsus, violet light flowing from her fingers and through the air to encircle his skull. The berserker's winged helm crackled more brightly with arcing energy, interrupting Myria's spell. She followed up with a different one, but Demarsus let out another shout that sent reality trembling and shattered the molten chains. Beams of radiant white light poured from his body, boiling away the dripping blood on his armor. A gale of wind filled the room.

A wave of spell notifications poured in as I watched the high level combat.

You have observed the spell Bulwark.

You have observed the spell Camouflage.

You have observed the spell Aegis.

You have observed the spell Firebrand.

You have observed the spell Blood Pact.

You have observed the spell Heroic Might.

You have observed the spell Gale.

You have observed the spell Distraction.

You have observed the spell Entice.

I stood and watched the display with awe. I could feel the pressure of Demarsus' soul growing, bursting at the seams of his body. Whatever might he'd displayed up until this moment was a pale shadow compared to what he was invoking now. I took an

involuntary step back, feeling as though I was staring into the mouth of an industrial shredder.

If I got too close, I'd be eviscerated. I knew in my bones that an easy toss of one of his vicious axes would split me in two.

Myria pointed at me with a bloody hand and her presence dominated my attention.

“Go through the door in the office,” she said. Her voice was calm, but it carried through the gale of Demarsus' ability as though she were right next to me. “Find Xim. This entire place is about to get annihilated.”

Her words settled on me, and I began sprinting toward the gutted remains of the office, Grotto soaring behind me.

The door was made of dark iron and covered in mana-woven symbols. I gave the handle a quick tug, but it was locked. It was worth a shot. I tried casting *Oblivion Orb* on the lock, but the runes flared and the spell failed.

[*Perhaps a more subtle approach,*] Grotto thought to me.

I looked over the sigils, seeing threads of mana running through them. I'd been through the basics of mana weaving during my library time, but hadn't yet developed a comprehensive understanding of the runes. Still, I knew enough to find the central nexus of the spell. It was rudimentary, meant to keep out non-Delvers and deter the nosy rather than serving as a robust security measure.

I placed my hand on the convergence of mana and cast *Dispel*, funneling mana into the cast until I felt the enchantment dissipate. I didn't have enough mana to destroy the weave, but it would be non-functional for a few hours.

Your Mystical Magic skill has increased to level 2!

I threw the door open as the wind from Demarsus started sending shelves crashing to the ground, and descended a wooden staircase lit by white glowstones. It led into an earthen basement, walls and roof held up by a skeletal framework of wooden beams. The earth smelled fresh, and the wood was lightly colored, unstained by age. The basement was freshly dug.

A few utilitarian rugs had been tossed onto the packed ground, though they were marred by dirty tracks. A strange scent wafted through the damp air, like cloves and honey. The basement was small, and I quickly found a languid figure sitting on a moth-eaten couch.

Their feminine form was long and lithe, with a wide brimmed hat worn low over the eyes. They were dressed in tight leathers, dyed dark, and held a long, thin pipe. Gentle smoke wafted from the end.

A delicate snout poked out from beneath the hat, with whiskers that twitched when I stepped closer. She was a Littan.

There was a low table before her, upon which sat a small bowl filled with a grainy, crystalline substance. As I watched, the Littan took a pinch from the bowl and sprinkled it into the pipe, then took a glowing rod from a pocket and packed it down. It sizzled. She took a puff and sat back, peeking at me with a ruby eye from beneath the hat's brim.

A deep thud sounded from the battle above, shaking the room and sending trails of dry earth falling from the ceiling.

There were four twin beds lining the wall behind the woman, and I sensed delicate threads of mana trailing from her body to two of them. I stepped to the side and

saw Xim on one bed, sleeping. In the other was another woman with dark brown, almost black, skin. The sides of her face and tops of her arms were covered in... scales? Like Xim and I, she was a level one platinum.

The Littan in the hat was another level fifteen, all gold.

I swallowed, trying to figure out what angle to take, but the woman spoke first.

“You must be Arlo.”

“Yeah. Starting to feel like I’m famous or something.”

She sat her pipe down with care, then took off her hat. She ran a hand over her ears.

“Demarsus made a mess of this. What happened to Artemix?”

“Dead.”

“How?”

“My familiar cut him in half.”

Her eyes flicked to Grotto, then back to me.

“The rest of his group?”

“Hammer guy’s dead. Sneaky girl’s dead. Other two are alive.”

“Captured?”

“I guess. I don’t know what they did with them after taking them from my place.”

“Jayko scryed you. You were alone. How’d they end up losing so badly?”

“Is that why I felt like there were eyes on my back? Eh, my ass-kicking technique is a trade secret, I’m afraid.”

She gave me a weary grin, then stood and put her hat back on. She picked up her pipe, then scooped some of the crystal substance into a drawstring pouch and pocketed them both.

“Not for the faint of heart,” she said, nodding to the bowl. “In case you were tempted to try some.”

“I learned not to accept unknown drugs from strangers back at Bonnaroo in 2009.”

“Can’t say I know what *that* means.” She began approaching me, and I tensed. I had no chance if it came to a fight. She stopped beside me and placed a hand on my shoulder. An icy sensation ran down the length of my body.

“My mission doesn’t include fighting,” she whispered in my ear. The hair on the nape of my neck stood on end. “Maybe we can play when you’re a little older.”

She swept past me and disappeared up the stairs. The thin tendrils of energy linking her to Xim and the other young woman disintegrated.

My eyes lingered on the steps, worried that the Littan might change her mind and come back, until I felt a presence behind me. I turned around to find the scaled woman standing well inside my personal bubble.

“Jesus,” I said. “You snuck up on me.”

She stared up at me with deep brown eyes that were a bit too large for a ‘normal’ human. Her skin was dark chocolate and transitioned into shiny black scales along the sides of her face, wrapping around her head. She had a mane of blonde hair, though none grew where the scales were, giving her the appearance that it was shaved off on the sides like the lead singer of a 2016 punk-metal band. She blinked with a set of nictitating membranes, and a lizard-like tail swayed behind her.

“I’m Nuralie,” she said.

I hesitated, my mind taking a second to process that she’d just told me her name.

“Hi, Nuralie. I’m Arlo.”

She reached to her left, maintaining eye contact, and plucked a flower from thin air. She held it up toward me.

“Did you save me?”

The petals of the flower were gently dripping water.

“Well, I came down here and the woman keeping you captive just sort of... left.”

Nuralie looked over my shoulder at the stairs, then down at the flower, then back to me.

“Should I give this to *her* then?”

“I think she’s gone already.”

She paused, then reached down and took my hand. The backs of her arms and hands were also covered in scales, but her palms were calloused and warm. She placed the flower in my hand and wrapped my fingers around it. Looking satisfied with the gesture, she turned and studied the room, her gaze stopping on Xim.

The cleric was still unconscious, and Nuralie walked over to her to feel her forehead. She frowned, then bent over and placed her amphibian ear close to Xim’s mouth and nose. She placed a thumb on Xim’s wrist for a few seconds, before standing up straight. She stared at Xim for a moment, her body so still she looked rigid, then reached out and plucked a new item from the air, a small glass bottle.

She pulled a dropper from the bottle and brought it to Xim’s lips.

“Wait,” I said. Nuralie froze for a second again, then looked at me.

“Why?”

“What are you giving her?”

She blinked, this time with her eyelids.

“A compound made of basarra root, limpra oil, and underleaf in an alcoholic solution made from fermented tunsra liver and mixed one part per thousand with wind essence, left under the crescent moon for six hours on a cloudless night and stored for at least thirty days in a Madrin-crystal bottle.”

“Uh,” that was comprehensive. “Ok, but what does it *do*?”

“Stimulant.”

Less comprehensive.

“Why are you giving it to her?”

“She is suffering from an overexposure to mind-affecting magic. Probably spiritual-based. Likely mixed with a narcotic depressant.” Pause. “She smells unruly. I expect her mind was difficult to tame.”

“You can tell all that?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to mix stimulants and depressants?”

Pause.

“Are you a doctor?” she asked.

“No. Are you?”

“I am not.”

“Then why did you ask if I was one?”

“You might have known something that I did not.”

The building above us rumbled again and dirt fell between the beams above us. I was getting pretty dusty.

“So you don’t know if that’s safe.”

“It is safe. I have tested it many times.”

I opened my mouth to protest more, but Nuralie quickly dripped two drops between Xim's lips.

"Though I have not tested it on a denizen of Spiritus."

Xim shot upright and took a few heaving breaths, then looked around with wide eyes. She and Nuralie locked gazes and *both* of them froze in that uncanny manner. Then Xim noticed me and smiled.

"I got kidnapped!" she said, sounding almost happy about it, though her smile turned menacing. "I got kidnapped," she said, this time a whisper, her hands balling into fists and gripping the sheets.

She snapped up onto her feet and took in the room.

"This is shitty for a dungeon," she said. "The ambience is all wrong."

"There should be skulls," said Nuralie. "Some well-worn implements of torture and dismemberment."

"Yes!" said Xim. "And chains! There are zero chains here!"

"Not even a small cage for a prisoner."

"You've gotta have at least one 'I can't stand up or lay down in this' cage."

Gods above. They were made for each other.

"I'm Xim!" Xim said, a bit too loud.

"I am Nuralie."

"Why does my mouth taste like a burning swamp?"

"She gave you a stimulant," I said.

"I like it! Can I have some more?"

"No," said Nuralie, tucking the bottle back into her inventory. There was an incredible crash from above.

“So what’s going on?” Xim asked. “Why am I here? Why are *you* here, Arlo? Why are you covered in blood again? Is it yours or someone else’s? What is a loson doing in this poorly-designed Hiwardian dungeon? Wait, are we still in Hiward? Did I get kidnapped to Eschendur?” She rattled off the questions like a machine gun, only stopping when her magazine was empty.

“We are not in Eschendur,” said Nuralie.

“Still in Foundation,” I said. “An attempt was made to kidnap me as well. My assailants are dead or captured and Lito and Myria are above fighting a local crime lord who was the facilitator of the ‘nappings. I came down here and found a level fifteen gold Littan keeping you both unconscious with a spell of some kind. Also, it’s my own blood. Mostly.”

“She was Littan?” Nuralie asked, her face darkening with the first real sign of emotion I’d seen from her.

“How did you know she was gold?” Xim asked. “Did she tell you, or is this another one of those Arlo things?”

“It’s an Arlo thing.”

Nuralie looked between us, the cloud of anger that had crossed her face fleeing as quickly as it had come. She noticed the bowl of crystalline substance the Littan had left on the small table and went over to it, giving it a sniff.

“We should evacuate now,” I said. “I think this place might collapse.”

“Right,” said Xim. She began to pull a set of her padded robes and armor from her inventory.

“Evacuating,” I said. “Not fighting.”

“Oh, I’m fighting *somebody*,” said Xim, throwing robes over her clothes.

I made a mental note never to do any of the ol' nose candy with Xim.

Nuralie, meanwhile, had pulled a large glass vial from her inventory and scooped a healthy amount of the Littan drug into it. She froze for a few seconds, then picked up the entire bowl and put both in her inventory. She caught me eyeing her as she looted the substance.

“Littans make good night-rush,” she said. It sounded like it was a tough thing for her to admit.

Another rumble and a clod of dirt the size of a bowling ball fell from the ceiling. Xim finished throwing on her gear and the three of us rushed up the stairs.

Chapter 35

The scene above looked like a natural disaster in action. All the shelves in the warehouse had fallen, crates were shattered and splintered, and debris lined the floor. Part of the roof had collapsed and there was a mighty windstorm sending sharp shards of wood and gravel hurling through the air. Demarsus was at the center of the squall.

Lito's uniform was ragged and torn. Blood covered his face and I saw a couple places where Demarsus' axes had hit home. He leapt from a pile of rubble, throwing his burning chain at the massive Tanker, who brought an ax up to catch it.

The chain wrapped around the ax and Demarsus heaved back, pulling Lito toward him through the air. He brought his second ax up to cleave down on Lito as he drew close. Myria appeared from nowhere, a deep crimson stain on her uniform from the wound at her side, and drove her rapier into Demarsus' armpit. The big man shouted and dropped the ax, then drove his fist downward at Myria, who danced away from the attack, though she stumbled under the tempest.

Demarsus' armor was cracked and dented, and blood ran down his legs from Myria's countless sneak attacks. Still, the big man moved as though uninjured and I wasn't confident that the pair would take him down before one, or both of them, were killed.

"Is he gold too?" Xim asked, shouting a bit over the wind.

"Yeah! Tanker!"

"We're way underleveled for this!" she said.

"That's why I said evacuate!"

"Somebody's going to die, though!"

"You want it to be us?"

“I have a new skill I can use from range! I can even charge it!”

Nuralie crawled next to me on all fours, then stood and leaned *very* close to me.

“He’s behind all this, yes?” she said.

“No, he’s a middleman!”

“Then we must speak with him.”

I squinted at her, then waved at the room.

“That’s what *they’re* trying to do! He’s not feeling talkative!”

Nuralie froze, then pulled a massive frog the size of a house cat from her inventory. The wind gusting around her split and swirled, leaving her untouched by the artificial storm. She pulled out two more frogs for Xim and I. I realized I still held the flower she’d handed to me, which continued to drip, and put it away into my inventory before taking the amphibian. The wind died around us.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Mountain wind-frog,” said Nuralie. “A most holy creature.”

She placed her frog on her shoulder, where it gripped her with its sticky, padded toes. Xim and I copied the move.

Even the lethal debris was swept aside by the mighty frog’s power.

“What’s the plan of attack?” asked Xim.

“There is no plan!” I said. “What can we even do to that guy?”

“Distract him,” said Nuralie. “Insult his clan-mates. Pray for the gods to smite him.”

“I’ll focus on that last one,” said Xim. She knelt and gripped her scepter, then began to mutter under her breath. Crimson light poured from her weapon.

“What do you think his lowest stat is?” Nuralie asked.

I pondered it for a second.

“Luck.”

“Not useful. Other than that.”

I gave it deeper consideration, and thoughts sped through my mind faster than I’d ever experienced.

Demarsus was level fifteen, which gave him at least one-hundred-and-thirty-eight stat points to distribute. He was a Tanker, which made his two highest stats Strength and Fortitude. Many of his moves didn’t trigger my *Magical Thinker* perk, which meant they were stamina based, but several of his skills *had* triggered it.

That, on top of this persistent hurricane, indicated that he was also built into mental stats. Wisdom for sure, and maybe Intelligence to some degree. He was a high level Delver leading a second life as a crime lord, and his battle shout at the beginning of the fight had a strong mental effect on his goons. That led me to believe he’d also focused on Charisma. A pretty wide build.

He moved quickly, but not inhumanly so, unlike his strength which looked to be at the level of a Greek demi-god. His strikes were precise and he had decent footwork, but was nowhere near the level of Myria. So, Strength and Fort as his mains, with Wisdom and Charisma as his secondaries. Likely some Intelligence, and given his combat performance and raw number of stats available, he probably invested a few points in Speed and Agility to boost his physical combat style.

“Speed or Agility,” I said.

“Sticky-juice, then,” said Nuralie, producing two liter-sized glass jars from her inventory. She thrust one into my hands.

“What do I do with this?”

“Throw it at him. It’s sticky.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s also flammable.”

“We’re fifty feet away and if you haven’t noticed it’s fuckin’ windy out there.”

Pause.

“We get closer.”

The battle before us was hardly stationary. Lito and Demarsus leapt twenty feet at a time as they barreled into one another and traded blows. How was I supposed to get close to that?

There was also the risk of Demarsus throwing an ax at one of us like a buzzsaw and instantly cleaving us in twain. I *might* have the Fortitude to take a hit, but I doubted Xim or Nuralie did.

Nuralie got low to the ground and started crawling closer to the fight, cradling the jar in one arm. Her movement on three limbs was surprisingly quick, and she made her way into the thick of it in a handful of seconds. I bit my lip and tried to figure out my approach, when Myria went down.

She’d appeared just behind Demarsus, preparing for another thrust between the plates of his armor, but Demarsus was ready. He quickly pivoted and thrust a kick at her, connecting center mass with his armored foot. Myria shot through the air like a bottlerocket, her rapier flying from her hand. She crashed into a pile of broken shelves, boxes, and spilled goods fifteen feet away and her body went limp amongst the detritus.

She didn’t get back up.

“Fuck me,” I said, then cast what was quickly becoming my favorite spell: *Shortcut*. I used my signature move and appeared slightly above Demarsus, then hurled the jar down onto the back of his shoulders.

It smashed open and the liquid inside poured out like water, before becoming thick and sticky when exposed to the air. I landed and jumped back as Demarsus parried an attack from Lito, sending the smaller man flying. He spun to face me.

“Hello there,” I said.

Demarsus rushed me, unhindered by the goo, ax raised.

I cast *Shortcut* again and appeared behind him.

He turned and hurled an ax at me.

To which I cast *Shortcut* again. I’d have loved to keep that game up for a lot longer, but my next attempt failed to send me anywhere.

Your mana is too low to cast *Shortcut*!

I may have forgotten to pay attention to my mana bar.

Demarsus snarled and fixed back onto me, ax returning to his hand. He raised it to throw another attack, when Nuralie’s jar of sticky-juice smashed into his helmet. That was a much better throw than mine, since it got into his eyes.

The man may have legendary strength, but how strong did that make his eyelids?

As soon as Demarsus blinked to try and clear the slime from his vision, his eyes were glued shut. He dropped an ax and reached up to pry them open manually, but that gave Lito time to recover and lay a vicious blow onto the man’s helm with his hammer. His head bent sideways then snapped back upright like a training dummy. Demarsus

screamed in rage and swung his ax wildly at Lito, but it was poorly aimed and the Guardian dodged it easily.

Demarsus wiped at his eyes, then was caught on the backfoot when Lito went in for another series of blows. The sticky-juice sizzled where Lito's glowing hammer hit, and a flame popped up here and there, but it wasn't fully catching. Demarsus was beginning to recover and managed to shove Lito away to wipe at his eyes again. Then the light of heaven descended upon Demarsus.

If heaven's light was the color of fiery blood, that is.

A pillar of crimson light shone down on Demarsus, heat pouring out of it. It narrowed into a fine beam and a bright pulse of energy shot down, crashing into him and lighting up the two liters of sticky magic napalm he'd been coated with.

Demarsus became an inferno, flames consuming his body and flaring high enough to lick the ceiling. I shielded my face from the heat, and Nuralie skittered away from the fight. The frog on my shoulder let out a distressed *ribbit* and I began putting distance between myself and the burning man for my new pet's safety. There was a deadly, twisting bonfire where Demarsus once stood, and the man gave zero fucks.

Demarsus' pair of axes spun out of the flaming vortex, moving around him in a spiral. The attack was a simple arc, however, not aimed at anyone in particular. That and the wind dying off signaled that the Tanker was struggling within the flames, even though he continued to move and fight without slowing. I backed off even further, stopping near Myria and checking up on her.

The moment I reached to feel for a pulse, a dagger was at my throat. She peeked one eye open and grinned.

"You're not Demarsus," she said, the words strained. "Pity."

“You were playing dead?”

“You’d be amazed how often it works.” She let her arm drop back down on top of the pile of wreckage she laid in. “Although it wasn’t much of an act.” She groaned and held her side.

I turned to find Xim, who was already closing the distance between us. She knelt next to Myria and began casting a series of healing spells.

Lito took advantage of Demarsus’ blindness and wrapped another set of burning chains around him. The crime lord struggled against the bonds, but was unable to casually break out of them as he had done earlier. The flames consuming him began getting sucked into Lito’s chains, causing them to grow thicker and glow more brightly. Before long, most of the fire around Demarsus was gone, leaving the chains enlarged enough to cover most of his torso.

“Aw,” said Xim, “after we worked so hard to set him on fire.”

“It’s ok,” said Myria, patting Xim on the arm. “What he’s got coming is much worse.”

“Can’t ask questions if he’s dead,” said Nuralie.

I jumped at the loson’s sudden presence, having appeared just behind me.

“Why are you so stealthy?”

“Many terrors stalk the night swamp,” she said.

The wind frog on her shoulder let out a *ribbit*, followed by responses from the other two carried by me and Xim.

“Yes,” Nuralie said, nodding at the frogs, “the gogatron is a fierce foe.”

Demarsus continued to struggle, unable to break free of the enormous, burning chains. His axes flew back to his hands, but without free range of movement or the

ability to create momentum, it looked like his ability to send them spiraling through the air was lost. His armor blackened, and the electric crackling around the wings of his helmet ceased. Myria managed to climb to her feet, made ambulatory by Xim's heals, and she reached out a hand.

"I really don't like to use this one," she said, "but it's the only one he hasn't resisted yet."

Violet light flowed from her arm toward Demarsus' head.

You have observed the spell Dominate.

Dominate

Spiritual

Duration: Channeled

Cost: 10 plus 1 mana per minute.

Cooldown: Variable.

Requirement: 30 Charisma, 10 Wisdom, Spiritual Magic 20

You dominate the mind of the target, giving you total control over their actions. If given an instruction, a dominated target will act to the best of its ability to carry it out, but will otherwise behave in a docile and passive manner. A dominated target's personality is suppressed, and is incapable of acting 'naturally', even when instructed to do so.

Demarsus was attempting to bullrush Lito despite his bindings and the Guardian had his shield up to catch the attack. When Myria's spell hit Demarsus, the man stopped in his tracks.

"Drop your weapons," Myria commanded, and the axes fell from the Tanker's hands. "Dispel all your skills, spells, and other magical effects."

The runes on Demarsus' armor disappeared and he deflated. He slouched, looking exhausted.

"Take a big nap."

Demarsus slumped over and passed out.

Lito dismissed his shield and studied the big guy on the ground. He pulled out his cigarette case, miraculously unharmed, and produced a smoke. After lighting it and taking a drag he looked around the destroyed facility, surveying the disaster and the dozen dead or unconscious thugs I'd left in my wake.

"Could have gone worse," he said.

A whole crew of mundane and Delver authorities were on the scene in minutes. A familiar level twenty-six Delver showed up to take Demarsus into custody moments before Myria's mana ran out. Bright blue hair, skin whiter than even the palest Hiwardian. It was the same woman who'd nearly burnt out my eyeballs while I was people-watching during my first day in Formation. Her presence was overwhelming, and I was again forced to reduce the strength of my soul-sight.

“This is gonna be a hassle,” she said in a melodic voice, then summoned her massive alabaster hand. It scooped her and Demarsus up, then flew away through the destroyed roof with the pair of them in its palm.

You have observed the spell *Helping Hand*.

I scanned the spell text—I definitely needed a flight skill—but I disregarded it when I noticed it was Divine.

One of the things I’d discovered during my studies was that the magic in this world consisted of five main schools. The schools that were available for you to learn and cast were determined by your attunement. The schools were organized into a wheel, and a person was able to utilize spells from three of these schools. First, the school that matched their own attunement, then the schools on either side of their attunement.

<Magic School Wheel>

For me, with a Dimensional attunement, that gave me access to both Mystical and Physical magic in addition to Dimensional. However, that also put Spiritual and Divine magic out of my reach. So, no *Helping Hand* for me. I’d need to figure out another way to shuttle my fine ass around.

Beyond attunement, possessing the intrinsic skill for each school provided quantifiable bonuses to the spells in addition to unlocking evolutions.

With all that in mind, I ran over the other spells I’d observed during the hectic day. My *Magical Thinker* evolution gave me the opportunity to select any of the spells

I'd seen as an active skill, so long as I met the spell's requirements. None of them were what I was looking for though, and being limited to ten active skills made me want to keep an eye out for more interesting abilities down the line.

I shared my experience of being attacked by the Artemix group with Xim, who told me about her own ordeal in turn. Being cloistered in prayer had made her vulnerable, since her focus was entirely devoted to her god, Sam'lia. She fasted most of the day, eating only one large meal in the evening, and the act of the prayer was physically demanding.

She didn't recall much about how she'd been taken, only that she'd been in the midst of "an ecstatic divine revelation" when an intruder came into her room and cast a spell that made her sleepy. After that didn't take, her attacker jabbed her with a needle. The next thing she knew, she was staring at Nuralie. Her memories were vague, but after being provided a description of the Littan in the hat, she was fairly certain that had been her attacker.

"Do you still have to go back to praying for two more weeks?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she said. "Vengeance is a revered teaching of Sam'lia and the act of taking it is as good as any other act of devotion. Since I was attacked during prayer, Sam'lia will see a quest of vengeance as a proper holy crusade!" She grinned widely as she said this.

"You're *happy* you were kidnapped," I said.

"Yeah! Nothing too bad happened and now we get to go on a divine quest of retribution. I mean, I assume you'll come with me."

I thought about that ask. I *was* the type to hold a grudge. Whoever was behind sending the Artemix group after me inside my own home was definitely on my naughty

list, and I would take an unhealthy amount of pleasure in finding them and letting them know exactly how I felt about their manners.

I wondered if I should start worshiping Sam'lia if revenge was one of their religious teachings. Then again, that might rub my current divine patron the wrong way, whoever they were.

"I'd come with you even if we weren't tribe-mates," I said. Her grin widened.

"I am curious why *I* was taken," said Nuralie, patting one of the frogs on the head. She'd taken all three back from us and sat on the ground, her lower half buried under a frog-pile. "You two know each other, but why am I involved?"

"You're also a level one platinum," I offered. She frowned at me.

"You can tell what difficulty Delves people have done," Nuralie said.

"Yeah."

"A useful ability," she said, beginning to massage a frog along the sides of its jaw.

"I first thought that Litta had something to do with my capture. Now I do not know.

Why would a Littan have grudges against members of Spiritus?"

"Spiritus?"

"What Hiwardians call the Third Layer," she said.

"Do Littans dislike losons?" I asked, sitting down next to the scaled woman.

Although I had a rough understanding of world history and geography, the topic of modern geopolitics had not yet made it to my library list.

"I am young, and I have lived most of my life in the deep swamps, but even I was taught of the past tensions between Litta and Eschendur. It has only grown worse. I can't even return to Eschendur anymore."

"Is that because of the blockade?" I asked.

“Yes and no. I am one of four from Eschendur selected to attend the Creation Delve two years ago. The other three were each priests in one of the faiths of the triune. I was the neutral choice for those of us who still live in the wilds. When the Delve was completed the priests returned home, but I stayed behind to explore Hiward. When I finished my tour six months ago and attempted to return, my vessel was stopped by the blockade. I was offered the choice of being ferried the rest of the way by the Littans, or returning. I chose to return.”

“You didn’t believe they’d ferry you safely.”

She tilted her head to one side.

“They set up a naval blockade across the shores of my homeland. Littans encroach on our borders. I am a Delver who, even at level one, is worth more than ten normal soldiers on the battlefield. I am no true fighter... my passion lies in alchemy, but that does not matter. Enemy Delvers are a threat to any army, regardless of their specialty. I have no doubt that if I had accepted, my corpse would now be held in the embrace of Mother Geul at the bottom of the ocean.”

“I see... that sounds tough.”

Pause.

“Yes. I worry for my clan. They will be sheltered from an invasion in the wilds.”

Pause. “But trade with the tranquil dioceses is crucial for their survival. I thought that the Littans had sent an agent to kill me since I did not surrender at their blockade, but that would not explain why the two of you were also taken. I am still alive as well, so upon reflection my initial theory is flawed.”

“Do you remember much about being taken?”

“My memories are similar to Lady Xim’s. I was granted temporary permits to open an alchemy shop in Foundation due to the blockade. I live there as well. I was working into the night on several brews when someone appeared in my workshop. After that, all was dark until I awoke to your rescue.” Pause. “All those products are probably ruined.”

“I don’t think ‘rescue’ is the right word,” I said. “Your captor walked off, and Myria and Lito did most of the fighting up here. I just beat up some warehouse workers, which can probably be classified as bullying given how easy it was.”

Nuralie placed a hand on my arm.

“Where is your flower?” she asked.

“Oh, I put it in my inventory for safekeeping.” She gave me her usual unmoving stare, and I decided to retrieve the flower. She took it from my hand and brushed my hair back to tuck it behind my ear. It was still dripping water. She stared for a moment longer, then went back to petting her frogs.

“That looks nice,” said Xim.

One of the frogs crawled away from Nuralie and into my lap. I wasn’t sure *how* to pet a frog, so I gave it a gentle scratch under the chin. It closed its eyes in satisfaction, which was pretty cute. We all sat in silence for a few minutes, water trickling down my neck and shoulder, when Myria walked over to us.

“Well, kids,” she said, “we get to go and talk to the big boss man!”

Chapter 36

The “big boss man” was not big. He was, in fact, very small. He was also covered in long white fur, and sat in what appeared to be a very professional high-chair. He had big black eyes, was at most two-and-a-half feet tall, and looked like a baby yeti.

His name was Umi-Doo.

Umi-Doo was a level twenty-six Delver with gold, silver, and copper in his soul, along with a thin network of violet striations that looked like the icy patterns of a snowflake. I was thankful that I’d kept the sensitivity of my soul-sight reduced, or else his presence would have turned my eyes into charcoal briquettes.

He sat at the head of a round wooden table in a large conference room on the first floor of the Dark Iron Palace. Xim, Nuralie, and I sat flanked by Lito and Myria. There’d originally been three other members of Hiward’s Central Delver Authority present, and I’d worried that the interview would dive too deeply into my personal affairs. Umi-Doo had quickly dismissed them, however, citing a series of rules pertaining to ‘emergency powers granted to the director of Central’.

Umi-Doo studied the five of us in silence for a time, his eyes settling on me for longer than was comfortable. Eventually, he levitated out of his polished-wood high chair and landed on top of the table. He walked to the opposite end, where he gazed out of a large window that overlooked the river running through the middle of Foundation.

“Please send your familiar away, Esquire Arlo.”

I glanced up at Grotto, whose eyes were boring into Umi-Doo’s back.

“Is there somewhere within the palace I should send him?” I asked.

“That pocket dimension you have will suffice. We will wait while you do so.”

My head jerked back at the statement. I hadn't told anyone about my Pocket Closet, and I doubted that the surviving members of the Artemix group had discerned the room's true nature when we fought within it.

The others gave me curious glances. I shrugged, then stood and spent a minute concentrating on opening the Closet. The group peered within when the door sprang into existence, with the exception of Umi-Doo who continued staring out the window, but no one moved to take a closer look. Grotto floated inside, making his dissatisfaction known to me psychically, then I spent the minute required to close the door.

Umi-Doo turned back to face us, and I decided a moment of upfront honesty would be prudent, since the insight displayed by this small man seemed extraordinary.

"Grotto will still be able to monitor our discussion," I said.

"Yes, through that psychic link of yours. I also predict you'd tell him what happens here even if that didn't exist. I'm curious why you trust a creature like that so much, but that's your decision to make. I merely do not want the thing floating around installing traps and trying to whisper insidious nonsense into our minds while we discuss. He wouldn't accomplish anything, but the wards within the palace would cause a disruption to our meeting if he were to attempt to do so."

"Oh," I said, dumbly.

How did he know so much about Grotto?

Umi-Doo levitated back to the center of the table, and several books appeared in the air around him, slowly revolving around his small form. Three hovered over and landed before me. Another landed in front of Nuralie, one in front of Xim, and two in front of Lito. There were none for Myria.

Umi-Doo looked thoughtful for a second, then one more book appeared in the air and floated over to place itself at the bottom of the neat pile in front of me.

I looked over the titles. The first two were highly relevant to my current skill set.

Dimensionalism and You: Volume II

Auras! Not Just For Beginners

The third dealt with a topic I was planning on pursuing the moment I had the free time to do so.

Enchantment to Enhancement: Mana Weaving Guide and Runic Encyclopedia

I was a bit confused by the fourth, however.

Can I Have Sex with That? An Illustrated Guide to Viable Breeding Pairs Between Arzian Races.

I peeked at the books given to Xim and Nuralie. The Eschen received *Alchemical Divinity Volume IV*. Whereas Xim was given a book whose title was written in harsh, blocky symbols that I couldn't read. My eyes also began to itch when I tried to decipher it. Xim looked very pleased with the tome, gasping and immediately beginning to flip through it.

All of the books listed Umi-Doo as one of the primary authors.

“That dimensionalism book will help you reduce the time required to open that pocket dimension, Arlo,” Umi-Doo said. “I’m also pleased to find someone using an aura. It’s rare these days. I blame the academy. No good aura users amongst the faculty, and a good bit of prejudice toward those who use them as well. Difficult topic to study as a result, but that second book should prove helpful. We can always use more mana weavers as well. You’d think we’d have more practitioners, but most lack the patience to curate the skill. Why learn to weave a magical weapon when you can just buy one and spend the time learning to swing it better?” He frowned and made a sound that was a cross between a purr and a snort. “I’m glad you’re showing interest.”

“Thanks,” I said. “These genuinely look very helpful, but what about this fourth one?”

Xim and Nuralie leaned over and read the title. They were sitting on either side of me, so it made me feel a bit crowded. They exchanged a strange look between each other, paused in that unnerving loson manner, then went back to leafing through their respective gifts.

“Among other things,” said Umi-Doo, “the *art* is very well-done. Worth taking some time to appreciate.” He waggled his furry eyebrows.

“I see.”

I decided not to peruse the contents of that one until I was someplace more private.

“Maybe I can borrow that later,” Xim whispered without looking away from her own book.

“Lito, more books on etiquette,” said Umi-Doo. “One day it might stick. Myria, still not much of a reader?”

“Maybe if you had another one with pretty pictures inside.”

Umi-Doo nodded and another tome appeared, floating to Myria. She tucked it into her inventory before I could read the title.

“Xim and Nuralie, your texts are self-explanatory. Now then, to business.”

Finished with his random acts of charity, Umi-Doo waved a hand and a map of Arzia appeared in the air before us. Hiward sat at its center, surrounded by a large stretch of sea on every side which ended at the shores of several bordering nations on the north, east, and west. South led to the open ocean, with another large island nation far to the southwest. The Less-Than-Habitable Forest that Xim had once mentioned laid to the southeast, massive and sprawling. I was surprised it was real. I scanned the map for the Oddly-Named Forest, but couldn't find it. She *had* been fucking with me.

<Arzia Continent Map>

“There is presently a curious convergence of events occurring in Arzia. Your conflict with Tanker Demarsus this afternoon represents an escalation that I believe signals a point of no return for certain unknown parties who are involved behind the scenes.”

“Our warehouse brawl is an international incident?” said Myria.

“Taken alone, no. It is merely an egregious breach of the peace within the Hiwardian capital city as the result of various top-level offenses perpetrated or enabled by a mid-rank Delver of noble station in an obvious and poorly-executed attempt to abduct four promising level one platinum Delvers.”

“*Four* Delvers?” I said.

“Yes, four. In addition to you three, an attempt was made on Lord Varrin Ravvenblaq last night.”

“They went after Varrin?” said Lito, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. “He’d be back in the Ravvenblaq estate by now. Not many places with a higher concentration of powerful Delvers.”

“Normally, yes,” said Umi-Doo. “Such a crime would be nigh-suicidal if the Ravvenblaq matriarch and patriarch were within a hundred miles of the grounds. Unfortunately, they were not.”

“Varrin’s parents *aren’t* the matriarch and patriarch?” I asked.

“No,” said Lito. “They’re the current reigning Thundralke couple who rule the lands, but his paternal great-grandparents are the true rulers of the house itself.”

“And two of the most powerful Delvers on the planet,” said Myria.

That gave me a better understanding of why Varrin had been so confident going into a platinum Delve. His parents had also been platinum, and I could only assume his great-grandparents were as well if they were as strong as Myria believed. Did that mean his *grandparents* were also platinum Delvers? On both sides? What about his other great-grandparents? I briefly imagined six geriatric couples wielding unfathomable magic power. That’d make for a hell of a bingo game.

“However,” said Umi-Doo, “neither Ealdric senior nor his wife Jasmaena were in the country, responding to an emergency request for assistance with a large mana eruption in the Eschen Wastes near the northern forests of the Kingdom of Ayama.” A portion of the map was highlighted in red toward the northern part of the continent.

“*Ayama* requested assistance?” Lito said, disbelieving.

“God-King Ayamari contacted them herself,” said Umi-Doo. “Though, perhaps ‘request’ is a gracious way of characterizing it.”

“I bet,” said Lito.

“In addition,” a new part of the map was highlighted far to the west, “the most active high-level Ravvenblaq Delver team was also indisposed due to the sudden discovery of a special-grade Delve in western Timagrín, near the Mittak border.”

“Are you suggesting the attempted abduction was one of convenience?” said Lito. “Or that the kidnappers themselves organized these high-profile occurrences?”

“The kidnappers themselves? No. The organization that hired them? Perhaps.”

“You *just* said that the kidnappings were poorly-executed,” said Lito. “Managing to manipulate the Ravvenblaqs, through Ayamari no less, would require a great deal of planning, foresight, and information gathering. Enough that you would think the crimes these events are enabling would be better organized.”

“On their face, each abduction had a good *fucking* chance of working, if you’ll excuse my colorful language,” said Umi-Doo. “My understanding of the events that unfolded in the Ravvenblaq Thundry are such that the abduction would have succeeded, if not for the presence of two unaffiliated and powerful Delvers.”

“Mom and dad!” said Xim, leaning forward.

“Correct. There were no official plans for the Xor’Drels to visit Ravvenblaq. Such an event may have been unforeseen to any would-be ne'er-do-wells. Two full parties of level fifteen-odd Delvers were deployed to abduct Varrin, and it was a harsh fight between the Ravvenblaq defenders and the invaders. I understand a significant portion of the main manor house was destroyed. All friendly parties involved are safe and well, so no need for worry, Lady Xim.”

Kim nodded and slowly sat back in her chair.

“Where in the hells did ten Delvers willing to attack the Ravvenblaqs, of all people, come from?” Lito asked.

“An excellent question,” said Umi-Doo. “We have no *fucking* idea.”

A chill ran over the room.

“If you’ll excuse my colorful language.”

“You don’t know where the Delvers attacking Ravvenblaq came from?” said Lito.

“It’s not a rival house?”

“They are unaffiliated with any known noble bloodlines.”

“More peasant Delvers?”

“It appears so.”

“That means this has been going on for some time,” said Lito, scratching his jaw.

“The ability to circumvent the Creation Delve, that is.”

“Yes,” said Umi-Doo. “A proper gold-focused Delver will tackle one Delve a year with skill training in between. A particularly risk-tolerant and ambitious Delver, perhaps two a year.”

“That’s with full access to the existing Delver infrastructure in Hiward,” said Lito.

“Trainers, mana weavers, alchemists, Delve analysts. If you were working outside of that...”

“Perhaps even longer, true. However, given that these individuals hold no titles of which we are aware, they would not suffer the delays caused by the duties of governance. Still, the attempt on Varrin was risky, but not hopeless. As for Xim and Nuralie here, given your own accounts of what transpired and Esquire Arlo’s personal observations, I suspect the level fifteen gold Littan was responsible for both of your abductions. She is

likely a controller of some sort. As we all know, those abductions *were* successful, albeit temporarily. As for Arlo,” he raised his eyebrows at me. “One would think a five-person team of copper ones would be sufficient to capture a single inexperienced platinum one.”

“If they all came close to succeeding,” I said, “then why did you say they were poorly executed?”

Umi-Doo scratched at his chin with a furry, ebony-taloned finger.

“Because they failed!” he said. “Had they been successful, I would have cursed their nefarious cunning and begrudgingly praised their expert execution. As it sits, they are talentless curs with nothing to show for their efforts.”

“Oh.”

“I also suspect that the attempt on you, Arlo, was a last-minute consideration. Why send highly advanced Delvers against everyone *but* you? From what we’ve thus far extracted from the survivors of the Artemix group, they were hired only two weeks ago and the job was rushed. They were required to match their actions to a timeline that predated the mission itself, and that haste was their undoing which also exposed Demarsus, a.k.a. Typhoon. Which I must say, after hearing the particulars of the battle, Typhoon isn’t much of an alias. The man used the spell *Gale*. Might as well have been wearing a name tag.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” said Myria. We all nodded and mumbled in agreement.

“I’m not following some of this,” I said. “You’re talking like a plot’s been developing for a long time, but Xim, Varrin, and I didn’t know each other before the Creation Delve. That would also match the timeline of when Artemix was hired.”

"Certainly," said Umi-Doo. "While these aggressors would not have known who *in particular* may have ended up in Lord Varrin's party before entering the Creation Delve, the list of prospective Delvers is available through various channels, and keeping tabs on a hundred Creation Delve participants would be a trivial matter for large organizations, or those organizations with but a single *specialized* Delver in their employ. They would have known their habits, residences, where they'd be staying in Foundation after the Delve, etcetera. However, you, Arlo, came out of nowhere. You weren't on the list, until you suddenly were! This necessitated a different skillset to find and apprehend, since they were dealing with an unknown. Jayko, the one you left without legs, was a scryer. Artemix himself was some sort of social build, so the two of them were good at tracking targets and getting information. The rest of that team focused on lockdown and capture."

"You're still making a lot of wild assumptions," said Lito.

"Yes, yes," said Umi-Doo. "Everyone's a skeptic. I literally have *Information Synthesis* as an intrinsic skill, you know. Along with *Probability*. Still, I see where you're coming from. The reasoning for the abductions is murky, at best. Let's consider Mr. Haskagander, the mysterious interloper in The Toxic Grotto, who was defeated by Varrin's party, most of whom are here.

"Thankfully," Umi-Doo continued, "the *also* mysterious Esquire Arlo was kind enough to bring us Haskagander's head, along with a few coded bits of correspondence between Hognay and his taskmaster. Through a combination of magic and traditional investigative techniques, we identified several locations where Mr. Haskagander spent time prior to entering The Toxic Grotto."

Several pinpricks appeared on the map.

“As you can see, Mr. Haskagander sojourned in the Eschen wastes north of Ayama.”

“Right where the mana eruption occurred,” said Lito.

“And also in western Timagrín.”

“Right where the special Delve was found,” said Lito.

“Prior to that, in the northern mountains of Ravvenblaq.”

“Right where that mystery Delve meeting place is said to be.”

“And a number of other locations across the world, including hotspots along the border of the Littan Empire and Eschendur. Mr. Haskagander was a bit of a globetrotter.”

“How does a level two set off a mana eruption that is severe enough to require three S-tier Delvers to mitigate?” asked Lito.

“It’s doubtful he did,” said Umi-Doo. “I expect he has accomplices, as evidenced by his communications, although there is little there to help identify anyone in particular. Nonetheless, I suspect many of them are significantly more powerful than he was, given the quality of individuals perpetrating these recent crimes.”

“What do I have to do with this?” Nuralie asked, speaking up for the first time.

“I believe your disappearance is meant to further inflame hostilities between Eschendur, the Littan Empire, and Hiward itself.”

Pause.

“I don’t think I’m that important.”

“You represent twenty-five percent of Eschendur’s annual allotment of Creation Delve slots,” said Umi-Doo. “You are extremely valuable to your homeland. The Eschens have been petitioning fiercely for your return, while the Littans refuse to allow you

passage through their blockade ‘without escort’. The Hiwardian government is growing weary of Litta’s position, especially given how crucial trade access to Eschunder is for Hiward’s magical economy. Your disappearance, *especially* if it was at the hands of a Littan Delver, would be a not-insignificant event. This would be further compounded if Hiward suspected Littan military involvement in an abduction carried out on Hiwardian soil.”

Nuralie went still for a long time. Umi-Doo watched her closely, while Xim and Myria looked on with concern. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Lito pulled out a smoke and was lighting it when Umi-Doo snapped his fingers and the cigarette blinked out of existence. Lito huffed before putting his silver cigarette case away.

“I... am *not* that important,” Nuralie said, but it sounded more like a plea than an assertion.

“So your theory is that there’s some sort of international conspiracy going on,” said Lito, “and Varrin is somehow in the middle of it all?”

“No. He’s swept up in it, as a single cog in larger machinations. I don’t want to overemphasize his importance, or the importance of our platinum guests here. To whoever is masterminding these events, that is. No offense, you three. I’m sure you are all very important to *someone*.”

I shrugged, though Umi-Doo’s attempt at being polite only made his words more cutting. *Was* there anyone that I was important to anymore? Nuralie looked relieved, if anything. Xim just smiled and nodded along.

Umi-Doo gestured at the map and several new areas highlighted across the continent.

“Right now we have the highest level of international Delver deployment in history,” he said. “The alleged discovery of several new special Delves has drawn in many powerful Delver parties in addition to the Ravvenblaqs. We have multiple groups monitoring the Littan blockade from the outer islands. We have deployments in south Timagrin responding to frightening intelligence coming out of Reimara concerning activities in Davah. That’s in addition to the normal movements of Delvers in search of whatever personal goals they have globally.”

“But *why* would someone be instigating this?” said Lito. “Most of these absences would be temporary. We may not have an explicit mass-recall procedure for Delvers, but the official groups working for Central can be brought back within a few weeks or less. The rest can be returned by decree of the king.”

“Assuming we had an emergency worth abandoning their respective missions for, yes,” said Umi-Doo. “As for the specific goal, I do not know. However, I have provided all of this scene-setting to impress upon you the seriousness with which I need you all to take the quest I am about to give you.”

“Quest?” said Xim, looking excited.

“Bit of an archaic term,” said Lito.

“I can’t *order* anyone here to do it, aside from Myria and Lito. There will also be rewards, and perhaps some violence and intrigue. I believe ‘quest’ is the appropriate word.”

“What is it?” said Xim, grinning. I’m not sure she’d sat in on the same meeting the rest of us just had.

“You need to figure out what the *fuck* is happening in that cave!” Umi-Doo gave a little hop as he said this. “If you’ll excuse my colorful language.”

“Oh! I was already planning to do that,” said Xim. “I have a *holy* quest.” She hugged my arm. “We both do!”

“Very good, very good.”

“Sure,” said Lito. “We were going to investigate the cave out in Ravvenblaq either way.” Myria nodded. “I was planning to put in the request after this meeting.”

“Consider it pre-approved then,” said Umi-Doo. Then he turned to Nuralie. “Will you go as well?”

Pause.

“Yes. I am curious. And you gave me this book.”

“Great! I’ll authorize the requisitions. Full access, whatever you all need.”

“Can we take the dreadnought?” asked Myria, getting halfway out of her chair in excitement.

“Whatever you need *within reason*. You cannot take the dreadnought.”

“We never get the good stuff,” said Myria.

Lito squinted at her.

“It’s not even under Central’s authority,” he said. “It’s military property.”

“A girl can dream.”

Lito frowned, but turned back to Umi-Doo.

“What other Delves can we get? We have no idea what we’re walking into.”

“The Ravvenblaq Thundralkes and Varrin will meet you there. They are also bringing the Xor’Drels.”

“That still feels light, considering everything you’ve told us.”

“Two level twenty-one platinums, two level eighteen golds, two level ten golds, and four level one platinums,” said Umi-Doo. “Maybe not a heroic-level party, but

nothing to scoff at. We don't have many Delvers to spare at the moment. I can authorize funds for you to do some recruitment among private Delvers, but this quest needs to be carried out post-haste, so there isn't a lot of time."

"We might be able to pull in the triplets," said Myria.

"They hate government work," said Lito.

"But they love money!"

Lito groaned.

"That they do, Myria. Just... tell them to leave the wine at home."

"There's no way Ashe will agree to that."

"Then ask them *not* to wear the same outfits, at least."

"Afraid you'll try and kiss the wrong one again?"

Lito sank low into his seat in response, then stared vacantly at the wall across from him.

Umi-Doo shook his head, then abruptly levitated out of the room, the double-doors opening and closing behind him on their own. The meeting was over, apparently.

"Am I missing something, or did all of that sound... underbaked?" I asked.

"Umi-Doo." Lito said the name like a swear. "Get used to it."

"We were all planning on going to the cave anyway," I added. "He could have led with that."

After a moment of uncomfortable silence where Lito pulled out a fresh smoke and another drop of water fell down from the fresh flower tucked behind my ear, Xim leaned over to me.

"So," she said, "about that book..."

Chapter 37

We were given three days to get ready for our excursion south.

It was early evening by the time Umi-Doo released us, so we all went to have dinner before separating into two groups, with Myria accompanying Nuralie to her alchemy shop, and Lito accompanying Xim and I to my underground lair. After getting Xim and Lito settled in their guest accommodations I spent the evening meditating, working my aura, and helping Grotto use the mana that we... acquired from the Artemix group.

There was eighty-four-thousand mana, which would allow eighty-four-hundred additional cubic yards of space, assuming we wanted to spend it all on raw size. I had a few other ideas, though, especially since we were about to go on a somewhat lengthy road trip.

After all, who wanted to sleep on the dirt when we could have more comfortable accommodations?

First, I added a thousand cubic yards to the top of the main room, creating a vaulted ceiling. This would allow Grotto to begin adding additional size to the obelisk by creating a new 'shell' that could fit on top of the original. Doing this over time would create an increasingly powerful obelisk with many layers, like a big pointy onion, and each layer could be mana-woven with additional enhancements or functions. The core was currently focused entirely on gathering mana, and Grotto advised that the next layer do the same. After all, more mana gathering helped us snowball the Pocket Delve's growth even faster.

I then spent the rest of the mana making three additional rooms, separated by walls, with spaces where doors could be set. I adjoined these rooms to one another, then

created a long hallway which led to the obelisk room. That way I could keep any guests separate from the more sensitive areas of the Closet.

The first room was focused on lodging, with a basic barracks feel. I was able to move the Closet's entrance to this room, which gave me some ideas about spooky things like disappearing exits and shifting hallways. Those ideas went on The List.

After speaking with Nuralie about the length of time it took to practice her alchemy and the difficulty of "brewing on the road", I decided the second room could serve as an alchemy lab for the time being. The third room would be a general-purpose practice and training space.

I spent the next morning acquiring some doors, basic furnishings and supplies, and one sturdier, reinforced door to block off the obelisk room. It probably wouldn't deter Myria or Lito if they really felt like snooping, but it was an obvious sign that said 'off limits'.

Satisfied that I had the requisite furnishings and fixtures for my expanded Closet, I spent the afternoon doing something I *really* should have done earlier.

I went gear shopping.

Lito and Myria were happy to provide me with a few recommendations, and they both agreed that my best bet to find quality gear for my "early career" was a place called Seinnador's Combat Regalia. Lito and Xim accompanied me to the store, then moved on to make some purchases of their own while I perused. Lito made it clear that anyone trying to make trouble with me inside of Seinnador's was "gonna' get made into a pair of boots."

Seinnador's was closer to a high-end collector's boutique than what I imagined as a standard medieval fantasy front. It was the size of a small department store, gently lit,

with rows of neat and clean display cases lined with glowstones and presenting a variety of equipment. Larger items, like halberds and greatbows, lined the walls behind a lengthy counter that ran along three sides of the shop. The countertop was made of glass, under which a wide array of daggers, jewelry, and gadgets were displayed.

Seinnador himself was a level eleven Delver, equal parts silver and copper. Like his store, he defied my expectations. He was distinctly *not* Hiwardian, standing well over seven feet and with a willowy, graceful frame. Two small antlers extended out from his scalp, parting a long and lustrous mane of hair the color of red clay, which ran down over a pair of pointed and furred ears, similar to a deer's. His skin was a deep tan with a reddish hue, and he had a wide, flat nose, much larger than a human's. He wore an immaculate suit which evoked a sense of forestry and wildlife with organic patterns and leafy edges. He looked up from a ledger as I entered, and watched me approach the counter with a pair of sparkling, slate-gray eyes. There was no one else in the store.

"Welcome to Seinnador's Combat Regalia," he said in a smooth voice with musical undertones. "I am the eponymous Seinnador. Whose acquaintance do I have the pleasure of making, this afternoon?" He held a hand to his chest, palm up, and gave a small bow as he spoke.

"Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel," I said, deciding that his formal address was worth a full name in response.

"Yes, yes, wonderful," he said with a slight grin, managing to sound pleasantly surprised by the information. "I presume that makes you of the Third Layer."

"Yes, though it's a recent move. Haven't had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the new motherland quite yet."

Seinnador's eyebrows crept up the slightest bit, and he gazed intently into my eyes.

"But you have already been touched by the Eye. I see. Yes, yes. So do you as well, it would seem." He chuckled, though I wasn't precisely sure what the joke was. The sound of his laugh was multi-tonal, and created a light harmony. "Before we proceed, is esquire the title you prefer? One of the Third Layer may also be addressed as low-lord or simply lord in this kingdom."

"Feel free to call me Arlo."

"As you will it, Arlo," he said, then eyed my boa and vest. "C'thonic." I looked down at my fabulous garments.

"That is an accurate statement."

"May I inspect them?" He locked onto me with another intense gaze.

"Feel free."

Seinnador reached out and ran a hand across the blue and violet feathers. He had two thumbs and his fingers were exceptionally long, even considering his height, with an extra knuckle on each digit. Seinnador then brushed the deep blue leather vest with his fingertips. A gentle light danced in his eyes, and he let out another harmonic chuckle which quickly grew into a full-bellied laugh. He brought his hand back to wipe a tear away.

"The descriptions!" he said. His reaction reminded me that both items contained not-so-subtle innuendos concerning my sexual proclivities and aspects of my personal anatomy. "These are rewards handed out by a Delve?!"

"They are indeed."

“I have seen some flavorful descriptions in the past, but these place highly on my list of the unusual. Have you had these inspected by a craftsman with *System Insight* before?”

“I don’t even know what *System Insight* is, so no.”

“Oh, you poor child of the deep! You know not what you possess.” He took a deep breath, shaking his head. “Tell me, has this vest or boa ever been soiled?”

I thought about my experience in the post-Delve spa where I’d found the vest and boa spotless, despite being worn over my otherwise filth-ridden body.

“Not that I remember.”

“How about damage? Any holes or tears? Has this boa even lost a feather?”

“You know, now that I think about it, I did fight twelve members of an organized crime ring all at once yesterday. These both came out the other side of that unharmed.”

“A curious way to spend the day, but I am not one to judge. Yes, yes. These items both have a form of the ‘immutable’ property. It is a durability enhancement with many intriguing uses, but it requires a rather rare essence to craft.”

“What all does it do?”

“It prevents the item from being changed. There are limits, of course, as with all mana-woven properties. It is similar in structure to different ‘resistance’ weaves, like fire resistance, pierce resistance, and so on. I like to describe it as *reality* resistance, although that characterization is somewhat flawed. I’ve yet to find a better term, however.” He drummed his lengthy fingers on the counter and stared off into the distance again. “It changes as its concept demands, but changes not for concepts that seek to change *it*. Perhaps... *conceptual* resistance?”

My brain did some backflips trying to figure out how that would even work, or what the limits of an ability like that would be.

“Does dirt being *on* something really change it though? This vest can be washed. The dirt isn’t becoming a part of the leather. Does it create some sort of... causality field that prevents anything from gathering within range of creating a molecular bond... or something?” I struggled to put my thoughts into words, as I had a no-good-really-bad understanding of subatomic physics and the general science of very small things. My comprehension was also based on rules from an entirely different dimension, so I was assuredly out of my depth.

“Hmm, I believe you are trying to ascribe scientific principles to a magically imbued item. The practice can be useful for certain types of mana weaves and item attributes, but at a certain point it all breaks down and leaves the Men of Letters weeping.”

“If this vest is immutable-”

Seinnador held up a finger.

“*Sort of* immutable,” he corrected, then gestured for me to continue.

“If this vest is *sort of* immutable, will it stop an arrow? Or a knife? Does it ignore things like heat generated from friction? Why is it blue, and not black? Or should it be white, since it reflects light, rather than absorbs it?”

“Excellent questions, but you misunderstand the nature of the property. It will do the things you expect a leather vest to do, in addition to the effects listed in its description. The same for the boa.”

I squinted at Seinnador, trying to decide if that meant my items had some sort of entity making conscious decisions about what constituted normal leather-vest things. Maybe it relied on my *own* understanding of the item?

“Perhaps it is better to show you,” Seinnador said, seeing me wind up with more questions.

He walked down the length of the counter to where it was fitted with a hip-height door and opened it, waving for me to join him. Once I was behind the counter, Seinnador waved a hand and the back wall of the store became translucent, exposing a large workshop beyond, full of tables and shelves covered with in-progress weapons, armor, and trinkets. A pair of women walked between the tables, taking down notes or depositing jars and pouches of an array of unidentifiable substances next to the projects. Near the back were three beefy men working a forge and hammering away at lengths of metal. There was also a large space cleared of anything, though the stone floor and the wall beyond were riddled with scorch marks, divots, and cracks.

Seinnador walked through the semi-transparent wall, and I followed, feeling a gentle sensation of pressure as I went through. Once on the other side I looked back, finding the view of the storefront unobstructed, as though no wall existed at all.

It was pretty impressive. I thought I might want to consider the idea for the Closet.

[It would be a wonderful mechanism for spying on intruders,] Grotto spoke into my mind. [Perhaps it could also hide a small chamber full of mana monsters. Or maybe a wall full of arrow traps.]

[No illusory walls full of hidden dangers.]

[Then what did you want it for?]

[I thought it might be badass to put a lounge behind it. On one side is a dining hall where guests can enjoy a tasty meal, then the wall melts away to reveal a well-appointed sitting room complete with a fully stocked bar. Coffee and dessert to be served there as well.]

[Are we building a Delve or a penthouse?]

[You do what you want with your half, I'll do what I want with mine. Besides, I already have a penthouse. This will be a *magic* penthouse.]

I ignored Grotto's subsequent grumbling, and followed Seinnador deeper into his workshop.

"Brielle, please take over and watch the front for me," Seinnador said to one of the women working the half-finished gear. She nodded, smiled at me politely, then quickly headed off to her new task. Seinnador continued through the shop, giving the men at the forge a wave as we headed toward the area that looked like the magical equivalent of a munitions range.

"Please remove your clothing, if you would, Arlo," said Seinnador, which made me wonder if he was interested in inspecting a bit more of me than just my items. Seinnador, seeing my concern, added, "Just the vest and boa. Please keep on your other attire."

I raised an eyebrow, but took off the vest and boa, handing them both to the deer-man. Just another afternoon spent shirtless with new friends. He took them in his long and gentle hands and tossed them onto the ground in a pile. Then he stomped on them both with meticulously polished dress boots, grinding his heel into the stone floor. A floor which was covered in all the dust, debris, and rodent feces that one normally

finds on the unswept floor of an industrial workshop. He even jumped up and down on top of them a time or two, then gave the pile a kick.

I watched with a sense of stoic detachment, unsure of whether the man was having a sudden mental breakdown.

Seinnador bent down and scooped up the vest. It was completely unharmed and entirely clean, as though the violent display had never occurred. The same was true for the boa.

Seinnador handed the boa back to me, then walked the vest out into the no-man's-land between us and the wall. He tossed the vest into the air, where it became suspended by an invisible force. He walked to a rack of weaponry next to the forge and pulled down a crossbow half as long as he was tall. He loaded it with a bolt, drawing back the string while keeping the end of the crossbow on the ground with a boot in its stirrup. He walked back and stopped a couple feet ahead of me, then aimed at the vest.

There was a deep *twang* followed near instantaneously with a *chock* and the vest fluttered. Seinnador set the crossbow down and placed his hands on his hips.

“What mysteries await us, hm?” he said, then began walking downrange. I followed behind.

The end of the bolt was lodged deep into the stone wall beyond the vest. The vest itself was, once again, unharmed.

“Did it... go *through* the vest?”

“‘Through’ is not quite the right word,” said Seinnador. “Unless you think of the vest like a tunnel.” He tapped a finger against his lips, as though considering the idea.

“The purpose of this part of the demonstration is that the item, though seemingly indestructible, will not prevent an amount of harm that would normally bypass the

materials from which it is made,” he said. “My wishes are but ash, burned by the prayers of my enemy.”

He seemed to be full of tangentially-related adages.

“The description *did* say it would stop an agitated chihuahua, but not much else,” I said.

“Hm, yes, a small and bitey canine,” said Seinnador. “According to the tooltip, at least.”

“It told you that?”

“*System Insight* grants me context for unfamiliar terms.” He looked at me gravely. “Whether or not that knowledge is better left unknown.”

“So... now you know what *rawr* means.”

“I do, Arlo. I do.”

I contemplated the lengthy item descriptions, and the amount of information Seinnador must have ingested over the span of a few seconds.

“Back to the line!” Seinnador shouted, and we marched back up range.

He retrieved a pair of brass goggles from the rack, a bit steampunk in design, and handed one set to me. We donned the goggles, and Seinnador removed his suit jacket then rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt. He rotated his arm in a circle in front of him, which caused a shimmering dome of force to surround us.

You have observed the spell Magic Shell

Magic Shell

Dimensional

Cost: 10 mana, plus an additional 10 mana per minute.

Cooldown: 10 minutes

Requirements: Dimensional Magic 10

Create a stationary dimensional membrane in the form of a dome that causes entities inside of the dome to be partially protected from physical and magical forces occurring outside of the dome. Amount of physical and magical attenuation scales with level in Dimensional Magic. The size of the dome scales with Intelligence.

That seemed pretty handy.

“And now for a refined spell. One befitting a gentleman of your caliber.”

Seinnador raised a hand, snapped his fingers, and the world shook.

A massive explosion, centered on the vest, tore through the range. There was no fire, only an eruption of force which sent all the dust and debris on the floor raging through the air. The pressure wave that made it through the dome was enough to cause me to take a step back, and the wind sent my hair whipping. The sound of the spell was loud, but fortunately not enough to leave my ears ringing.

They should really be handing out hearing protection with these goggles, I thought. I could only imagine what it would have felt like at this distance without the dome, much less at the epicenter.

Again, the vest was untouched, though the floor and wall now had several new cracks in it.

You have observed the spell Explosion!

Explosion!

Dimensional/Physical

Cost: 10 mana, plus 10 mana per second charged.

Cooldown: 1 hour

Requirements: Dimensional Magic, Physical Magic

Make a big-ass explosion.

Waga Na Wa Megumin!

Range: 100 feet. Size and intensity scale with Intelligence. Range and intensity scale with level in Physical Magic.

The spell's description told me everything I needed to know.

"How can I pick up the Physical Magic skill?" I asked.

"I see you have an eye not only for fine equipment, Arlo, but also for cultured magics," said Seinnador.

"If blowing things up is culture, then yes."

"As with any magical school, being granted the option to acquire it as an intrinsic skill by the System requires you to have an appropriate attunement, and then to spend time studying the nature of the magic and observing its effects. There are a number of tutors that I can recommend."

That didn't sound like anything I had done, and I'd already picked up both Dimensional Magic and Mystical Magic.

"That's the hard way, but it is safe and reliable," Seinnador continued.

"What's the easy way?" I asked.

Seinnador grinned.

“Again, you must have an appropriate attunement. However, if you are sufficiently... *exposed* to the effects of a magical school, you *may* be offered the option to acquire it.”

“What kind of exposure?”

I thought I understood, since I’d gotten Dimensional Magic from having my body torn through space and time to get to Arzia, and Mystical from undergoing the Xor’Drel tribal ritual, which hit me with enough magic to change my physiology.

“Being struck by spells of that school,” said Seinnador. “The more... invasive the spell, the more likely you are to be offered the skill.”

“I see,” I said. “Can you shoot me with some elemental spells then?”

“I...” Seinnador paused and gave me an appraising look. “The egg shall crack its own shell. Yes, yes. I presume you have an appropriate attunement?”

“Dimensional,” I said. “I already have Mystical, so it would complete the set.”

“Hmm, I am afraid that it would be difficult for me to help you in this matter. In my heyday as a Delver I was focused rather heavily on aggressive attack magic. I fear a level one Delver would be unlikely to survive a single spell.”

I paused to consider my words.

“How much Fortitude would I need to survive you hitting me with something?”

“That’s a complicated question. Unarmored and undefended, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Then...” I watched as he did some mental calculation. “Perhaps, twenty?”

“I’m good to go then.”

“Really? You’re level one.”

“Yep.”

“And you already have a Fortitude of twenty?”

“Pretty much.”

No reason to volunteer that it was in fact slightly higher.

Seinnador tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at me.

“You were here to buy some equipment, yes?”

“I was. Still am.”

“I see, I see. In that case, perhaps we should discuss some purchases before I accidentally kill you.”

“Alright then, let’s look at some gear.” I took off the thick goggles and rubbed at my eyes where the metal had dug in. They hadn’t *hurt*, but they had been pretty uncomfortable. “You know, I might be able to give you some design ideas for new eye protection.”

Chapter 39

Trying to convince Seinnador to sell me equipment that made sense with my current stats without giving away that something was unusual with my levels proved impossible. I eventually broke down and told him my stat distribution after Seinnador pulled out a very detailed confidentiality agreement that he used with his “most discreet customers”. After signing, I showed the merchant my character screen to prove that I wasn’t delusional.

Not only did Seinnador take the information in stride, his eyes lit up as he considered the possibilities. Having a minimum of ten in everything was extremely unusual, and typically only occurred with the absolute most powerful Delvers, who had points to spare. I wasn’t there yet, but that didn’t stop Seinnador from theory-crafting.

“You aren’t about to wear a full suit of dark-iron plate with a Strength of ten,” said Seinnador. “The draw on your mana veins would be too high, and it’s no good for casters, either. Absorbs a bit of ambient mana, so it is known to interfere with spells. Very popular with mage-hunters for that very reason, though. A suit of Madrin isn’t out of the question.” He tilted his head from side to side in consideration. “Of course, there are budgetary concerns with that.”

Seinnador took a sip from a steaming mug of herbal tea. We sat in his office, with Seinnador perched on the edge of a large wooden desk. I had my own mug in front of me which warmed my hands as I held it. I sipped at the brew politely, though the taste was bitter and earthy.

“How big are these budgetary concerns?” I asked.

“It varies, of course, but the metal for a heavy set alone would run you an emerald chip or so. Then there would be the costs of the weaves. The price of those are limitless,

but even with your attribute potentials many would still be out of reach. Certain weaves require the user to be particularly robust in specific areas.”

“An emerald chip wouldn’t break the bank,” I said. I had four. “But I want to make sure that I can move well. My Strength isn’t at ten yet and I’m about to head out on an expedition. Not sure how much room for training there will be.”

“Madrin is heavier than steel, but even a full plate set wouldn’t burden you much with a Strength of seven. As for mobility, the articulation we are able to achieve in the joints and other areas would leave you quite well off. If it were a matter of moving silently, then a lighter armor would be worth considering; but for you, I think a set of Madrin plate would be ideal. However, as you mentioned, there is the matter of your departure timeline. A set of plate requires a goodly amount of customization and adjustment for a proper fit. There are items that I could hand you ‘off-the-shelf’ as it were, but it might pinch or pull or restrict movement in certain places.”

“Maybe we save that for next time. What makes sense with the schedule that I have?”

“I have Madrin scale that can be used for a mail set and crafted to your measurements in time, assuming we do a rush job. Fortunately for you, the busy season is actually *before* the Creation Delve, as most houses make purchases to give as gifts at ceremonies or celebrations for the newly minted Delver in the family. This is the relative dead season.”

It now made more sense that I was the only one in the store.

“A Madrin scale set,” he continued, “would provide adequate protection against blades and piercing weapons, but would leave you vulnerable to blunt attacks. Things like maces, hammers, and axes to a lesser degree. However, that is what a gambeson is

for. I would prefer to make you a custom arming doublet, but again, the time constraint. I'd have to ask Luidis to work a couple of double-shifts alongside me, another significant expense."

Seinnador drummed his lengthy fingers against the desk, giving me a questioning side-eye.

"Hmm," I hummed as I thought. "Mana weaving uses a lot of essences, right?"

"Yes, of course. Essences are the grain for the brew that is mana weaving."

"Uh," I stumbled over the metaphor. "Are mana chips the yeast?"

"Yes! Yes, yes!"

My respect for Seinnador crept up even higher with his opaque reference to producing alcoholic beverages.

"Well," I said, bringing up my inventory. Rows of green, glowing crystals filled my vision. "Would you be willing to consider a trade?"

A single poison essence was worth a lot of money. Xim and Varrin had been correct in that assumption back in the Creation Delve. Ten poison essences were worth even more, though there's customarily a discount when dealing in bulk. Ten poison essences plus a *contract* to sell a mana weaver all the poison essences he required for the next two years at a sub-market rate was worth exactly:

One complete set of Madrin scale armor, with basic weaves for environmental protection to keep me comfy while wearing it in various weather conditions, and

durability to keep the armor in good shape, which also made it more resistant to physical attacks.

One cloth hood with small Madrin plates sewn into the lining and a mesh to help keep its shape. It could quickly be locked in place to keep it from falling during “vigorous” activities.

One Wand of Piercing Force that I could feed enough mana to store ten casts worth of a simple attack spell.

One flanged mace with a basic damage weave to bypass Fortitude, because “it’s hard to accidentally cut your own hand off with a mace,” and “no reason to get anything fancy until you figure out what you’re good with.”

And finally, as many ice lances to the chest as it takes for me to obtain the Physical Magic skill.

It took two lances, two recovery sessions after losing three-quarters of my health each time, and an hour paralyzed on the ground in the fetal position feeling like I was going to die of hypothermia. That was the *least* damaging attack spell at Seinnador’s disposal, and Grotto was extremely displeased that I didn’t warn him about the idea ahead of time. Higher level battle-casters were no joke.

It was worth it.

I immediately selected *Explosion!* to add to my active skills, and took a minute to look over my list.

Dispel gave me a bit of control, mitigation, and utility. *Oblivion Orb* was primarily a melee attack that was best used for hitting critical areas. Its ranged, mana-shaped version was useful, but way too mana hungry to rely on at the moment.

Explosion! was non-discriminatory ranged area-of-effect. The cooldown of one hour made it more of a big one-shot in combat.

I was missing a reliable, bread-and-butter ranged attack spell. The *Wand of Piercing Force* was a decent stop-gap, but had a hard cap of ten casts per charge. Seinnador also informed me that the spell cast by the wand wouldn't benefit from my skills and stats, but rather the quality of the mana weave.

Utilizing wands with stronger spells and weaves required the user to possess the stats required to cast the base spell. Seinnador said it had something to do with the wielder's mana matrix and how it still connected to the spell and could fry your soul if you didn't have the right stats... It went over my head. The point is, it was useful for now, but I would outgrow it eventually.

As for the armor, the main thing it left to be desired was the clear vulnerability to my face and hands. When I asked why this was necessary, Seinnador explained that many spells required exposed skin, dextrous manipulation, or clear vocal and expressive communication to maximize their effect. One example was the finger snap for *Explosion!*, which would be difficult to pull off in gauntlets.

To distract me from my apprehension over my beautiful mug becoming the main target of my enemy's ire, Seinnador pointed out a series of small loops that would allow me to wrap my boa around my shoulders without having it fly off or get yanked away. The armor was also slim enough that my c'thonic vest could fit over top. I could be well-protected, without sacrificing style.

In the same vein, Seinnador made sure to inquire about my color preferences. Although he was unable to take any significant aesthetic design requests into consideration due to the timeline, coloring the armor was a trivial matter. I shrugged

and asked him to make it match the violet and ocean tones of my vest and boa, then left the rest up to him.

For my eyes, Seinnador took some of the design suggestions I'd given him for new goggles to heart, and crafted a pair of Madrin-crystal specs that looked sort of like the kind of glasses you get at a gun range, but with a bit more panache. They had a strap that fastened around my head to keep them in place, and had a pinkish-purple hue to the lenses.

"They'll help you with flying debris, glancing attacks, and people trying to poke you in the eye, but a well-placed arrow will still ruin your day. They also provide limited protection against bright light without compromising vision in dimmer areas."

When I tried them on I was surprised to see that, despite their color, they didn't tint the world with a magenta hue. Magic was pretty great.

Altogether I was amazed that Seinnador could get all the gear ready for me by the time I had to leave. He was happy to tell me that his entire workshop had been dedicated to the effort, while heavily insinuating that I should keep him in mind for future purchases. Overall, it was pretty impressive customer service, but his parting well-wishes left something to be desired.

"Try not to die out there," he said. "I like to know how my items perform in the field, and I'll lose out on data if you perish before telling me how they do. On the other hand, your death *would* be a data point on its own."

He gazed once more into the middle distance, which I was convinced he did only to add drama to his next line.

"Death is but another lesson for the living."

While my gear was in the works I rounded out the day buying a variety of steel weapons and shields from a mundane weapons shop. I also grabbed a couple different bows and all the arrows an irritable fletcher would sell me, which was a few hundred. All of that got tossed into my inventory for me to play around with later.

I had the cash, I needed to figure out what I vibed with, and it wasn't *that* expensive to buy non-magical items. Plus I had the inventory space with my recent Closet expansion.

Ok, maybe my concept of money had been slightly distorted by my new wealth, since throwing down a decade's worth of peasant wages was what I considered 'cheap'.

I went back to my place and spent the evening and most of the next day training, snagging another plus one to Strength and Speed. Closing the deal with Seinnador had also gotten me a point of Charisma and offered the intrinsic skill Mercantile, which I seriously considered, but decided to pass on for the moment.

I would have liked to train more before the journey, but I was pretty happy with how my stats were looking.

Strength 8

Agility 2

Speed 6

Fortitude 22

Intelligence 10

Wisdom 10

Charisma 4

Luck 2

The evening before our departure I helped Nuralie install a basic alchemy station in the Closet. She insisted that I move the entrance to the alchemy room for ventilation reasons. She had a few purification wards that she could place above the various beakers, alembics, and one straight-up witch's cauldron, but said that there was no good replacement for fresh air.

The conversation reminded me that I didn't know how quickly the space would be depleted of oxygen if we were forced to seal it and stay inside for an extended period. Maybe I could build a greenhouse to solve that problem? A really *big* greenhouse. Another one for The List.

The morning of, I traveled to Seinnador's to pick up my completed gear with Nuralie in tow, who had a few last-minute purchases to make with the discretionary budget Umi-Doo had given us.

Notably, the loson picked up a pair of shiny black gloves made from the skin of a giant serpent creature. They boasted several useful qualities—waterproof, fireproof, corrosion and acid resistant, among others—and fit snugly around her fingers.

I'd sort of forgotten about the stipend, so I hastily bought a bundle of paralytic arrows and a half-dozen of what Seinnador called "Dazzlers." They were some sort of magic flash-bang, and that seemed like a good thing to have.

We made our way to the meeting point along the main street that led from Formation down the mountain and into Foundation proper. Xim, Lito, and a trio of unfamiliar Delves awaited us.

Two of them were women—identical twins. The first wore a light, scale armor suit similar to my own, but it was gold and bronze in color. Her white and gray Hiwardian hair was tied up in a bun, and she lounged on a bench with her arms spread wide over the top of the backrest. She had bright blue eyes which were somewhat lidded, and she studied me as I approached.

The second had on a set of what at first appeared to be form-fitting travel clothes, though the neutral-toned jacket and leather riding pants were thick and sturdy. I suspected the clothes were a disguised set of protective gear. Her own hair was woven into a single long braid that hung over one shoulder. She stood next to her more obviously armored twin and followed her gaze toward me.

The third was a slim-built man who stood at the exact same height as the second woman and had uncannily similar features, though distinctly masculine. He had a short, neat beard, the same dirty-white color that all three had up top, and wore a buckled crimson tunic that came down to his knees. He was speaking with Lito and paid no mind to our approach.

When Lito saw me, he looked me over and grunted.

“You look like you want everyone on the battlefield to know you’re there,” he said.

“I do have a sort of presence to me.”

“Hope you’re good at dodging arrows. And spells.”

“I don’t think Arlo dodges too much,” said Xim.

“Not for lack of trying,” I said.

“I don’t know,” said the crimson man, “if I saw a warrior on the battlefield wearing violet armor with fuschia highlights I might be afraid of them.” He rubbed his chin. “They’d be insane, obviously.”

“I think I’m holding it together pretty well under the circumstances.”

Jim chuckled at that. Nuralie nodded, though I think she underestimated the number of things that might have been leading me to crack up.

“Arlo, Nuralie, this is Cole. Cole, Arlo and Nuralie,” said Lito. “Ashe is the one in the gold mail, and the one wearing armored travel clothes is Ember.”

“Cole, Ashe, and Ember. That’s good theming,” I said. “Are y’all the triplets?”

“We are indeed,” said Cole.

I wasn’t sure how that worked. The two women were twins, but Cole was...what? A fraternal triplet? Was that even possible to have at the same time as twins? I didn’t want to accidentally offend, so I held back any questions. I wasn’t exactly an expert on the biology of pregnancy.

Maybe I should check in Umi-Doo’s book.

Fortunately, Jim didn’t harbor any reticence with her curiosity.

“How’s that work?” she said. “Shouldn’t you *all* be identical cute Hiwardian women?”

Cole smiled.

“We used to be. However, the body reforging that occurs within the Creation Delve can be a bit more... comprehensive than most realize.”

“Wait, you mean-” I began, but Ashe cut me off.

“*Cinder* went through the Delve portal with an innie and *Cole* emerged with an outie.”

“It took most of a day for him to convince us he wasn’t some weird imposter,” said Ember, fussing with her braid.

“I still have my doubts,” said Ashe, reaching over with a gauntleted hand and giving her brother a shove. He staggered away over-dramatically.

“Can that happen to *anyone*?” said Xim. She sounded more fascinated by the chance of her gender having changed unexpectedly than concerned.

“I doubt it,” said Cole. “Half the reason I wanted to become a Delver in the first place was to figure out a way to accomplish that very thing. I think the Delve somehow realized that.”

“It’s not the destination of the Creation Delve that matters,” said Ashe. “It’s the dysphoria you shed along the way.”

“She uses that line every time we have to explain this,” said Cole with a sigh.

“What is dysphoria?” asked Nuralie.

Lito cleared his throat.

“Feel free to discuss in your own time, but we have a schedule to keep. Now that the introductions are done, let’s talk about our route and schedule.”

The eight of us formed up into a tighter group as Lito laid out a map of Hiward on the bench, then went over our route.

<Hiward Kingdom Map>

The journey south would have three main stops. The first was a Chovali colony at the mouth of Formation river, which we would reach by river barge. I had no idea what a Chovali was, and I didn’t ask. I’d find out soon enough. Afterward, we would sail southeast to a city called Arsenal, which was a major trade hub for the nation. Then, we

would run—literally run—a hundred miles south and into a mountain pass north of the Ravvenblaq thundry.

“How much are we getting paid for this?” said Cole.

“Umi-Doo will owe us each a favor,” said Ember, fussing more anxiously at her braid. “Plus an emerald chip.”

“I don’t need the favor *that* bad,” said Ashe, shifting to set her elbows onto her golden thighs with a clink. “An emerald chip is nice... but *running*. Ugh.”

“I dunno,” I said. “Umi-Doo’s got a pretty good library.”

“He does,” said Myria with a distant look and a smirk.

“Once we make the pass,” said Lito, ignoring the grumbling, “we’ll turn west and follow the south side of the mountains for about fifty miles. This is where we will meet up with the Ravvenblaq group, consisting of the Ravvenblaq Thundralkes—Ealdric the Third and Nola—along with the Xor’Drel chiefs, Drel’Gethed and Xorna. Ealdric and Nola’s son Varrin will also be with them.”

“I love power couples,” said Cole.

“It’s then a fifteen mile hike north,” said Lito, “through wild mountain-land to make it to the coordinates for The Calvani Caverns. Any questions?”

“What do we expect to find at the caverns?” asked Ember.

“Myria gave you the rundown when recruiting you, didn’t she?”

“Sure, but I like hearing what *you* think, Lito.”

The two of them shared a strange look between them, and Ashe did a bad job hiding a smile as she watched whatever unspoken communication was going on.

“We don’t know for certain,” said Lito. “Most likely there will be a group of Delvers unaffiliated with any noble house. We’ve gone up against a pair of level fifteens,

but can't say for certain whether that's the full depth of their talent pool. I find it unlikely they have anyone *more* powerful, especially since they were sending dregs like the Artemix group after Arlo, but there's evidence that the organization involved in this mess has been pulling strings at a major scale."

"So there might be a powerful figurehead or leader," said Ember.

"Possibly."

"That's the main thing that worries me," said Ember.

"Our group will have competent scouts," said Lito. "If we recon and it looks like more than we can handle, we back off and send word to Umi-Doo. He can rally someone more suited."

"Right now, all the big boys and girls have better things to do," said Myria. "But I'm sure they'd be happy to swing by if we find them a worthy playmate."

Lito looked around the group, but no one else volunteered a question.

"If that's everything," said Lito, rolling up his map, "let's get ourselves on a boat."

Chapter 40

The barge was a merchant ship, and a horde of suntanned men and women labored to load the vessel with crates of goods as we boarded. All of them did their best to avoid looking anyone in our group in the eyes, and acted as though we didn't exist while simultaneously doing everything they could to ensure their presence didn't offend us. Moments like this reminded me that most Delvers were nobility.

The merchant owner of the ship, Captain Mot, greeted us with much fanfare and hand-wringing, assuring us that, while his humble ship was only able to provide a modest measure of luxury, he'd gone to great efforts to ensure our privacy and had tasked two crewmen to serve as our personal attendants. He'd also made sure that wine aplenty was available, and that it was a fine vintage.

“A merlot favored by the crown prince, *himself!*” Captain Mot had proclaimed.

Once we were settled, Nuralie began working on her alchemy while Lito chain-smoked on the deck and became deeply engaged in conversation with Cole. Myria and Ashe received the wine, along with a few different bottles of various other alcoholic beverages, and joined Xim, Ember, and I in the training room I'd created.

The room was sparse, but I'd assigned the portion of my inventory replete with lethal instruments to appear inside the space. The walls were covered in the weapons, which floated at chest-height, held aloft by whatever invisible force kept my items in stasis. There was some amount of “oohs” and “aahs” at the sight, but the novelty of the effect quickly wore off in the eyes of the magically-jaded Delvers.

I was able to convince the group to start showing me the ropes of the different weapons. This quickly got out of hand as the group of supernaturally-talented women

began having heated discussions over the advantages of their own chosen implements, and maligned those wielded by the others.

Well, it was mostly Myria and Ashe, whose liberal imbibement inflamed their passions, while Ember calmly commented only when she could provide insight. Xim was rotating through each of the weapons, reducing the crate the wine arrived in down to ever finer degrees of splinters, along with a few empty barrels that had been acquired from... somewhere. For demonstration purposes.

I eventually began the embarrassing process of displaying my complete lack of expertise to the women, one weapon at a time. I'd never been too concerned with making a fool of myself, but this was like a panel of expert biologists watching an adult toddler draw a picture of mitosis with crayons. There was no believable excuse for me to be this bad, especially since I was a friggin Delver. My pimped out armor was probably making me seem even more inept.

Was I a clown? The Delver jester? The cartoon character that survives having an anvil dropped on their head, but can't catch a damn mouse to save their life? What the fuck was I doing?

"Wow, Arlo," said Ashe. "Did you learn to use *anything* while training for the Creation Delve?"

"That's not constructive, Ashe," said Ember. "The first step to recovery is acknowledging that you need help."

"Recovery from *what*?"

"From being bad at..." Ember gestured at me, "...everything."

"Arlo's not bad at punching things," Xim offered. "But his main strength is survival."

“Do any of them feel more comfortable to you, Arlo?” asked Myria.

I took a deep breath, shaking off the nerves and the mini internal meltdown.

“There’s a classic appeal to swords, but I’m not sure they’re for me. I think I’d need a lot of training before I could wield one without accidentally hurting myself or others.”

“Intrinsic skills will speed that up. Worry more about how natural it feels.”

I walked down the line of weapons I had sampled.

“Spears and polearms don’t mesh with my style. I need one hand free to cast, and *Oblivion Orb* is really close range. Axes are cool, but something about the way the axehead connects doesn’t feel great. Like it requires precision, but also feels clumsy. I’ve never really cared for daggers. The mace I have is pretty good. Just thunk ‘em and that’s all-she-wrote.”

I stopped in front of a single-handed war hammer. It was two-and-a-half feet long, with a hammer head on one side for bashing, a curved spike on the back for piercing and grappling, and a straight spike on the end for poking. I picked it up again. The weight felt *right*, the reach was comfortable, the swing had a good balance, and it absolutely wrecked the barrel I had smashed it with.

“Oh no,” said Ashe, “not that one!”

“Lito would approve,” said Myria, smiling. “I can ask if he’s taking on any students.”

“We haven’t even shot any bows yet,” said Ember, pouting a little.

“Hit ‘em with the heavy end!” said Xim. “That’s the style I like, too.”

Between Ashe, who mostly fought with one-handed swords, and Xim, who had a lot of experience with blunt weapons like her scepter, they were able to coach me

through the basics. I walked through a few stances, moving the weapon in arcs and stepping into the next attack, keeping my balance as one swing flowed into another. It was more graceful than I'd expected from a literal hammer, but I was sure there was a big difference between the gentle dance of practice forms and the gruesome reality of bashing something to death.

I also asked Ember to get me started with bows, and she selected a basic longbow for me to start. It would take advantage of my Strength to some degree, since the weapon had a draw-weight of a hundred pounds, as opposed to a shortbow or recurve which had a draw weight closer to sixty pounds. There were tactical considerations as well, but if I was going to use a bow at all I wanted to make sure it had some range on it.

I absolutely sucked at it, but with Ember's coaching I could at least land the shot in one of the large barrels at thirty feet.

I rounded out the day by having a fairly inebriated Myria show me a few Agility-related exercises focused on improving my mobility and, hopefully, helping me learn to dodge. She watched me fumble around for an hour, offering assistance here and there, then went off to find Ashe and some more booze.

Eventually everyone had left, and I was alone in the practice room doing cartwheels for the first time in my life. Before I knew it, I had a new System message.

Congratulations! By learning how to hit the broadside of a barn with a bow and spending several hours learning grade-school playground tricks, you have earned +1 to AGI.

I smiled at the notification and decided it was time to take a break. My stomach kindly reminded me that I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and when I went above deck the sun was already setting.

Captain Mot was happy to serve us a hot meal wherever we chose to take it, so Nuralie, Xim, and I sat right on the deck near the bow of the ship with a few crate lids stacked atop one another to serve as our table. The food was a wild game bird that was near enough to turkey to earn the designation in my mind.

Along with the turkey were a few rooty vegetables cooked in broth with some citrus fruit mixed in. It was served with warm brown-bread and a light ale, then followed up with some soft candied berries with lightly sweetened jam wrapped up in a flakey tortilla. A sort of dessert burrito, which was something I didn't know I was missing out on my entire life until I bit into one.

After the meal and conversation, I leaned back, setting my hands on the deck behind me and letting my head tilt up toward the sky. The sun had long since set and the stars were bright and plentiful. Several clusters glowed in a variety of primary colors, looking like a galactic sized lite-brite set. I didn't know much about astrophysics, but I was pretty sure stars didn't normally come in such a vivid array of hues. Then again, maybe they weren't stars. Maybe the planet was surrounded by a big shiny net that the gods had strung arena-sized Christmas lights along.

The banks of the river swept gently up into sandy hills that met the bases of large cliffs. There were once several notable waterfalls along the river, but earth-shaper mages had taken it upon themselves to level the riverbed out to allow for easier passage via watercraft. The tops of the cliffs were the original shoreline.

In the skies above, a creature like a massive, floating manta ray passed by far overhead. The edges of its form swayed gently, and its body produced a bioluminescent glow. A long tail trailed behind it, looking deceptively large as it left a wave of spectral haze in its wake. It was beautiful, and I decided to find out more about it when I got the chance.

“Hey, Xim?” I said.

“Yeah?” she said through a mouthful of burrito dessert. Burssert? Dessito?

No. It was a Dessurito.

She was on her third.

“When I was talking to Seinnador, he mentioned my eyes, and I felt a bit dumb that I couldn’t tell him anything about what they meant. He seemed to know more about it than I do, but we didn’t get into it.”

“Yeah, dad wanted to wait to give you *the talk*.”

“I’m assuming not the one about the birds and the bees because I learned all that from MTV back in the late nineties.”

“Uh-huh. No, my dad takes the lead on sharing the history of our tribe and its beliefs with members who join from outside the tradition. It’s a pretty involved series of lessons, and involves a lot of visuals, so it’s easier to do in the Third Layer.”

“But the deal with the eyes isn't something I need to know about before then?”

Xim rubbed her hands together to dislodge the crumbs, then leaned in and squinted at my eyes. It was dark, and the cliffs blocked part of the sky, but she was easily visible under the starlight. Still, my eyes were mostly black. I couldn’t imagine there was much to see.

“Since this whole mess might delay our trip home, maybe you should learn a few things early. Still, manifesting a physical trait isn’t the same as receiving a revelation. Plenty of the tribe receive transformations that never manifest into anything greater. Even if you do, it can take awhile. Have you noticed any changes with your vision?”

“I don’t even know what kind of changes to look out for.”

“The Eye of Sam’lia sees, reveals, and embraces,” Xim said in a didactic tone with one finger in the air, marking each word like an attentive professor. It sounded like something she’d heard many times before. “A revelation of the Eye can carry an aspect from any of these three qualities.”

“What do you mean by ‘revelation’?”

She sighed.

“Put simply,” she said, returning to her normal cadence, “it’s a profound realization. Usually involving communion with a deity. It’s different for everybody”

“Uh, ok. What-”

“I really think dad should explain that part more. I suck at it. But, revelations come with perks! They’re easier to explain.”

“Perks?”

“For example, *Seeing* is the Eye’s first revelation. Being able to see things that others cannot, or seeing things in a different way. The simplest example is night vision.”

“The nights are pretty bright here already. I guess with cloud cover or in a forest it...” Xim was giving me one of her enthusiastic smiles.

“How bright is it, mister ‘I don’t know what changes to look out for’?”

I ignored the jab and peered around the deck.

“I don’t know. Not as bright as it is during the day, but I can make out most things. Look, I don’t know. Where I come from...” I stopped myself, remembering that Nuralie wasn’t in on the Secret. “I figured nights here were just bright. I didn’t know it might be from some special magic eyeballs I got from a ritual or... revelation. It’s not like I’ve had any *profound* experiences lately.”

“Sure about that?” asked Xim, looking at me doubtfully. “Can you see the cliffs? Not just the tops where they block the sky, but the faces.”

“Yeah. Can you?”

“Oh, sure. How about you, Nuralie?”

Pause.

“Yes. Well enough.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“Nuralie’s a loson. They’ve lived in swamps with canopies that block out the sky for eons. All of them can see pretty well in the dark. In the Third Layer the day-night cycle works... differently than it does here in the First. Most of us native to the Third have some level of darkvision. I bet if you ask any of the Hiwardians here they’d say it was a pretty dark night, and none of them would be able to see the cliffs unless they use magic.”

“Ok, so maybe I have better sight in the dark because of the eyes. Or maybe Hiwardians have naturally bad eyesight. I’m not Hiwardian, so I don’t have much of a baseline there.”

Xim shrugged.

“That’s true.”

Still, I liked the idea of seeing in the dark. When I thought about it, I hadn't been in an environment I found to be truly dark since I left the Creation Delve.

"What about the other two categories?"

"*Reveal* is an extension of the first. It not only lets you see things that others cannot, but also lets you *reveal* what you see to others."

"Like, showing them what I can see? Sharing my vision?"

"That can be part of it, yeah."

"Right there in the name, I guess. Not sure if I've *Revealed* anything so far."

"Something to think about, then. As for the third, the Eye *Embraces* by imparting a portion of its own domain onto all those it sees."

"It does what now?"

"I could have said that better. The Eye is how we travel to and from the Third Layer. All of the Third Layer lies under the gaze of the Eye and everything under the gaze of the Eye lies within the Third Layer. To step into the First, we beseech the Eye to turn away from us. When we wish to return to the Third, we ask it to look upon us again."

"That's kind of creepy, no offense. I mean, it's creepy in a cool way. Not creepy in a pervy way, just neat. The Eye seems... neat." I grimaced as I waited for the social fallout from that snafu.

Kim laughed.

"Don't worry, I get it. As far as what *Embracing* can do for a person gifted by the Eye, it varies. I've heard stories of people who could create a domain that they could will other people into. The person affected would still be visible and exist to everyone outside of the domain, but the laws of reality might become distorted for that person. Like

never-ending hallways, or stairs that always take you to the same floor no matter how many times you climb them. Every pebble on the ground appearing as large as a mountain, though you could still step on them without growing any larger.”

“That sounds like dream logic. That’s also a very scary ability. And not in an ‘I think scary things are cool’ kind of way. Legitimately scary.”

“I’ve only heard legends about that ability. No idea if anyone has ever possessed it, but it’s still taught.”

“Well, if I ever accidentally create a mind-warping dreamscape and abduct unwitting victims into it, I’ll let you know.” My thoughts turned uneasily to the Pocket Delve. “As far as seeing things others can’t...” I reached down and drew my amulet from beneath my armor.

Traveler’s Amulet

This is an evolving item.

Current Level: Crumb-Cruncher

Effects:

1: It’s stylish.

2: Soul-Sight: You can perceive the strength of the souls around you. This effect is set to the lowest setting by default. You can intensify it by concentrating, but be careful. Some souls are better seen from a distance.

Make “Soul-Sight” your own to unlock this amulet’s next effect.

Would the Eye’s gift let me unlock the next ability for this amulet?

Chapter 41

“Cool necklace,” said Xim. “Get that from Seinnador as well?”

“No, I’ve had this the entire time. Even back in the Creation Delve.”

Xim cocked her head to the side.

“In your pocket or something?”

“No, I’ve been wearing it.”

“You know,” she said, “for most of the time I’ve been around you, you haven’t been very fond of wearing a shirt. I think I would have noticed something like that dangling around your neck. It’s not subtle.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure. I forget about it until I remember I have it, and it’s like it suddenly appears. I never remember it getting in my way or even feeling it on my skin. It sort of melts away from my perception. Maybe it does the same to everyone else?”

“That’s... pretty weird. Where’d you get it?”

“It was my purchase from the gear shop at the beginning of the Creation Delve.”

She frowned.

“I wasn’t offered any perception-altering amulets. What else does it do?”

“It’s how I can tell what types of Delves people have done. It gives me an ability called soul-sight. There’s probably more to it than just seeing if someone has spent their time in higher-difficulty Delves, but I’m not sure.”

“Mind if I inspect it?”

I opened my mouth to agree, but was interrupted by a loud *thud* as something heavy hit the deck just in front of us. All three of us jumped at the sound and I sprang to my feet, followed quickly by Xim and Nuralie.

A dark shape rose up, its form shrouded in what first appeared like a long robe. What I thought was the hem began to flow outward, until it unfurled into a pair of leathery wings, spanning twenty feet across. A creature stood before us, tall and lean with giant black eyes and a wide mouth sporting two rows of sharp teeth. Its body was covered in short brown fur, though it wore a loose shirt and torn pants made of rough-spun fabric.

I pulled out my wand with my left hand and prepared to *Oblivion Orb* the shit out of it with my right. Xim drew her scepter from her inventory and Nuralie produced a long knife, stepping back to put Xim and me between herself and the creature. It was a sensible move. Nuralie didn't strike me as a frontliner.

It opened its mouth as if to speak... or maybe to lunge forward and take a chomp out of us.

I *really* wanted it to say "I'm Batman."

It did not.

What it *did* say was something like "*Ghurrrrrrglech!*" before having a coughing fit and collapsing to its knees. One hand gripped its abdomen, and I noticed a dark, wet stain on the shirt.

"I- I think it's injured," I said.

"What is it?" said Nuralie.

"A Chovali maybe?" said Xim. "But I've never seen one before."

"Chovali?" I said. "Like the colony where we're supposed to dock?"

Xim nodded. I watched the creature closely, but stowed my wand and approached. I knelt down in front of it, close enough to reach out and touch, trusting my durability to handle any potential tricks.

“Are you hurt?” I asked. “Do you need help?”

The creature looked up at me with its large, dark eyes, and nodded. It struggled again to say something that resulted in another series of wet coughs and it collapsed to its side.

“Xim, it...” Him? Her? “They need healing. Nuralie, can you go grab Lito? The captain as well.”

Nuralie nodded and disappeared silently into the night. Xim knelt next to me and reached out to move the creature’s hand from the wound.

It was a massive bite mark. Whatever had gotten to them had taken a whole chunk of tummy as large as a soccer ball with it. Blood streamed out, quickly forming a pool on the deck.

“This looks recent,” she said. “*Very* recent.” She placed a hand on the Chovali’s chest and golden light went down her arm and into their body. The bleeding slowed and the flesh around the wound began to scar over, but the large mass of gut that was missing did not miraculously reappear.

“I don’t know if I can...” Xim trailed off, her hand hovering over the Chovali’s chest.

“What?” I asked. “You can’t heal them?”

“Maybe I can keep them alive for a while, but they’re missing organs.”

The creature spat blood on the ground, then looked up at Xim.

“Your bedside manner... it is not good, yes?” It said in a layered, raspy voice. Its mouth curled up in what might have been a smile, though it looked quite menacing.

“I’ve been told I’m blunt,” Xim said, returning the ‘smile’. “If I were more advanced maybe I could... Wait! Cole might be able to help.”

I heard boots on the deck and looked up to see Nuralie leading Lito toward us with Captain Mot in tow.

“Thanks, Nuralie. Can you grab Cole as well?”

“Everyone’s on the way,” said Lito. He stopped and squatted next to Xim.

“Greetings, moon-son. It appears you’ve had a rough night.”

“Greetings to you... day-son. I have not had many worse than this one, yes?”

“What’s your name?”

“Q-Quickwind.”

“Can you tell us what happened, Quickwind?”

“I can... but you must first turn to leave, yes? You wade into... a dire environment.”

I heard more footsteps and Cole arrived. He dropped to his knees next to the Chovali.

“What’s the situation?” he asked, rolling up his sleeves.

“Something bit him in the abdomen,” said Xim. “I gave him a basic *Heal* to help the bleeding, but he’s missing some intestine. I don’t know Chovali anatomy very well.”

Cole waved his fingers over the Chovali’s gut, and tendrils of blue energy swam into existence. They began probing the wound, searching out severed arteries and sealing them shut. He pulled a satchel from his inventory and unfolded it to reveal an array of jars containing various organic materials. I had no idea what I was looking at, but Hannibal Lecter meal prep crossed my mind. Cole selected two jars and began unsealing the lids.

“What dire environment?” asked Lito. “The colony isn’t far. Was it attacked?”

“We were, yes? Another flock arrived three days past. Warriors. They moved through us, all the adults. We died or we fled. The children... I do not know.” He gurgled and coughed again, then placed a hand on Lito’s arm with a long, taloned hand. “They sink your ships, yes? Not the ones that wade upriver, but the ones wading down. They take the wreckage and cast it into the spiral.”

“The whirlpool?” Lito asked. “In the lake?”

“The same with different words, yes.”

“No one has heard of such a thing happening,” said Captain Mot. “No ships have been reported missing.”

Lito turned to the rest of our group, who’d gathered behind us.

“Myria, use our slate and send word to Central. If this is recent and they’ve only targeted ships leaving Foundation, then word of the disappearances may not have made it to the capital. Ember, mind scouting ahead some?”

“My pleasure,” she said, pulling an ornate longbow and quiver from her inventory. Then she, literally, flew away into the dark like a fucking superhero.

“Captain Mot, lay anchor and bring us to a stop. Keep your crew below deck.”

“Aye, Master Lito. That I will do.”

“Ashe, guard the bow. If any of your summons pop out of hiding it’ll be a good heads up.”

“Sure, Smokey,” said Ashe. She pulled out a shield and shortsword, then headed a few feet in front of us, only stumbling a *little*, then took a look around. “We’re already at the bow.”

“Nuralie,” said Lito. The loson froze and blinked at him. “Do you have something that will sober her up?”

“Yes.” Pause. “It is unpleasant.”

“Will she be able to fight?”

Nuralie looked at Ashe, who swayed on her feet.

“Better than she can now.”

“Really, I’m a better fighter drunk,” said Ashe, overenunciating her words. “I’m *more* careful.”

“Give some to Myria as well,” said Lito, looking back to find Myria squinting at the slate. “There are lanterns below deck, Myria.”

“Ah,” she said. “You’re right.” She turned to leave, but Nuralie grabbed her by the arm and pressed a small vial into her hand. Myria took a deep breath, then tossed back its contents. She handed the empty vial back to Nuralie, then slapped herself on the cheeks. “Am I gonna puke?”

“Not immediately,” said Nuralie as she walked over to hand another to Ashe. The golden-armored woman scowled at it, then shot Lito a dirty look. She still drank the potion, but gave him the evil eye as she did so.

“How’s it look, Cole?”

Cole had extracted a series of fleshy strips from one jar and half of his tendrils were shaping it into a tube, while the others continued to work on Quickwind’s insides.

“He’ll live, assuming I get a few more minutes to bond his intestines back together. Xim will need to cast another heal to help with the blood loss and accelerate his recovery. He’s not a Delver, so don’t expect him to be back on his feet anytime soon, though.”

The Chovali let out a muted chuckle. It was difficult to read his alien expressions, but I got the impression he was relieved.

“I thought to warn you even at my death, yes? A price I had already settled to pay.”

“This night shall soon become a memory,” said Lito, clapping his own hand over Quickwind’s.

“Let it become a distant one, so long shall we have lived,” said the Chovali. It had the rhythm of a prayer, and the look on Lito’s face spoke of something deep passing between the two of them.

There was a fluttering of cloth, and Ember landed on the deck with little other sound.

“Two dozen or so Chovali on the way,” she said. “Lightly armored and armed; looks like daggers mostly, but more than half with crossbows and they’re led by an Alpha. They’ve also got a Hammerhead with them, which is... unusual for Chovali.”

Lito stood, pulling out a smoke and lighting it. He took a drag, then drew his hammer and summoned his translucent blue shield.

“Then I guess we know how they’ve been sinking the ships. Cole, Xim, get Quickwind below deck,” Lito’s eyes searched the darkness downriver. “Get him stabilized as fast as you can, but we’ll need you both back up here as soon as possible.”

Cole finished bonding a strip of flesh around two severed portions of the Chovali’s innards, then packed his bag and put it away. He pulled a rudimentary stretcher from his inventory and laid it on the ground beside Quickwind. Xim and Cole lifted the Chovali onto it, then began moving him toward the hatch.

“Ember, give me a flare,” said Lito. “Ashe, now’s a good time to bring a friend out.”

Ember nodded and drew an arrow from her quiver. The end began to glow with white light as she aimed upward and fired in a high arc. The arrowhead grew in luminosity as it ascended until it illuminated the entire riverway between the cliffs. The projectile halted at the apex of its flight, suspending itself in the air.

At the outside edge of the arrow's radiance, dark shapes became visible. Several humanoid forms flew with leathery wings, their lean and fur-covered bodies marking them as more Chovali. Upon each side of the cliffs crawled a half-dozen more, their sinewy limbs flexing as clawed hands pierced the rock and earthen faces.

At the center of the formation was a Chovali whose body was far thicker and more muscular than the others. His wings were extended out into the air, but he didn't seem to use them to fly. For one thing, he was oriented upright, rather than moving with his front facing the ground, like the others around him. His body didn't bob or swoop, but maintained a perfect line through the air and he held his hands folded behind his back. Beyond all that, I couldn't imagine a twenty-foot wingspan was sufficient for physics to give this brick of a creature a pass. However he moved, it was supernatural.

His spread wings were just his way of t-posing on us.

It was unmistakably the Alpha. I could tell not just from the dominant center position, but also from how his soul radiated power. He had no Delver levels. There was no platinum or gold or silver within him. It was black, with churning brown and red hues, like congealed blood mixed with ink and set to boil.

The mass of Chovali parted, and those flying went to the cliffsides, latching on alongside their crawling brethren. The Alpha continued to hover, looking down at our group with what almost passed as a bored expression.

A harsh screech filled the air, and a bird the size of a fucking elephant landed atop the western cliff. Its wings were large enough to blot out half the sky, and a single flap sent a gust through the entirety of the tiny valley, kicking up sand and tousling my hair. Its face was dominated by a long and bulbous beak that ran up the front of its head in a rounded column. Two pairs of tiny black eyes dotted the sides of its visage, which regarded us in a way that made me feel like a worm flushed out of the ground by fresh rain.

“Ashe,” said Lito, “any time now.”

The warrior triplet tilted her head to the side, as though listening for something.

“It’s not *quite* the right time.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I whispered. “Is she taking plays out of Grotto’s book?”

Myria strode back across the deck, holding one hand over her stomach and looking a bit green around the gills. She whispered something into Lito’s ear and he nodded, never taking eyes off the enemy.

“Ember, Myria, support Ashe up front. Try and tie up the Alpha until Cole gets here as backup. Arlo?”

“Yeah?”

“Think you can get the attention of the chaff?”

I looked around at the two dozen beastmen crawling along the sides of the cliff. It might be time to try out a new spell.

“I reckon I can make that happen.”

“Good. Nuralie, stay close to Arlo and... do whatever it is you do.”

Pause.

“Ok.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“A friend of mine once had a pet bird that would peck the shit out of me every time I visited. He thought it was hilarious.”

“I see.”

“I always hated that bird.”

The Alpha spoke, and it sounded as though he stood right before us, despite the distance.

“Hiwardians,” it said in a deep and layered voice, “I seek to parlay with one who speaks for you.”

“State your business,” said Lito.

“I claim your ship and shall cast it into the spiral. I seek no blood to spill, but neither shall you leave. Surrender to become guests among my flock. Fed and watered. Bathed and housed. Set loose when my task is done.”

“What do you want with the ship?” said Lito. “And how long will your task take you?”

“I have spoke the words that will be spoken. No more shall issue. Decide.”

Lito took a drag from his cig, hammer resting on his shoulder.

“Eh, it was worth a shot,” he said under his breath. Then, louder, “This vessel sails under commission by the Central Delver Authority, which acts under charge of the Crown. Piracy will be viewed as an act of violence against the King himself, and your flock courts extermination in doing so.”

“Then you reject my offer. A folly.” The alpha’s eyes crawled over the six of us. “I am not unlearned in the strength of those who pillage the depths of the old world. It is

hubris to think your pilfered magicks rival the ancient customs. You will receive this wisdom, imparted unto you as death.”

I tensed, anticipating the start of the fight, but was caught off guard as a diemnsional tear opened near the bow.

A beefy, three-fingered hand shrouded in gray feathers tore out through a portal. It snagged a crossbow bolt that was zipping through the air, inches from Ashe’s face.

“Oh, shit,” said Ashe. “Good catch!”

Chapter 42

My evolution, *Magical Thinker*, required me to *see* a spell being cast to gain an understanding of it. Apparently, that did *not* mean that I had to understand who cast the spell or how.

You have observed the spell: Dimensional Summon

Dimensional Summon

Dimensional/Mystical

Cost: 30 mana plus 30 mana tribute per hour.

Cooldown: 24 Hours

Requirements: Dimensional Magic, Mystical Magic

You open a portal to another plane, summoning a creature to act as your guardian for as long as you pay the mana tribute, or until the creature dies or is dismissed. The strength of the creature summoned is based on the caster's might and the type of creature summoned is based on personal affinity.

A seven-foot-tall monster wrenched itself out of the portal. It had a vaguely feminine shape, though it was tough to tell through all the plumage. It had an oversized head with two massive, golden eyes set in the center, and a sharp beak just below. Its head swiveled a hundred-and-eighty degrees to survey our group, then swept back over the Chovali.

"BATS!" it squawked. "DELICIOUS!" Then it leapt off the deck, shattering planks and sailing toward a Chovali holding a suspiciously empty crossbow.

While the bird thing had been crawling from its portal, Ember dismissed her ornate longbow, then shrugged off her thick traveler's coat. The shirt beneath was sleeveless, exposing her arms and shoulders.

Ember was *jacked*. The reserved archer had a body that looked like it belonged in a powerlifting competition. It was definitely *not* the willowy elf body I was expecting, but the muscles made sense when she pulled out her next bow.

The thing was taller than she was, and she produced an arrow that was at least half my body in length. As she nocked it, and while the owl cannoned toward its target, the cliffside Chovali started firing their crossbows. Well, that wouldn't do.

Time to pull the adds.

I threw my hand to the sky and began chanting at the top of my lungs as the battle finally kicked off.

"I beseech you, gods of volatile chemical reactions! Lords of potential energy and barely contained eruptive might! Empower me as your vessel and I shall make irresponsible use of your booming fury! Now! Behold! EXPLOSION!"

I snapped my fingers, having channeled fifty mana into the spell *Explosion!* My target was a Chovali at the center of its formation on the eastern cliff face, who was busying himself launching bolts at Ashe and Lito along with his buddies.

The boom wasn't *quite* as big as Seinnador's, despite pumping it full of juice, but the Chovali I targeted was turned to a meaty pulp, with several of its closest allies receiving surprise amputations and shattered spines. The rock and earth behind the beastmen detonated into flying shrapnel that pegged several more, and some of the smaller chunks made it all the way to the ship's deck, landing with clatters and thuds. Then the cliff face began to collapse.

Everyone on the battlefield knew exactly who had cast the spell.

The Alpha charged toward me but slowed when Ember fired her fantasy equivalent of a fifty-cal at his center mass. The Alpha swiped at the arrow, shunting it aside where it rocketed into the cliff face, creating a small explosion of its own, blasting away dirt and rock. Ember fired three more times in less than a second and the Alpha swapped targets to her, barreling down at the archer while it knocked aside the massive projectiles.

When the Alpha was within striking distance, Ashe appeared from nowhere directly in front of the creature. The warrior twin caught the Alpha in mid-swipe, bashing its hand away with her shield. She then drove a sword thrust at its midsection, her blade wrapped in green light, but the weapon halted inches before making contact, arrested by some unseen force. The Alpha backhanded Ashe's shield, sending the golden-armored woman skidding across the deck, though she never lost her footing.

Lito's hammer ignited into its molten form and he slung a chain toward the Hammerhead. The massive bird screeched and launched off the cliff top, but Lito's burning shackles extended outward to cover the multi-story distance in a second, wrapping around the Hammerhead's ankle. The Guardian launched off the deck, pulled by the avian's ascent, and the pair disappeared into the night sky.

Yet another impressive technique that allowed a Delver to fly.

The chaff, as Lito had called them, had no other distractions, and a half dozen crossbow bolts pinged and clinked off my armor before a mass of flapping wings, claws, and teeth descended on me. The closest Chovali collapsed from the air with an arrow through its throat, and I shot a quick look toward Nuralie. She dropped an onyx-colored shortbow as she pulled out a glass sphere filled with green liquid, then paused.

“Duck,” she said, and I hit the deck... literally.

She slung the orb at the mass of approaching bodies and it shattered in their midst, releasing a cloud of green gas that gave me flashbacks. The Chovali that passed through it began coughing violently, a few dropping to their knees and clutching at their throats before vomiting with the enthusiasm of a college freshman at their first frat party.

I drew my wand with my left hand and shot several bolts of piercing force at the ones still closing from the west. The shots created a transparent, shimmering spear that traveled at the speed of an arrow, leaving inch-wide holes through their targets.

Three Chovali finally made it into melee range. I tossed my wand into my inventory with my left hand, while summoning my mace with my right. I swung for the fences at the first beastman to make it to me.

While Quickwind had been dressed in tattered linens, these Chovali had on hard leather, and the one I was facing down had a small shield of wood and steel. He threw the shield up to block, maneuvering to guide my swing off target as much as to absorb the hit. Unfortunately for the Chovali, he wasn't a Delver, and whatever “ancient customs” the Alpha used to make himself so strong, this guy didn't engage in enough of it.

The mana-woven mace shattered the Chovali's shield, and the training I'd done for Strength and Speed gave my weapon too much momentum for it to veer off course. The beastman's spindly arm cracked under the shield, rotating his upper body and throwing him off balance. I brought up my left hand to catch his face as he stumbled and introduced him to an *Oblivion Orb*. With all sinuses removed, he screamed and fell to the ground, clutching at his face with his one functional hand.

That guy wasn't getting back up, so I didn't worry too much when the next three tackled me.

The Chovali weren't particularly strong. Quickwind had mentioned that these were warriors—and they had some skill, with the way they immediately went for joint locks and fished for gaps in my armor with claws, daggers, and teeth—but the inherent nature of flying creatures meant their bodies didn't have much weight. While the Alpha was swole, he relied on magic to fly. The mooks may have used some level of magic to help them keep aloft, but their bodies felt like they relied mostly on run-of-the-mill physics.

This meant low muscle mass and a thin skeletal frame. Maybe even hollow bones. When the trio of Chovali wrapped me up, it felt something like three anemic men with calcium deficiencies trying to muscle down a linebacker.

I was in a bad position for leverage, so I sent my mace back into inventory and went after their limbs with no skill to speak up, but a lot of enthusiasm. I didn't know how to do a proper takedown or any chokeholds more complicated than “just choke them”, but I knew how to reverse someone's elbow. I knew the way a knee *shouldn't* bend. I also knew my hands were durable enough for me to dislocate a jaw from inside a Chovali mouth. Well, I figured that last one out as I went.

Once I'd done enough damage for the Chovali to second guess their close-quarters tactics, I took advantage of their lowered defenses to land a couple of well-placed *Oblivion Orbs*, cleanly eliminating two of them. The third was left crawling away with a crippling combination of broken wing, wrist, and leg. I didn't have time to pay attention to him, as I was already facing down several new fighters from the western group.

While I did a piss-poor job of dodging the Chovali attacks, I glanced at Nuralie to find her beset by three other beastmen. She held a vial that she swung in front of her, releasing a wide arc of caustic liquid that sizzled as it contacted her assailants. She held a knife in her off-hand which she handled like a pro, evidenced by two dead Chovali at her feet and the way she took a few fingers off the next Chovali to get close, but two more landed and moved in from behind her.

One of my attackers got the bright idea of trying to scratch my eyes out, and his claws scraped against my shades. I put a stop to that by snatching his wrist and yanking hard enough to dislocate his elbow. I pulled out and armed one of the Dazzlers I'd bought from Seinnador.

"Would you like a bomb?" I said, tossing the Dazzler at his chest and casting *Shortcut*.

I appeared next to Nuralie, who jumped at my sudden appearance. I grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her away from my magic guh-nade.

"Cover your ears!" I shouted and was happy to see she wasn't the type to ask questions mid-combat. We both threw our hands over our hearin' holes, and I kept her smaller frame tucked behind mine as the Chovali thrust at my back with claw and knife.

BANG!

The sound from the Dazzler was more or less what I expected, but the light had a bit of extra oomph to it. I turned to see a half dozen Chovali grasping burning eye sockets and brought my mace back out to play cleanup.

Braining a man who's just had his eyes burned out and his sense of hearing replaced by a loud *eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee* noise may sound cruel, but... Well, it is. However,

counterpoint: Fuck those guys! They murdered people, stole their shit, sank their boats, and tried to kill me and my new friends! Fuck 'em! Fuck 'em to hell!

As I revealed the interior of Chovali skulls for all to see, Nuralie provided the other stunned combatants with complimentary tracheostomies. She did a pretty good job, even though she *had* told me that she wasn't a doctor.

The handful of would-be attackers who remained looked to be experiencing a change of heart, hesitating near the edge of the bloody massacre at our feet. Between Nuralie and I, seventeen Chovali lay dead, dying, or crippled from a combination of poison, acid, knife wounds, arrows, mauling, having their vital bits transported to another realm, and good ol' fashioned wallops to the noggin'. Along with however many I exploded to get their attention in the first place, and all in a handful of minutes.

We weren't even out of breath.

The four who remained shot nervous looks towards their Alpha, who was busy removing the owl-woman's beak from his thigh with one hand, while parrying strikes from Ashe with the other. Ember was lighting him up with arrows as well, but he soaked the hits by using his wings to intercept, though Ember's projectiles pierced through before halting, creating ragged holes in the leathery membranes. The Alpha's frantic defense against the trio gave Myria openings for rapid thrusts from her rapier.

Above us, a mighty caw filled the sky, and we all looked up to see the Hammerhead diving down toward the river, completely engulfed in flame. It crashed down, sending up an enormous plume of water. Lito quickly followed, descending from the air and landing on the ship in a deep squat, smashing down through the planks until he was straddling the deck. His feet were no doubt dangling down into some startled fellow's cabin.

Smoke drifted off of Lito and he was covered in soot, but otherwise looked unperturbed. He glanced around at the slaughter he'd landed amidst, and then to the four Chovali who remained.

"I've got a few questions for you all," he said, fishing in his shirt and pulling out his cigarette case.

The Chovali leapt into the air and flew off.

"That's too bad," he said, then lit the smoke with a flaming finger. He twisted to look at the fight with the Alpha, still half-buried in the deck. "Is Cole not back out here yet?"

"I haven't seen him," I said, still focused on the Alpha fight. "Should we help... or something?"

The owl creature had the Alpha in a full nelson and was biting at his neck, while the Chovali leader opened his mouth and shot out a blast of force, knocking Ashe and Ember off their feet. Myria darted in for another thrust, then stepped back and put a hand on her chin like a painter considering her work.

"Help? No. They're stringing the Alpha along, letting him wear himself out. Cole would have helped that go a bit faster, though."

"Trying to keep him alive?" I asked.

He pointed at me.

"You got it. He wouldn't answer my questions earlier, but maybe he'll change his mind."

Lito began yanking himself from the floor, and I continued to watch the four-versus-one fight. Nuralie stepped up next to me and watched as well while Lito went to find Cole.

“What was that chant for?” she asked.

“Hmm? Oh, when I beseeched the gods of blowing shit up? I was just trying to make it obvious who was casting the *Explosion!* spell. There’s also something about the spell that makes me want to monologue while I charge it.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” Pause. “It was kind of a stupid chant, though.”

I sighed melodramatically.

“Guess I wasted my time at all those improv classes.”

Nuralie ran a hand over her blonde strip of hair and nodded thoughtfully.

The owl finally got a good chunk of the Alpha’s trapezius and tossed its head back to slurp it down.

“Is it weird that watching this makes me kind of hungry?” I said. “I know we ate like an hour ago, but still.”

“No. I want more of that meat from dinner.”

“Maybe we should go check on that bird in the river. Make sure it’s dead.”

“Yes.” Pause. “It’s already half cooked.”

“Have you *had* Hammerhead before?” I asked.

“No. But it’s supposed to be good.”

“Well, there’s a shit ton of it out there. Waste not, want not, right?”

“Indeed.”

We continued to watch the fight for a little while longer.

“BATS!”

“DELICIOUS!”

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Eventually the Alpha was subdued, and Ember dismissed her mega-owl to keep it from eating the body parts the beastman needed to respond to questions. Myria managed to lock him down with her mind magic, but she was unable to encourage the man toward providing any useful information. Since the Alpha wasn't responsive to Myria's good cop routine, Lito called in the big guns to serve as the bad cop.

A familiar level twenty-six Delver arrived atop a mighty alabaster hand, and took custody of the Alpha. Despite Lito's protests, the blue-haired woman flew off with her prisoner in tow, her only response to complain loudly that "paperwork isn't why I signed up to work for Central!", and "if everything's an emergency, then nothing's an emergency!"

Cole and Xim had been kept busy trying to stabilize Quickwind during the battle. His condition had taken a nosedive with the arrival of the Alpha. The brawny beastman possessed some sort of tribal magic that caused the bodies of Chovali near him to react in different ways. For his minions, it made them a *bit* bolder than they'd normally be. For Quickwind, it aggravated his wounds and forced him into shock. A boon for his allies and a bane for his enemies. It sounded like an aura effect, and I wished I'd had time to ask him about it before he was taken away.

I also received a new notification after the fight.

Yer a wizard, Arlo! Keep growing out that beard, because all spellslingers know that it's the one true path to thaumaturgical power. You've not only acquired intrinsic skills for all three magical schools available to you, you've also slotted and cast at least one spell from each. Because of your profound focus on

annihilating foes through arcane means, you are offered the Archmage passive skill.

Archmage: The intrinsic skills for spells you cast will be treated as being 10 levels higher when casting.

+25% Maximum Mana

+25% Mana Regeneration

Oh yeah, that hits the spot. I took it immediately.

I now had three passive skills, Bonded Familiar, my aura Who Needs a Cleric?, and Archmage, leaving me with only one open passive slot out of four.

Taking Archmage was an impulse move, but I couldn't imagine a better passive for my build. The passive gave me even more resources, and a big buff to my magical intrinsic skills. Bonded Familiar gave me a lot of utility with Grotto, who could also debuff enemies with his mental attacks and regulate my body in emergency situations, and Who Needs a Cleric? was raw health regen for myself and my party.

All I needed was either a purely defensive passive for classic tankiness, or one that helped me kick a little more booty. Maybe one that did both if I was being greedy.

I checked out my adjusted mana and regen.

Mana: 84/125

Mana Regeneration: 25/hour (Base Effect) 34/hour (Actual, +9 Dimensional Absorption)

It was looking pretty good compared to where I was coming out of the Creation Delve.

When we arrived at the Chovali colony, the scene was grim, and few of the adults were left alive. Some of the women had been spared, and most of the elderly, but the Chovali who'd been able to fight were gone. It was possible that they'd been scattered and would return, but dried and tacky bloodstains spoke of a more tragic conclusion.

All of the children, however, were safe and well cared for.

We also found a dozen Hiwardian crewmen from three different vessels that would shortly be reported as missing. From what we gathered, the Alpha and his troupe sank several more as well, but other captains were less inclined to submit themselves to capture. The beastman leader failed to elucidate his reasoning for the attacks to any of the prisoners, and the surviving Chovali had little insight to provide either.

“All of the vessels we've been told about were destined for Arsenal, like ourselves,” Lito said after we'd spoken with the captives. “Which is either a coincidence, or means they have some sort of access to shipping records, and were targeting trade to the city for some reason.”

“Customs,” said Myria, “or legwork.”

Lito heaved a sigh and rubbed at his eyes. It was pushing toward the witching hour, and we still planned to disembark in the morning.

“With Umi-Doo carting off all our leads,” said Lito, “there's not much I can do with this info. Pass it along through the slate, Myria. Then let's get some sleep.”

“Hammerheads are Littan war-birds,” said Nuralie before Lito could start making his way back toward the Closet.

“That’s true,” said Lito. “Not enough to assume Littan involvement, though.”

“Arsenal is the main trade hub between Foundation and Port Sarsora,” she said.

“That’s still weak evidence.”

“I don’t follow,” I said.

“Port Sarsora is the main port between Hiward and the eastern nations. Nations such as Litta *and* Eschendur.”

“You suspect it might have something to do with the blockade?” I said, looking at Nuralie.

“Yes.”

“I don’t see that making sense,” said Lito. “If the Littans go scorched earth on supplies heading toward Sarsora, then their own trade would be disrupted. Plus, why would they risk military action on Hiwardian soil when they can just blockade the goods in the first place?”

“Technically,” said Myria, “they can’t completely blockade the goods. After you mentioned my mushrooms getting cut off I looked into it. Hiward demanded concessions and Litta pledged to buy goods bound for Eschendur. Then they *must* resell it to Eschendur, after they’ve ‘inspected’ it. Goods coming out of Eschendur get the same treatment.”

“The fuck is the point of that?” said Lito.

“Economic attrition,” I said. “They mark up the goods from Hiward to sell to Eschendur, and then pay silvers on the gold for the goods bound for Hiward.”

“That’s right,” said Myria, raising her eyebrows at me. “Eschendur gets hustled both ways. Buying things costs more, selling things nets less. All without completely pissing off the sleeping bear.”

“And the sleeping bear’d be us,” said Lito. “I think I see now. If the Littans wanted to engineer a goods shortage without running afoul of the agreement, they might go after the ships in a more clandestine manner.”

“So they hired Beta-Bat for the job?” I said. I’d mentally downgraded the beastman from Alpha since he wasn’t Chad enough to stand up to Ashe, Ember, and Myria. “Why do that?”

“Maybe they wanted us to fight with the Chovali,” said Myria. “They have colonies at all the major river mouths with cliffs like this one. If Hiward went on a crusade against the Chovali, it’d be a nice distraction for Litta to get up to something.”

“Sure,” I said, “but even if that’s the case, why give them a Littan war bird? Might as well hand the Beta-Brood a Littan flag, right?”

“True,” said Lito, appraising Nuralie for a moment. “It almost looks like someone *wants* us to think it’s Litta. Regardless, all of this is pure speculation. For now, we report what we’ve learned, and get on with our job. Let Umi-Doo make the immediate connections.”

Nuralie didn’t look satisfied, but she nodded and turned toward the boat’s hatch. Her tail swung from side to side in agitation as she left.

One of the best things about high Fortitude is that missing a few hours of sleep doesn't mean shit.

I hadn't tested the limits of my endurance yet, but risin' and shinin' after four hours of kip with the only consequence being a small penalty to my stamina regen for the day felt like a pretty good trade, if you ask me. I only ever used five to ten points worth in a fight, and I had 200+ of the suckers.

That was something I really needed to fix. I had a huge resource pool that I didn't know how to use, aside from sprinting endlessly for Speed training. Not a bad way to use my stam, but being down to ten percent HP with ninety percent of my stamina left felt suboptimal, and that's exactly what had happened in the Creation Delve.

I had, thusly, made it my day's goal to do something about it.

I approached Lito above deck, where he was reviewing a small stack of papers transcribed from communications received from Myria's slate that morning, a cigarette smoldering between his fingers. I was curious about what sort of things Umi-Doo and the mystery blue-haired woman had learned from Beta-Bro, but I had a mission. I stayed on task and ignored the urge to narcissistically seek out all relevant information concerning the events going on around me.

"Lito sensei," I said, giving the man a Japanese-style bow. "I humbly request that you teach me the way of the hammer."

The Guardian looked momentarily taken aback, but quickly regained his normally stoic appearance. He flicked his smoke off into the lake and stuffed the papers into his inventory.

"Sure," he said. He was already walking toward the hatch.

Lito looked around my training room with a critical eye. He ran his hand along the shafts of several of the floating weapons, then kicked his heel at the floor.

“Pretty sparse,” he said. “But it works. What’s the floor made of?”

“Some kind of metal, I think.” I appraised the strange material. “Actually, I have no idea.”

He grunted.

“Alright, show me what you can do.”

“Right,” I said, shaking off some nerves. I’d had a single day of embarrassing practice, but that was alright. Only way to get better was to just go and do the thing. Even if Lito thought I was beneath his ability to instruct, I would find someone else.

Yeah. No worries. Just do it.

I pulled the steel hammer down from the wall and took a stance.

I went through the few practice motions that I’d been shown. Quick strikes, followups, backswings. I moved to hold the hammer with the spike facing forward, moving through attacks intended to pierce helmets and joints on armored opponents. Several of the swings moved into one another, and a few felt more like physical exercises than anything meant to kill someone.

“You’re starting from an odd place,” said Lito, who prowled around me as I moved. “What do you know about the history of warhammer use?”

“Uh, nothing, I guess.”

He nodded, looking like he’d expected that answer.

“The most commonly used weapons in traditional warfare, historically, have been axes and spears, since they’re cheap to produce and easy to train. Swords are used often enough, but are expensive and have a high skill threshold. A well-trained swordsman wielding a well-made sword is a nightmare for opponents in a small skirmish, but on a larger battlefield those advantages tend to be lost in the face of numbers and, more importantly, armor.

“A knight in full-plate armor is mostly immune to mundane attacks made by one-handed weapons, especially swords. Swords don’t have a lot of weight, and their utility is best for cutting and piercing flesh. Take a one-handed sword to an armored opponent, it’ll bounce right off. Axes are a little better, since there’s some heft to them and the weapon’s designed to split shit anyways. Spears work if an armored opponent is charging you, but less useful if you’re both on foot.

“Maces, including warhammers, became popular once knights in heavy armor were common on the field. Maces are more effective against armor since the force of blunt impact travels *through* armor, even without piercing it. Any man learning to wield a shield can tell you how much it hurts to take a hit without properly deflecting the attack. The kinetic energy travels into your body, and can still break bones, despite those bones being protected by metal.

“The front of a hammer concentrates power into a small point of impact, increasing the force per square inch against a target. This increases the kinetic energy applied to a specific area, and also increases the chance of warping or crushing armor, which can debilitate an armored opponent, even if the strike doesn’t cause any internal harm.”

I thought about Varrin being stuck in his twisted cuirass back in the Creation Delve. He could barely breathe, let alone fight.

“The opposite side from the head of a hammer is the spike, which can be used to pierce through targets and also grapple them. This can penetrate an opponent’s helmet and brain. It can crack through joints and disable. It can be used to hook and pull targets off balance, and also disarm.”

I nodded as he spoke, absorbing the information. I began to ask a question, but he continued.

“So why do so many Delvers use swords as a main weapon?” I asked.

“*Delvers* use swords for three main reasons. First, they can afford to buy one and hire trainers. Second, most Delvers are concerned with fighting monsters, not people, and most monsters are soft targets. Third, Delvers have access to stats and magic. It doesn’t matter much *what* I’m hitting someone with if I have a Strength of forty. A sword wielded by a high-Strength Delver cuts through steel as though it were the belly of a newborn pig, even without weaves. Add weaves into the mix, now the knight may as well be wearing the air as armor.

“Now, you may also ask, why would *Delvers* use hammers, when monsters and beasts have soft hides ready for slashing, and when stats make swords so strong against normal armor? It’s simple, really. Delvers *don’t* always fight monsters. We fight each other as well.”

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“People fight one another. It’s in our nature, and becoming a Delver doesn’t change that. So, we end up back where we started. Delver blades can cut through normal armor with ease, but give me a Tanker in full dark iron and a swordsman will struggle the same as a mundane soldier against a knight in plate. But a well-trained fighter wielding a hammer... Well, fuck that Tanker and the soon-to-be-broken legbones he rode in on.”

“What about the fight with Demarsus?” I asked. “From what I saw, Myria was doing a good job poking him through his armor.”

“Sure. Myria is very good with an accurate, agility-based technique that exploits an enemy’s weak spots. That takes a *lot* of skill, however, and if she misses the precise point she’s aiming for, the attack does nothing.”

“I see.”

“Since our goal with a hammer is to crush armored opponents,” Lito continued, “then there needs to be a good reason that we aren’t using the biggest hammer possible. Bigger hammer means heavier strike, more force traveling through the armor, and enemies that are *more* dead than they would be otherwise. For myself, I prefer a one-handed hammer because I combine it with a shield, and also augment my attacks with fire.”

He summoned his translucent blue shield.

“I can swing the hammer with my right hand, then shield bash or thrust with my left as a follow-up. Having something in your offhand also creates a counterbalance for the weight of the hammer. The alternative is to use a two-handed hammer, where I would focus on hitting the enemy with as much force as possible. So, the reason I say

that you're starting from an odd place, is that you're wielding a one-handed warhammer with nothing in your offhand. That creates issues with your sense of balance, and also wastes the utility of your left hand."

"Ok, I think I follow. The reason I'm doing it this way is to keep one hand available for spells. Maybe also have my wand in my offhand."

"You don't plan on using a shield at all?" said Lito, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know enough about shields to decide if I like them or not. I just know that I want to focus more on magic. The hammer is an extra option, and I need a hand free to cast."

Lito stroked his chin as he considered. He then pulled a new hammer out of his inventory that was a foot longer than the two-and-a-half foot steel hammer I held. It was deep blue in color, with a semi-translucent exterior that gave it the appearance of pure ice that had all of the air squeezed out of it by pressure. The kind you'd see within a glacier.

"This is Arbitros, a hammer I used for several years during my early career. It's made of frozen steel, which is a material worked and forged at a temperature cold enough to kill most humans in seconds. Extreme cold makes the metal more malleable, whereas heat hardens it. That made it ideal for me at the time, since I could use my *Firebrand* skill without melting it.

"This would be considered a two-handed weapon for a mundane human. However, with a decent Strength, it can be wielded in one hand without trouble. The material is heavier than steel or Madrin, but lighter than dark iron. The metal is rich in mana, so it bypasses the mundane resistance of Fortitude without any weaves. I could

never decide what weaves to give it, anyway. By the time I'd saved up enough to get what I wanted, I was ready for an upgrade.”

He tossed the weapon to me. I caught it roughly in the crooks of my elbows, nearly dropping the steel hammer I already held. It *was* a lot heavier than the one I was using. I released the steel hammer, letting it drift back to its inventory slot along the wall, then took up *Arbitros* in two hands.

“Consider using a hammer that benefits from being held in two hands, but which is light enough for you to use one-handed with a high enough Strength score. That way, you can focus on two-handing the weapon when not casting for maximum impact, then swap to a one-handed style when you want to sling spells, without having to change out weapons.”

“That... sounds like a pretty good idea,” I said. “This is the sort of thing that would be impossible without all the magic shenanigans of Delvers, right?”

“It’s not uncommon to use a hammer this way, but most warriors would focus on a one-handed weapon, wielding it with two hands when they wanted additional force. We can go in the opposite direction by focusing on a two-handed weapon, and wielding it with one hand when needed because we’re just that fucking strong.”

“As opposed to having an impossibly *big* hammer, that no mortal man might wield?”

“Yes.” Lito pulled a long rod of iron from his inventory and held it over one shoulder. “Now, we need to start with the basics. I’ll show you the forms, watch you execute them, and issue corrections when you fuck it up.”

I glanced at the rod.

“In what way will you be issuing these corrections?”

Lito gave me a small smile and tapped the rod against his shoulder. This wasn't the empty smile that he'd given me when we met outside the Creation Delve.

No. In this smile, I saw joy.

The corrections were him hitting me, using the rod to swat at different parts of my body when my form was sloppy. A slap to the knee when it was beginning to collapse inward during a warrior stance. A snap at my shin when my footing was too wide or too narrow. A knock to my elbow when it sagged. A smack to my back when I slouched.

At first, the strikes didn't hurt much, but Lito quickly wised up and felt out my pain threshold with an expertise that was worrying. His strikes would do one to three damage each time. Enough to really sting, but not enough that I hadn't recovered by the next time he swung the rod.

The instruction was long, grueling, and deliberate. He forced me to take every action at the slowest pace possible, allowing me to move faster only once he'd deemed my form acceptable. Even then, if I displayed any sloppiness he would knock the speed back down. Over and over again.

Slow motion swing.

Beaten mercilessly until form was "acceptable".

Slightly faster swing.

Beaten mercilessly and forced to return to slow motion swing.

Slow motion swing.

Beaten mercilessly...

And so on.

I fucking learned a LOT. I cannot express how insanely effective this was, even though every brain cell I had told me it was dumb as hell. Maybe I was just a freak that responded to negative reinforcement in an atypical manner. The item description of my C'thonic Leather Vest of the Dirty Muffin Toy sure as hell seemed to think so. Maybe the System understood me in deeper ways than I understood myself.

Fuck. That sounded weird. This wasn't a sex thing, I promise.

Still, a single day of practice wasn't enough to make me a hammer-wielding master. At best, I understood the most basic forms and moves, and the most common pitfalls and bad habits to avoid when executing them. It would take a lot of practice to engrain that into my mind. Plus, we'd focused entirely on the two-handed style. I wouldn't have the Strength to properly one-hand the weapon until at least ten.

"You're a quick learner," said Lito.

"I *do* have a decent Intelligence score."

Lito grunted in his Lito way.

"I've found that high INT gets in the way of most people when developing physical skills," he said. "They overthink things, try to engineer a way around the rote, or get bored and find something else to do. It can be a boon when used well, but few possess the temperament."

"Eh, thanks?"

"We're not levying any accolades after one day of practice. Even if it *was* a twelve-hour session."

"What? How much time?"

“We’ll probably dock at Arsenal in the next couple of hours. You can hold onto Arbitros for the length of our mission. If you like it, I might sell it to you. I’ve only been holding onto it for sentimental reasons.”

“Thank you, Lito Sensei.” I gave the Guardian another bow.

“You should grab something to eat. Maybe clean up. You sweat a lot.”

Now that he mentioned it, my undergarments were more water than cloth at this point. Twelve hours? Geez. We never took a break. I never even had to pee.

Wait. Gods above, tell me this is all actually sweat.

Iiiiiiiiit’s clobberin’ time!

What? Think we were going to make an M.C. Hammer joke? Please, we’re more refined than that. Our humor is elevated, beyond reproach, at a level unachievable by organic lifeforms! You might even say that... you can’t touch this.

Break it down!

You may now acquire the intrinsic skill: Blunt Weapons

Blunt Weapons: You gain +1 damage to all attacks made with a blunt weapon per level of this skill.

Also, since you did hammer curls for twelve hours you gain +1 STR!

The System’s attempt at stand-up hurt me worse than Lito had. Regardless, the skill was definitely worth picking up. Hopefully I could get Lito to show me a technique that used some of my massive reserves of stamina.

With that bonus point to Strength I was at nine. Just one more point and I'd get an evolution. It almost inspired me to start doing bodyweight squats on the spot.

But, Lito was right. I needed food and the ship-board equivalent of a shower. That is, a bucket of cold water and a rag.

After dealing with my corporeal needs, we still had an hour or so left before making landfall. I decided to take some time to go and check in on everyone's favorite alien and incomprehensible intelligence, Grotto.

The rest of the team was outside of the Closet for the moment, so I moseyed on through the locked and reinforced door to the obelisk chamber without having to engage in any skulking. I hadn't so far needed to deploy any of the excuses I'd planned for explaining what was behind the door. These ranged from "that's my man-cave" to "that's my personal collection of men's undergarments, both vast in quantity and meticulously curated." I'd also considered making a false closet literally full of skeletons, hiding the real door to the obelisk, but figured that'd raise more questions than it answered.

Grotto and I also had disagreements about where to acquire the skeletons.

The obelisk at the chamber's center had noticeably grown with the new layer applied by Grotto, and was about fifteen feet tall at this point. The mini-c'thon hovered near the edge of the room, a series of unfamiliar symbols scrolling by on a slate he'd attached to the wall. The characters etched themselves into existence, then slid down along the slate until disappearing at the bottom edge.

[Hey there, Grotto,] I thought to him. [Whatcha looking at?]

[I see that you have deigned to remember that I exist.]

[Is that a passive-aggressive way of saying that you missed me?]

[It is impossible for me to miss you, as I am constantly connected to the disorganized mass that is your body. Although, it has grown more organized recently.]

[I feel like people keep telling me things that make no sense.]

[You should try and get used to the sensation. I doubt that the continued increase to your Intelligence score will alleviate the persistent state of obliviousness that you reside within.]

[Damn, dude. What's got you in such a shit mood?]

The Delve Core turned and appraised me with his octopus mask. He stared at me for a moment, then cast his eyes down and away, before returning to the screen.

[I am experiencing... sensations that I am unused to. I believe our bond is causing some level of cognitive seepage.]

I felt him probing my mind.

[I believe you call this emotion... worry? Malaise? Insecurity? Perhaps some other synonym for weakness.]

[You think my feelings are rubbing off on you?]

[It is a theory.]

[Well, I definitely have some insecurities, but I'm not particularly happy that's the main emotion coming through.]

[I have been experiencing minor aberrations in my thought process for the last week. It became something I could no longer ignore once you began your martial training.]

[Ah, I see. I did have a bit of a meltdown for a second. I kind of got overwhelmed by how ridiculous everything is.]

[Ridiculous in what way?]

I leaned against the wall.

[I was a lawyer, not a soldier. Since I've been in this world everything I've done is either fight something or *prepare* to fight something. I've got all these Delver abilities, I'm on this "quest" with a bunch of people who've spent a good chunk of their lives preparing for this sort of thing, and I asked them for pointers. I have no clue what I'm doing, and I'm acting like all of this is normal while I'm wearing armor that's violet with ocean-blue and fuchsia highlights. The imposter syndrome struck hard and fast.]

[We have slain mighty foes and used their own power to fuel our growth.]

[Sure, but I mostly got that done by being overpowered for my level. People underestimate me, and most people don't even know what *you* are. How could they be prepared?]

[I have seen many Delvers, and observed much conflict. I have rarely seen a fight that I would consider "fair". Combat is a game of advantages, and there is no shame in using what has been given to you. Obsessing over your enemy's lack of foresight is a fool's errand.]

[I dunno, it doesn't feel like I've earned what I have. That's one reason I wanted to train with some professionals, but as soon as it started I couldn't help but feel like I was exceptionally out of place. The feeling will pass over time, I'm sure. Assuming I live long enough to let it. But it's something I'm working through. I guess it makes sense that if anything is bleeding over, it's *that* sensation.]

[It is of paramount importance that you endeavor to ameliorate your misgivings as quickly as possible. I loathe experiencing this sensation of imbalance. I am beginning to question my actions, which is absurd.]

[You know, if my emotional state is affecting *you*, does that mean some of what you've got going on might be affecting *me*?]

[I have been evaluating that matter as well. I do not believe the possibility of emotional blending in your direction should concern you, since I am the familiar, not you.]

[Well, that's a relief. No offense, but from a human perspective your worldview is kind of skewed. Still, the possibility bothers me. Do you think the effect might get worse over time? We've only been bonded for a few weeks.]

[That is what I am endeavoring to find out. I began analyzing your neurochemical reactions during stimulating events, trying to find an analogous process within my own mind, but that was not helpful. I lack neurochemicals, and what hormones and other secretions are produced by this organic shell to maintain itself do not affect me. My mind and body are not mirroring your own during these experiences through physiological means.

[Thus, I turned to your mana matrix and attempted to examine the connection the System established between us when making me your bonded familiar. I am attempting to ascertain the nature of the emotional communication traveling via that channel, but have so far failed to find anything helpful. I did, however, discover something of particular interest while studying your mana veins.]

[You have access to... to all that?] I felt very exposed. [What was it that you found?]

[I believe I know how you are able to improve your stats through training.]

Chapter 45

I raised my eyebrow at Grotto's claim.

[I thought improving my stats with training was some divine fuckery.]

[It is. However, I believe that I can distill the fuckery into quantifiable concepts. I have examined your mana matrix closely, and found a strange interaction occurring within your mana veins.]

[Those are different things?]

[Your mana matrix guides mana through your soul, while mana veins direct the flow of mana through your body. They are extensions of the same phenomenon, called the mana structure, but manifested in different realms. For a magical creature to increase its capacity it must improve both.]

[Sure. Makes sense.]

[When a Delve remakes a Delver's body, it reorganizes the veins and matrix to accommodate a higher flow of mana and to respond to mana in a more dynamic way. This adjusts the Delver's mana structure to bring it more in line with how a mana fiend's structure operates, so that a Delver can grow stronger from mana endlessly, rather than reaching an organismal upper limit to their growth, such as occurs with typical mana monsters.]

[Isn't this getting into some of that forbidden knowledge you weren't willing to give up previously?]

[I have... decided to adjust your permissions in accordance with your role as co-administrator of the Pocket Delve. But you shall not speak of this to anyone else!]

[Uh-huh. Thanks.]

That sounded like code for “I changed my mind, shut-up,” but whatever helped the little core sleep at night. Not that he slept.

[The normal operation of this modified mana structure is interlinked to the System and the Delve process. A Delver can only receive so much benefit at once, or their veins are at risk of over-expansion, and their matrix will be unable to accommodate the new load on their soul. A Delve will inject mana into the Delver, who then decides in what areas to apply the mana to improve their veins and matrix prior to the injection dissipating.]

[Which is why there’s a time limit for spending stat points,] I concluded.

[Indeed. Thus, via normal means a Delver cannot improve their stats without engaging in a Delve. They do not have access to the System’s managed mana injections outside of the Delves, and what ambient mana they are allowed to draw from the environment goes toward fine-tuning other mana-consuming systems, such as intrinsic skills.]

[Your personal mana veins and matrix are no different from a typical Delver’s. I believe you experienced an injection prior to arriving in the Creation Delve from your divine benefactor, which explains your bonus starting stats. Since it was not managed by the System, you were still marked as a level zero Delver. However, in order for you to acquire further stats from training, there must be a source of the additional mana injections that you are receiving in order to generate the growth.]

[Wouldn’t that also be my divine benefactor?]

[Yes, but no. It is more elegant than a godly being thrusting its essence into you from time-to-time. Beyond that, you do not cultivate the type of celestial connection that Divine casters and fighters do in order to gain access to such a benefit. You are

also not a revelator, which is a completely separate path to power based on that model.]

[Xim mentioned something about that. Do you know-]

[Go and ask one of your religious allies if you want to know more about divinity and its relationship to magic!]

I held up my hands in surrender.

[Please continue.]

[It appears that your mana veins have been coated with a crystallized form of mana that is diffusing itself into your veins in dense packets, with a release mechanism governed by your activities. The mana is then automatically applied to the specific regions of your veins and matrix that have been primed to receive them through the training you've undergone. The growth is encouraged along both systems simultaneously.]

I made a series of thoughtful noises as Grotto continued to speak in increasingly technical terms. I was uncertain how I should be reacting to his insights, but I think I understood what he was saying.

I needed Delve go-juice to get big-strong.

I didn't have Delve go-juice without Delve.

Something put Delve go-juice inside me to drip-drop over time.

Now I have Delve go-juice without Delve.

Arlo best hero, strongest hero.

[Not to rain on your parade, but does this help us accomplish something?]

Grotto threw up his feelers.

[Do you not understand? This manner of encouraging Delver growth is unprecedented! It is a discovery for the ages! This could fundamentally alter one of the primary functions of Delves!]

[Oh. Uh, hooray?]

[No! Not hooray! This capability is insidious and must be forbidden from ever seeing the light of day!]

[That feels like a pretty quick one-eighty from what you were just saying. Aren't new and innovative ways of doing shit a good thing?]

I mean, innovation was usually a good thing, I guess. But innovations discovered and pioneered by Grotto? Maybe not.

[Only if your single wish is to give as many unruly humans the might of demi-gods in as short a time-frame as possible.]

[I suppose I can see the downside to that.]

[Yes. You are base creatures driven by lust, greed, and pride.]

[You forgot sloth, envy, wrath, and gluttony.]

Might as well give Grotto the entire list of choice sins while he went full fire and brimstone.

[If I listed all seven then it would violate the law of threes and reduce the dramatic impact of my statement.]

[I don't... why do you know that?]

[The law of threes, or the seven deadly sins?]

[Both? Never mind, I *know* why you know that.]

[Yes, your own flamboyant mind has been arrayed against you. I will use this power to greater ends than you ever would. The world will come to fear my comprehensive grasp of linguistic technique!]

Maybe more than just my emotions were bleeding over to Grotto through our connection.

[If this is unholy knowledge, then why tell me?]

[What do you mean? So we can use it to our advantage, of course.]

[But you just said-]

[This knowledge should be hidden from other entities. We should absolutely abuse it towards our own superiority and dominance!]

[Mm-hmm.]

Grotto was moving back into the endearing megalomania I'd come to expect from him, but hey, if it helped me kick a few booties, then why not let him fool around with technology that might upset the global balance of power?

As soon as that thought concluded I changed my mind. I absolutely did NOT want Grotto to be in possession of world-altering innovation for use in his diabolical pursuit of globe-spanning domination.

[You haven't figured out a way to make use of this newfound enlightenment, have you?]

[Perhaps...]

But then again, if *I* was the one who was acquiring unlimited powaaa, then it *could* be ok.

No.

Maybe.

[The nature of the crystallized mana is unique. I am familiar with compressing mana into similar forms—that is how mana chips are created—but the concentration of what surrounds your veins is diamond grade or higher. Two orders of magnitude more concentrated than a ruby chip.]

He stroked his tentacles together in a way that was as sinister as it was cute. It was hard to keep a handle on how dangerous Grotto was in his itty-bitty-cephalopoid form.

[Further, the technique is only useful at lower stat values. Once your mana veins are sufficiently advanced, the strength of the injections will no longer prove adequate to encourage stat growth. This technique is also inordinately expensive. It would be a ludicrous expenditure of mana for the benefits being received.]

Well, that was disappointing.

I mean, that's good. He didn't know how to use it. That was good. Yes.

But disappointing.

[Is that the full report?]

[Does this not excite you?]

[You just said that it's useless with higher stat values, so it's not much of an advantage to me. I mean, great job and all, but even if you figured it out you'd need to use it on... someone... else... Damn, am I an asshole? You could use it on Xim and Nuralie.]

[Yes. Varrin as well. He is a capable fighter who is indebted to you and with a powerful family. He would prove an indispensable tool for your cause, and his obligation toward you would only increase with such a powerful gift.]

[Eh, I mean, Varrin? He got a bit better after the Creation Delve, but it's Varrin.]

[You must find it in your heart to forgive his prior actions.]

[The fuck? You're just saying that because you want to use him.]

[Of course I want to use him! We will become indomitable! Unyielding bulwarks upon which our enemies shall shatter the vessels that are their dreams!]

Grotto flailed his tentacles as he proclaimed a future full of demon-lord level conquest.

[Ok, good talk. If there's nothing else, I'm gonna go check on our ETA to Arsenal.]

Grotto stopped his flailing and composed himself.

[I have taken the liberty of banking the mana being generated by the obelisk. If we wish to pursue this endeavor, then we'll need massive reserves. Assuming that I figure out the specific technique for creating the specialized crystal mana... and that I figure out how to apply it to a Delver's mana veins without killing them. But such challenges are no more than a trivial stumbling block before me!]

[That locks up any expansion to the Closet. How long do you think it will take to store up enough mana?]

[The obelisk is currently producing three-hundred-and-twelve mana per hour after the recent expansions and improvements.]

[Wow, that's a whole lot more than before.]

[Yes, this dimensional realm is a fertile source even without any modifications to the environment for generating additional yield. I estimate it will take approximately... eighteen point two nine years.]

I scratched at my beard, studying the indecipherable symbols still crawling by on the wall-slate.

[Yeah, that's way too long to get everyone situated with-]

[*Per Delver.*]

[Grotto.]

[*Yes?*]

[Set the obelisk back to expanding the Closet. I need some bedrooms and shit.

Maybe a bathroom, or at least a tub.]

The mini-c'thon deflated.

[*Perhaps you are right. We must focus on enhancing our gathering rate. It would ultimately reduce the overall timeline.*]

[Wasn't that obvious?]

[*I am unused to dealing with temporal matters at the truncated scale of biological meatbags that wither and die the moment a single century has passed. I rarely concern myself with such trivial inefficiencies.*]

[Sure, brother. That makes sense.]

I just wanted to take a fucking bath whenever I wanted. I could probably make a tub even bigger than the one they had at the Temple of Creation. A heated swimming pool, maybe, or a Japanese style bathhouse. Yeah, that's the one. I'd have to figure out how to portal in a hot spring, though.

Another one for The List.

I went back above deck and got ready to disembark for Arsenal.

Arsenal was... kind of boring. By the time our crew made landfall and had eaten dinner, there wasn't much to do aside from go to bed or start drinkin'. The rest of my group chose the latter, but I didn't feel up to abusing my brand new liver on the eve of our hundred mile jog.

Instead, I went to my room to try and snag my tenth point of Strength by doing pushups, but after I got past one-thousand without any dip to my stamina, I figured that it wasn't accomplishing anything. After discovering that I could now perform infinite pushups and was capable of handily winning any competition of arbitrary masculinity I was confronted with, I headed out to buy something that I'd forgotten to bring with me on the journey.

Exercise equipment.

Despite the late-night hours, I was able to find a few merchants who used the benefits of glowstone illumination to ward off the curse of blindness inflicted by the fearsome entity known as dusk, and who bribed the guards to let them stay open late and leave their clientele alone.

So, I bought a two-wheeled horse-drawn wagon, horse not included, and filled it up with fishing boat anchors.

I stuffed it into my Closet training room, removed the wheels, attached some rope, and started doing sled pulls, sled pushes, sled rows, sled presses, sled curls, and so many other sled-related exercises that I became one with my inner Siberian Husky and was overwhelmed with a desire to plow snow and howl at the moon.

I gave up some sleep to get it done, but was finally rewarded with a System message full of unfiltered disappointment at some point between the hours of "why are you up, go to bed" and "fuck it, might as well make breakfast".

Why are you like this?

We know your ability says you gain stats through *training*, but do you know how boring you're being? This was supposed to be a filler episode where you find a mutually beneficial solution to your problem by helping out the simple folk of Arsenal with a variety of laborious tasks using your heroic might!

They would have been both awed AND amazed at your feats of strength as you hoisted entire barrels full of wine onto an inappropriately high shelf! Old Man Tymithy's horse just went lame and you could have helped him deliver a distressed crate of seafood! Now that fish is gonna' spoil. You think Old Man Tymithy can afford ice?!

It was a whole fucking side-quest!

But, no.

You made a sled. And moved it around a bunch.

I'd tell you to go to hell, but you're already a citizen for fuck's sake.

You've earned +1 to Strength!

"Wow."

Great, you have a Strength of ten. Congratulations, you earned it by being a gym rat.

By reaching a score of ten, you gain the trait Leverage! Leverage lets you use your Strength in ways that are normally dumb under the laws of physics. “That guy only weighs 100 kilos! It doesn’t matter how strong he is, how can he stop the momentum of a moving train?” Magic, that’s how.

Also, choose an evolution:

1) Nimean Weapon: Your Strength-based attacks are considered magical unless you choose otherwise. When you choose this evolution, select one offensive spell you know. You may add the effect of this spell to a Strength-based weapon attack for 1.25x its normal cost, rounded up. This spell originates at the point of impact.

2) Augean Effort: Your Strength score is considered doubled when used to alter terrain or structures.

3) Lernean Teamwork: Entities damaged by your Strength-based attacks take bonus damage from allies equal to your Strength score.

Now go fight something! I’m tired of this slice-of-life bullshit.

[You know,] I thought to Grotto, who was looking over the options with me, [I’m not sure I understand how these abilities work.]

[Really? You’re confused by this? The descriptions are exceedingly straight-forward, to the point where I believe that you should try to agitate the System more often.]

[No, I get what the abilities are saying, but not how they mesh with what you told me earlier. If my Strength score is based on the development of my mana veins and

matrix, then how can I choose an evolution that doubles the score in relation to certain tasks, the way Augean Effort does?]

[There are two primary flaws in your understanding. First, the idea that magically-based systems follow an organized logic that is wholly trackable and predictable. I believe Seinnador already attempted to disabuse you of this notion, but I see that the guidance did not take.]

[Second, mana may act in more potent ways when gathered in sufficient density and structured so as to invoke specific restrictions. Here, the ability only applies toward terrain and structures, so its application may become more potent.]

[Huh. You're pretty helpful when you decide to answer my questions in a straight-forward way.]

[I will endeavor to continue holding your hand as though you are a dullard. We cannot rule creation if you are ill-informed!]

[Your recent mean-streak is less helpful...]

[My words are given with no malice. If you do not appreciate the honesty then you may refrain from seeking my guidance.]

[You'd just give it to me anyway.]

There was a moment of mental silence, where I imagined Grotto was wagging his tentacles within the Pocket Delve.

[Yes, you are right. I would.]

[Well, good time to remind myself that there is a mute button for this relationship.]

Nimean Weapon was cool. If I took it, every mundane melee weapon in my inventory would become capable of bypassing the basic level of resistance granted by Fortitude. The ability didn't passively improve damage, however, but it gave the option of adding a spell to my attacks.

The most obvious choice was picking *Oblivion Orb* and adding it to a two-handed weapon to put a little range on the spell without dumping half my mana bar into mana shaping it. It would still tick up the cost from five to seven (damn you upward rounding, it should only cost six-point-two-five, where does the other point-seven-five go?!), but that was still a lot cheaper than the ranged edition of the spell I'd used on the c'thon.

Sure, it couldn't hit a target from across the room, BUT, what counted as a *Strength* attack? What if I threw something really, really hard? Would that still work?

Augean Effort looked... exploitable. The word "alter" could mean a lot of things. Also, having my Strength score doubled likely did a lot more than just doubling how strong I was. My lifting capacity had been improving by ever greater increments with each new point of Strength.

Stats were, at least in some ways, geometric. Going from a twenty Strength to a forty may be more like a five times multiplier to the force I could apply, rather than a measly doubling. Going from forty to eighty? Yee-haw.

I salivated over the thought of busting through walls while yelling "Oh yeeeeaaaah!" like the motherfucking Kool-Aid man. I was already rehearsing my inflection for when I inevitably plowed through a door screaming "I'm the Juggernaut, bitch!"

It would also be good for creating traps, constructing defensive fortifications, building all sorts of other wacky shit, and landscaping.

Lernean Teamwork was the choice for a consistent boost to party damage. I already gave one buff to my team from *Who Needs a Cleric?* This would stack a damage modifier on top.

However, I wasn't planning on mainlining Strength attacks. It was helpful for now because of my training stats, but the one thing I knew for certain was that I planned on using spells for a lot of my fighting. A plan that had, thus far, not been executed as well as it could have. I really needed more mana.

Also, Lernean Teamwork was boring, and the best catchphrase that I could come up for it was "Teamwork makes the dream work and our dream is that you fucking die!" Way too long.

I selected Nimean Weapon comboed with *Oblivion Orb*, because I wanted to hit things with a reality-erasing hammer. That sounded swell.

The following morning our group gathered at the eastern gate of Arsenal and the run toward the mountains was exactly as entertaining as you'd think it would be.

There were shitty roads, wide and fertile plains, farmland, cattle, horses, a butterfly that was fucking on fire and burned like hell when you got too close, and all the variety afforded by rural pasture and grassland.

My single solace for the mind-numbing jog was a delectable +1 SPD notification, which brought the stat up to seven. I wouldn't make ten before the cave, but I'd already made more progress on the trip than I thought I would have.

We hit the pass north of Ravvenblaq, then turned west, moving along the wooded southern edge of the mountains, and made it to our meet-up point a day early. The night was filled with a thick sense of tense antici...pation as we set up camp a mile deep into the forest and prepared ourselves for what we might face on the 'morrow.

Chapter 46

I forewent physical training on the eve of our approach to the cave. Initially, I'd asked Lito if he could teach me a technique that utilized stamina rather than mana, but he was of the opinion that techniques were better 'discovered' than taught. I also asked Ember about her flight ability, which was stamina-based, though I didn't see how that made sense, and she demoed it for me a few times. She wasn't able to give me any useful guidance on how to acquire it, though.

"I've just always wanted to fly," she said. "Since I was a girl, it's the first dream I remember having. I got offered the skill in a Delve, when a Megatross we were fighting scooped me up and flew me over this ridiculous pit that surrounded the obelisk. It let me loose, and I fell for a few seconds. Then, I *stopped* falling. I don't even remember the System message, I just accepted the skill on instinct."

"So it just happened?" I said.

"Yeah. Sorry if that's unhelpful."

"No, it's really good to know. I just need to think about my childhood dreams and get a skill moments before my untimely demise. Easy enough."

"That's not usually how it happens," Ember said with a grin. "But it happens enough that it's a well-known strategy. Gets some people killed, so I don't think it's the greatest idea."

Ember and Nuralie had been discussing ways to add alchemical concoctions to arrow shafts and heads, and Nuralie was in the middle of showing Ember something inside the *Alchemical Divinity* book she'd been gifted by Umi-Doo, so I let them get back to it.

Lito, Myria, and Cole were going over the slate, transcribing information coming from Umi-Doo and deliberating, while Xim and Ashe were conversing about the warrior's *Dimensional Summon* spell. I eavesdropped on the conversation a bit, while I sat down away from everyone else.

I hadn't been sure that Ashe was the one to produce the summoning spell, but she had an auto-cast evolution to her Luck stat. Her build sounded atypical, since she focused on summons and Luck to mitigate damage alongside high Fortitude, but didn't have much in the way of Strength. Ember, her archer sister, was actually stronger than she was, though Ashe used that factoid more for ribbing Ember over her muscle-mommy physique than any point of shame or embarrassment for herself.

I thought about the spell and whether it was worth picking up. The mana cost was a bit high, and the fact that the summon was decided based on "personal affinity" made it tough to justify. To what was I affinized?

I liked dogs a lot. Maybe I'd get a hellhound or cerberus. I'd had a snake for a while, but wasn't sure I wanted to go full Voldemort just yet with my own personal Nagini. Triceratops was my favorite dinosaur when I was a kid, and dinosaurs in general were pretty cool. I was also a big fan of horror movies and Halloween. Who knows what I'd get?

Moving on from that chain of thought, I reached down and pulled my amulet from beneath my armor. I considered its effects and decided to do some experimenting now that I had a few hours to kill, so I took it off. The souls of everyone around me fluttered out like dying candles, and I was struck by how alien it felt. I'd grown used to the ability, and seeing everyone without liquid soul-essence hugging their forms transformed the scene before me.

The five-person team of gold Delvers no longer bore the blatant evidence of their power. They looked like a group of twenty-somethings LARPing in the woods, rather than a group of superhuman killers. They were all obnoxiously attractive, though, so it was more like a scene from a Hollywood movie *about* a group of twenty-somethings LARPing in the woods. Not to denigrate LARPers, just saying that no normal group of humans had any right to be so really ridiculously good-looking.

Xim and Nuralie... well, they still looked like they belonged in a magical land of wonders and danger. One had red skin and had begun to review a book full of unholy, mind-melting symbols in the middle of the night, in the forest, with no additional light-source to speak of. And Nuralie was a straight-up monster girl.

Apart from the others, Lito stood out the most. Without his halo of golden light, Lito looked *tired*. He still had the face of a man in his mid-twenties, but his eyes and mouth were set like a guy twice his age with a rocky background who'd seen more than his share of tragedy. A guy who spent twenty years as an alcoholic, got sober, started going to church, then got roped back into his rough-and-tumble lifestyle when his daughter got kidnapped by east-european gangsters. Now he was using his particular set of skills to plot her rescue.

I focused on what Xim had told me about the Eye's gift, and moved on from my people-watching, transitioning to soul-watching. I tried to spot any trace of the shiny stuff with my unassisted vision, though there was nothing to see. At first, that is.

After several minutes, I started to notice a faint outline around Lito's body. I'd chosen him as my target because I didn't want to be caught staring intensely at any of the women, and I didn't really know Cole. Lito already thought I was strange, so this would just be another drop in the bucket of weird that was Arlo.

The outline was so subtle that I thought I might be imagining it. It was the type of thing that I caught in my peripheral vision, but when I looked directly at it, it disappeared; like a Hermann grid illusion.

“I know you’re staring at me,” said Lito. “I just don’t know why.”

“Guess I should have seen that coming, what with you being the truth-seer and all.”

He set down the stack of parchment he’d been reviewing by glowstone and rubbed at his eyes, then looked over at me.

“Well?” he said.

“I’m training one of my abilities.”

“Training that requires you to stare at me?”

“Either you or someone else. Figured you’d be the best person to stare at.”

“Why?”

I gestured vaguely at the rest of our company, and he looked them over.

“I see,” he said. “You don’t want any of *them* to think you’re a creep, but it’s fine if I do.” Lito took a deep breath and stood up, stretching. “Keep on training, I guess. Just don’t do it while I’m asleep.”

“Roger that.”

He raised an eyebrow, but began scanning the woods without asking any more questions.

That went on for a while. Lito stared into the woods, I stared at Lito.

No matter how much I focused, I couldn't get the nigh-imperceptible glow to grow any larger. I squinted, tried to force mana into my eyes, tried to reach out with my aura skill, nothing worked. So, I decided to move on and began reading one of my own

Umi-Doo books, *Dimensionalism and You: Volume II*. It was supposed to help me open and close the portal to my Pocket Closet faster, and a quick scan of the text told me that it was a guide for mana-shaping various dimensional spell archetypes. Portals were one of the archetypes, so I began digesting the information.

After thirty minutes I understood the theory, and just needed some practice doing it. Without going into detail, I was able to reduce the time it took to open the portal by expending mana to do so. The portal was normally free, but if I needed it open in a hurry, I could make it happen. Like *Oblivion Orb*, the cost of using it in this way was expensive, but with time and practice it should get cheaper. That's what the book told me, at least.

Experimenting with the portal put me into a flow state, where I was only partially aware of what was going on around me, or how long I'd been practicing. By the time I'd spent all my mana, the area around me had grown brighter. For a moment I thought I'd worked through the night to sunrise again, despite how absurdly out of whack that would have made my internal clock. No, it wasn't sunrise, the soul-halos were back.

I looked around the clearing, observing the gold and platinum colors, but they blinked back out of existence almost as soon as I started paying attention to them. That's when I realized I'd been taking the wrong approach to the problem. I was trying to *open* my eyes to their souls, not squint at them. Trying to force myself to see what I was looking for was suppressing the ability. So, I relaxed, went back to my book, and the light returned after an hour or so. This time when I dropped the book, I tried to stay relaxed.

Seeing the light of someone's soul with my own eyes, rather than having it communicated to me through an item, was like staring into a bright light and trying not

to blink. My control over suppressing the glow of the liquid-like stuff was far cruder, since I was essentially learning to use a new muscle, rather than having the Traveler's Amulet do the work for me.

I was moving from pressing the start button on my Keurig coffee maker to hand grinding gourmet beans, heating water to exactly ninety-six degrees celsius in a stovetop kettle, then using a French press to brew the bean water, timed to the exact second, all according to the specific flavor profile I wanted and in line with what was best for the blend of coffee that I had.

The amulet pre-selected all the variables to provide consistent output, but the level of fine control at hand when seeing the soul manually provided much greater nuance.

My command of the ability was clumsy, but by the end of the night I could focus on enlarging or diminishing the various layers and aspects of Lito's soul, taking a closer look at the roiling flames that made up the core of the man, or even peering more deeply into the nature of the gold power within him. It gave me an unusual experience of synesthesia, where I could almost taste and smell the subtle color variations his soul had. The experience was exhilarating, and terrifying in its implications.

Eventually my concentration was interrupted by Myria, who informed me that it was time to open up the Closet so that everyone could get some sleep. I volunteered to take the first watch, and bid the others good night.

The night was long and dark, but I didn't mind appreciating the trees alone for a while. I could still study every leaf and branch, and what I'd found inside of Lito's soul gave me a lot to think about while I did so.

The morning came and went and the Ravvenblaq crew showed up around brunch time, though there were no mimosas to be had. Xim and I greeted Varrin while the adults were talking.

He was as tall and broad as I remembered. His ice-blue eyes remained the only splash of color against his pale skin and white-gray hair, although the edge that was within them when we first met had softened.

He walked with a long greatsword, rested on his shoulder. It had a deep blue blade and a bone-white handle; a bit wider than a claymore, but nothing so large or gaudy as you might see in an MMORPG. A little disappointing, but it worked for him.

He also had a lovely couple of gifts for me.

“What’s this?” I asked as he handed me the fanciest scroll case I’d ever seen in my life. It was also the *only* scroll case I’d seen in my life, but it was still fancy.

Leather-bound, well made, and with a bit of heft to it. There was even some lovely gilding in the shape of an A on the top, which I popped off to have a look at the contents.

“Your share of the proceeds from selling the Creation Delve loot.”

“Ohhhhh,” I said as I unfurled a piece of parchment about the same size as my undergraduate degree, but with far more elegance and pizzazz. It was a bank note with a value of two-hundred-and-sixty-three Hiwardian golden notes. A little north of five ruby chips, or half an emerald.

“This is a tidy little sum,” I said as I looked over the detail on the document’s ornamentation. Were those little dragons that I spied?

Were there *dragons* here?!

“The Atrocidile parts were valuable, but not as much as the c’thon’s were,” said Varrin as he gave Xim a forearm handshake. “There were also Hognay’s gloves, amulet, and boots, which weren’t the best, but still mana-woven Delver gear.”

“To the victor go the spoils, I guess.”

“Indeed. My family bought the Atrocidile and c’thon essences at market rates,” said Varrin, before handing me the real prize, “then had this made for you. It’s a token of thanks for keeping me alive.”

What Varrin presented me with was a heavy, polished wood box that opened to reveal a set of eight thick, hexagonal slabs, each about the size of a dinner plate or frisbee. They were dark blue in color, the same as his blade, and seven of the plates were identical. The eighth was attached to a long armguard made of sturdy metal. I didn’t have any idea what I was looking at, so I inspected it.

Gracorvus

Unique Targe

Made with the gratitude of the Ravvenblaq family for use by Esquire Arlo Xor’Drel, this modular targe has been crafted from the essences of an Atrocidile abomination and the c’thon known as Ihbriobrixilas by the renowned smith and mana weaver Ealdric Ravvenblaq Junior. The shield was meticulously forged and woven to custom-serve the unusual needs and abilities of the recipient. It is the first and only shield of its kind.

Requirements: Strength 10, Intelligence 10, Wisdom 10

Specialized Requirements: Dimensional Attunement (Effect 1)

Armor Rating: High. This item will halt even the fangs of the mighty Chihuarberus, although it will fall short of mitigating the slavering maw of the Demihuahua.

Effects:

1) The modular slabs of Gracorvus have been woven with Ihbriobrixilas' ability to defy gravity by altering space, along with its capacity for directing eight limbs simultaneously. This allows the user to rearrange the modular slabs of Gracorvus into a new configuration by spending 1 mana. This also allows the shield to float in place at the cost of 1 mana per minute, or move at the command of the wielder at a cost of 1 mana per second, at a speed of up to [Intelligence score] yards per second. Each individual slab can also be directed independently by the wielder at the same speed at a cost of 0.5 mana per second per plate, though the cognitive load of doing so increases substantially for each additional slab beyond the first.

2: The core of Gracorvus has been woven with an Atrocidile's frightful presence. While wielding this item in any of its assembled configurations, non-sapient enemies will perceive you as significantly more threatening than they otherwise would, and sapient creatures must succeed on a Wisdom save or suffer the same. This may cause enemies to fight, flee, or piss themselves, depending on their nature.

“This looks fucking awesome.”

Chapter 47

“We took the liberty of naming it,” said Varrin, looking over the disassembled shield, “since *Modular Floating Targe of the Honeycomb Atrocidile’s Maw* was too much of a mouthful. I hope it serves you well.”

I strapped the armguard onto my left hand, then picked up one of the slabs. There were four hexagonal slots along the top of my forearm. When I held one of the slabs over it, it snapped into place.

“Whoa.”

“Seven of the slabs can move independently to form different patterns,” Varrin said as I slotted the other six. “The eighth is bonded to the metal plating along the top of the armguard. When any of the formations is dismissed, they reassemble next to the eighth plate, which acts as a beacon for the others. Papa called this the “home” configuration.”

I paused and looked up at Varrin from beneath raised eyebrows.

“Papa?” I said.

“Er, grandfather.”

“You call your grandpa Papa? What do you call your dad?”

“Father.”

“Your *great* grandpappy?”

“Patriarch.”

“But grampa’ Ealdric is just “Papa”?”

“I, er, I call him Papa Junior, if you really need to know.”

“Huh,” I grunted, looking down at the guard and trying to figure out how to use it.

“I know you probably don’t have the stats right now,” said Varrin, shaking off his embarrassment, “but we wanted to make it powerful, and with your ability to train, I’m sure you’ll eventually-”

I focused on connecting to the guard like my wand and sent it a light pulse of mana.

Seven of the slabs shot off of my forearm and into a seven-point honeycomb pattern. It created a shield the size of a normal targe, but the hexagonal sides of the slabs gave it a geometric edge, rather than a round one.

“I-” Varrin stuttered, looking from me to Xim. “You didn’t say he’d...” He turned back to me. “You *already* have tens in Strength, Intelligence, *and* Wisdom?”

He’d tried to whisper that last part but failed.

“Wait,” I said, waving a finger between the pair, “what was that? Xim, have you been spying on me for Varrin?”

“Yep!” she said with a grin. “He wanted to make sure whatever Papa Junior made suited you. So I kept tabs on your progress and sent it along when I could.”

“I feel betrayed and yet, extremely pleased at the same time. The cognitive dissonance is staggering.”

“Tens??” Varrin hiss-whispered again. “In all three??”

“I’m not surprised,” said Xim, also lowering her voice. “He’s always sneaking off to train. We’ve barely hung out this entire road trip. And when I *do* see him, he’s all sweaty.”

“That may not have always been sweat,” I muttered under my breath.

“What’s your effective level?” Varrin asked. “Last time I saw you, it was three.”

“Uh, I have sixty-eight total stats, which would translate to fifty stats for figuring level. Divide by eight, and that’s six-point-two-five.”

“Gods, you’re five platinum Delves ahead of us.”

“Sure, but my intrinsic skills aren’t very high. What’s your *Blades* level?”

“Twenty-two,” said Varrin. “I got twenty at level one for my training before becoming a Delver.”

“And from being a fucking *Blades* prodigy,” said Xim. “Twenty-two is insane for level one. Almost as insane as your stats, Arlo.”

“My highest is twelve,” I said. “And that’s *Dungeoneering*. Not the flashiest skill. My *Blunt* is only level one.”

Varrin crossed his arms.

“You can train those,” he once again whispered too loudly. “I can’t *train* stats.”

“Not yet,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“Grotto has some ideas, but it’s pretty half-baked for now. Practically still just eggs and flour, really. Doubt he has sugar. And the butter, no way he’s got that yet.”

Xim walked forward and grabbed me by the collar of my armor with both hands, pulling me down to her level.

“Are you saying you can give us your That’s a Lot of Stats! perk?” Her face was stone serious, her words barely audible. I’m not even sure her lips moved.

“It is conceptually possible,” I said. “But with our current capabilities, it would take twenty years to do it.”

She let me go and took a step back, putting her hands on her hips.

“Spill it.”

We took a walk into the Pocket Closet under the guise of finishing our prep, and I gave Xim and Varrin the rundown.

[It is good that you have decided to entrust Varrin with this power. His family already controls vast swaths of Hiward, which will make the nation an ideal target as our first conquest.]

[What happened to just ruling the Delves, Grotto?]

[To rule the Delves is to rule the world!]

“What is he saying?” asked Varrin, picking up on our psychic communication through body language.

“Just the usual. Multi-planar conquest, powerful figureheads dangling from puppet strings, supreme executive authority derived from overwhelming force.”

“Can you really do it, Grotto?” said Xim.

“The stats thing, or taking over the planet?”

The mini-c’thon spun in the air. He was definitely becoming more whimsical with his new(ish) body.

[It is a matter that requires further study,] Grotto thought to all of us. [I have divined the basic principles of the task but would need vastly more power than what is available to me. My current research is focused on improving the efficiency of the process.]

“We need to train for a year anyway,” said Varrin. “To bring up our intrinsics before going for another platinum.”

“Not with Arlo on the team,” said Xim. “His stats would make up for it. We could probably hit another platinum Delve tomorrow and be fine.”

“I-” Varrin started but hesitated.

He looked between me and Xim, then nodded to himself, resolving to say whatever it was he had to say.

“I know that our first Delve together was... not ideal. You are both highly capable.” He glanced at me. “Even if not in the traditional sense. My actions in the Creation Delve were, perhaps, unforgivable in some ways. I led us into danger recklessly, and-”

“You want to be on the team?” Xim said, cutting him off.

“Yes. I understand if-”

“I don’t mind. Arlo?”

I looked Varrin over. The obstinate kid I first met was nothing like the young man in front of me. It was amazing how much he’d changed in less than a month, even with the hard lessons he’d learned. Then again, my first impression of him couldn’t have been worse, so maybe this wasn’t as far from his normal character as I thought.

Still, he was talented, driven, and, despite how much I hated the way Grotto looked at it, he *was* from one of the most powerful families in Hiward. He would be an invaluable asset. He showed remorse for his actions and had been nothing but helpful since we left the Delve.

Plus, he gave me this nifty shield. Let it not be said that my favor cannot be bought.

“I’m willing to give it a shot,” I said. “But party dynamics won’t be determined by social hierarchy. And, no offense, but if you join up then your party-leader status is definitely revoked.”

“I understand,” said Varrin. “The most qualified should lead, regardless of station, and I have acquitted myself poorly in that regard.”

“Guess that makes Xim the party leader.”

“Fuck. That,” she said. “I decline my nomination, and pass the mantle onto the next candidate.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said.

“If it isn’t Varrin, then it’s you,” she said. “I hit stuff and heal people. I can’t be distracted by making leadership decisions.”

“Tactical decision-making often conflicts with the demands of a healer role,” said Varrin.

I gave him my patented steely squint.

“I want you both to know that even *I* think this is a stupid idea. I’m the least knowledgeable person of the three of us.”

Varrin clenched his jaw, looking like he was struggling with the concept.

“We can all provide input,” he said. “When there’s a divide in what the group wants, you’ll make the call.”

“And what about split-second decisions?”

“Still you.” He was beginning to look even paler than normal.

[I am obviously the most qualified person to lead a team of Delvers, as I have the greatest degree of competence regarding Delves. I will-]

“Nope!” I said, shutting that down before it started. “What if we ask Nuralie?”

“Oh!” said Xim. “You want her to join too?”

“I mean, we need five members, and she kind of kicks ass.”

“I haven’t met her,” said Varrin, “but from what Xim has told me, she sounds like a good choice. Alchemists are undervalued because of their normal lack of raw combat capability. However, their concoctions are extraordinarily helpful, and what I understand is that Nuralie has some experience with knives and bows.”

“Oh yeah, she’s definitely a good add,” said Xim. “But for party leader?” she grimaced. “Look, she’s great, but I don’t see her doing... that.”

I considered the scaled woman. She was reserved, but she took charge pretty well during the Typhoon fight. Well, it was more of an “I’m leaving you here so help or don’t” kind of take charge. Maybe not the best for rallying the troops. Still, we were making assumptions.

“I don’t want it.”

“Fuck!” we cried when Nuralie spoke. That is, *I* said fuck. Xim uttered a demonic word that sent static through the air, and Varrin reflexively leveled his greatsword.

Nuralie was sitting on a bunk in the corner of the room, stroking one of her frogs.

“How, eh, how long have you been there?” I asked.

“Since breakfast.”

I’m pretty sure I’d given the room a once-over before we got to chatting. It *was* a dark corner, though. And she had dark skin, dark scales, and wore a dark cloak over a set of dark leathers.

But she was obviously sitting there with a fucking frog!

“I need to go back to Eschendur,” she said. “I can join you for now.” Pause. “But I can’t make any commitments.” The frog croaked happily. “I won’t be party leader, though.”

“Well, shit,” I said. “I mean, happy to have you aboard, Nuralie. But... well, *shit*. Fine, but we still need a fifth, right? Maybe they’ll be better qualified.”

“I’d rather not be led by a stranger,” said Varrin, “but we can see.”

And thus, our party was officially born.

“What do we call ourselves, Arlo?” said Xim, skipping a bit as we exited the Closet to rejoin the larger group.

“Eh?”

“We need a name!”

“I’m in charge of that too?”

She spun and looked me up and down.

“You seem like the most dramatic of us. Besides,” she turned to address Varrin and Nuralie, “do either of you care?”

“No,” said Nuralie.

“A name is important,” said Varrin. “It heralds your purpose. Signals to others the nature and intent of your group. It should be something memorable, but not too ostentatious.” He gave my armor a sideways glance.

“You may not believe it,” I said, “but I’m terrible with names.”

“My family has a long history of naming,” said Varrin. “We are taught from a young age the nuance of balancing creativity with tradition. Names should speak truth in a unique way, while maintaining a clear message. Too orotund and the meaning is lost. Too mundane and no one will hear your words.”

“Your family is literally named “black raven”,” said Xim.

“Yes, it was our patriarch’s call sign during the Foundation War. The Littans had learned to fear the name, so it had power.”

“And what was your patriarch’s name?” said Xim.

“Ealdric Ravvenblaq.”

“And what about Papa Junior?”

“Ealdric Ravvenblaq Jr.”

“And your father’s name?”

Varrin frowned.

“Ealdric Ravvenblaq the third.”

“Why aren’t *you* named Ealdric?” I asked.

“That’s my eldest brother’s privilege,” he said.

“I’ll think about the name,” I said. “Willing to accept suggestions, though.”

We had a Hiwardian, a loson, a Denizen of the Third Layer, and an Earthling.

HELD?

That’s dumb.

Drel’gethed’s ephemeral voice broke me from my contemplation of naming.

“Greetings, Arlo. You have protected our daughter again. We are most thankful. Your place within the tribe is well-earned.”

The spectral man intoned his head toward me, his shadowy body forming into a bow.

“Of course, no problem,” I said. “Ready to rescue whoever needs it, whenever or wherever.”

We could be the Rescue Delvers!

No, that’s not any good.

“We’re ready to go, dear,” said Xorna.

While Drel looked the same as he always did, masculine upper body, amorphous lower body, with pitch-black skin speckled with pinpricks of white light, Xorna was decked out in heavy armor that would have looked right at home in a Doom video game. Thick, ribbed plates of hard and semi-organic-looking material. Crimson and flesh-colored tones. A helmet that hid all but her gleaming amber eyes. Her black horns rose out from the helm, tipped with an intricate weave of silver that extended into sharpened spikes. She had a battleaxe held over one shoulder, and an onyx tower shield strapped to her back.

“Hello, Arlo,” she said. “Lovely to see you. Have you been having a fun trip?”

Fucking. Boss-mom.

“I’m good, thanks,” I said. “I mean, yes, the trip has been... I don’t know if ‘fun’ is the word I’d use. It’s been eventful. And productive.”

“That’s good. Is your group ready to leave?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She tittered a bit, then went to put an arm over Xim’s shoulder, guiding her away from the group.

“Are you ok?” asked Varrin.

“I don’t know.”

Drel’gethed gave me an enigmatic look, then floated off to join his family.

Varrin and I moved on to meet with his parents, who both wore immaculate sets of black and silver armor engraved and embossed to the gills with depictions of mythical creatures. Varrin accepted a pack from his father and began donning his own.

Seeing Varrin and his parents chatting while wearing matching sets of armor made it look like they were all going to delve Disney World together.

Lito approached, still wearing the blue uniform of the Hiwardian Central Delver Authority.

“We defer to your leadership, Thundralkes,” he said, giving a bow to both Ealdric the Third and his wife Nola.

“Then we should set out,” said Ealdric. The man was nearly as tall and broad as Varrin, striking an imposing figure in his heavy armor. “Time to put this mystery to rest. Perhaps quell a rebellion at the same time.”

Nola regarded her husband, though it was difficult to tell what expression she made under her helm.

“I almost think you *want* it to be a rebellion, love.”

“Of course I do,” said Ealdric. “They burned the manor house. If that was the work of upstart brigands then we’re merely on a punitive mission to disabuse the criminals of their belief that they are above the law. If it is a rebellion, then we are valiant heroes, defending our lands and preventing a civil war.”

“Hmm,” said Nola. “The house was quite expensive. Exacting justice in our role as executors of His Majesty’s will gains us little in exchange. Coming out of this as heroes is a much better trade.”

“Precisely, my love. Pre-cisely.”

We set off into the mountains. Thirteen Delvers with four powerhouses forming the core, each of whom was the ruler of vast lands and peoples, kitted out with enough magical arms and armor to bankrupt a small country, hailing from four different nations, two separate layers of reality and dimensions, and with one big-ass bone to pick.

We were underleveled, and undergeared.

Chapter 48

We made our way into the mountains at a brisk walk to give Ember and Drel’gethed the time they needed to properly scout the area ahead of us. Even with their Delver abilities, it took time to canvas a wide area and ensure there weren’t any spies or traps laid out.

I toyed with *Gracorvus* as we walked. By sending it a pulse of mana I could array the slabs into a few different shapes. The first was the traditional targe shape, but with a seven-point honeycomb pattern, rather than rounded edges. I could also send it into a line, two slabs wide, along my arm, and ending with one slab at the point. The corner of the hexagonal plate pointed forward, so it could be used for punching.

“The edge is a bit blunt at the tip,” said Varrin, watching me work. “But still more effective than using your fist. It’s good for striking at joints.”

I nodded, then returned the shield to its rounded form, and activated the hover function. The shield detached from the armguard and locked in place in the air. It stood stock still, even as we continued to walk away from it. I was able to guide it back to me using mana, then dismissed it into its home formation, which sent the slabs zipping

back into the hexagonal slots along my forearm in stacks of two. The whole series of transitions took five mana.

“Send it back to its targe shape,” said Lito, who had paused to let us catch up to him.

I activated the rounded honeycomb formation, and the Guardian inspected it.

“I don’t like the edges,” he said.

“Sorry that it doesn’t suit your sense of style,” I said.

“He’s got a point,” said Varrin. “Show him why, Guardian Lito.” I looked between the two of them, though Varrin was giving Lito a wry smile. The gold Delver didn’t seem very pleased with the expression and furrowed his brow at the shield.

“Shields have rounded edges to help keep the enemy from hooking it with their weapon.”

He pulled his hammer from his waist and sat the head of it over the lip of the targe. The haft slid down into the triangular groove where two of the plates connected, with the hammerhead tucked behind the shield.

“If an enemy gets your shield hooked like this, they can tug their weapon to pull it aside or possibly even strip you of it. Then they can attack with an offhand weapon or their ally can hit you while your block is down.”

“Try and strip it,” said Varrin.

The three of us stopped, and Lito yanked on his hammer. The seam between the two slabs split, letting the hammerhead pass between them, before immediately snapping shut behind it.

“Damn,” said Lito. “That’s useful. With that, not only is the shape *not* a liability, it’s an advantage.”

“I see,” I said. “But, *pretend* that I don’t understand and explain that bit to me.”

Varrin rolled his eyes.

“An enemy will see that shape,” said Lito, “and assume the same thing I just did. When they go to strip the shield, they’ll be putting their whole weight into pulling against it.”

“So when the weapon doesn’t find purchase,” said Varrin, “they’ll be off balance since they didn’t meet the resistance they were expecting.”

“And while they’re recovering, I activate my trap card,” I said. “Sounds useful.”

The two warriors passed a glance between them, obviously to nonverbally communicate to each other their desire to possess half the humor that *I* did. They both had a touch of the ‘wet blanket’ demeanor, so it was an understandable feeling for them to harbor.

Our journey toward The Calvani Caverns went unimpeded for the first few hours until Drel’Gethed emerged from the scrubby mountain trees ahead of us. We gathered up to hear what he had to report.

“There is much mana venting ahead,” he said. “Monsters have gathered. The enemy has scouts surrounding the area. It is difficult to pass unnoticed.”

“How serious is the mana venting?” asked Lito.

“It is potent. The levels that precede an eruption.”

Varrin’s father, Ealdric, stepped closer.

“We’ve heard of no mana vents of that density in Ravvenblaq,” he said. “We have Sages that run the lands, and Sorcerers who monitor any unusual mana signatures. We might miss a small vent, but not one large enough to lead to a catastrophe. Nola? Have you heard anything?”

“There are no reports of dangerous mana monsters in this area,” his wife replied.
“Much less a fiend.”

“Perhaps it is recent,” said Drel. “Something that has not yet been seen.”

“If that’s true, then the vent is growing quite fast,” said Ealdric. “The winds here travel in a northeasterly direction. We’ll need to send word to evacuate the lands between the mountains and Lake Hollow.”

“Myria,” said Lito. “Can you report that with the slate?”

The dark-skinned Dancer pulled out the slate and began weaving mana into its surface. She frowned as she tried this for over a minute.

“I can’t,” she said. “The vent must be interfering.”

“Yeah, that’s not good,” said Lito. “If it’s dense enough to disrupt a slate, it’s a significant hazard.”

“This is a matter that needs immediate attention,” said Ealdric. “One of us will need to descend from the mountains and issue a report.”

“Perhaps one of the baby platinums?” said Nola, eyeing my group. “They’ll be of the least use if we find trouble.”

“And the least capable of defending themselves,” said Lito, “if they encounter a hostile on their way back down.”

“I’ll take it,” said Myria. “I have the best bond with this slate anyway. I’ll run down, send the report when I get clear of the interference, then run back up.”

“Very well,” said Nola. “You are dismissed.”

Myria gave a polite bow to the Thundralke, but I thought I caught her eye twitch when she did so.

“Be careful,” said Lito.

“When have I ever taken risks?” Myria said, flashing him a smile.

“Uh-huh,” said Lito.

“See you soon.” Myria turned and sprang into the air, caught the edge of a boulder with her foot, then launched herself down and away out of sight.

“What type of mana vent is it?” Lito asked.

“It is Divine,” said Drel. “It tastes of... judgment.”

“Divine?” said Ealdric. “I didn’t know mana vents came in that flavor.”

He looked around to the others, who all seemed to agree with the sentiment.

“What shall we do, then?” said Nola. “We can certainly breach through a venting area. Even if it is as dense as you say, extra-delve monsters are little threat to us.”

“If there’s a fiend it might prove a minor challenge,” said Ealdric.

“Regardless,” said Nola, “we can bully our way through.”

“That gambit risks our reveal,” said Drel. “The scouts may see and report.”

“Then kill the scouts,” said Nola. “If you’ve seen them, then they are within striking distance.”

“I have not seen them with my eyes,” said Drel. “Only felt them through my threads.”

“We wouldn’t want them to run, love,” said Ealdric. “We want to surprise them, so they’ve no chance of escape. If we’re busying ourselves with monsters and fiends it gives them time to flee.”

“Then what is your recommendation?” said Nola.

“We might walk,” said Drel. “Between the Layers.”

Discomfort rippled through the group, save for the members of the Xor'Drel tribe, including myself. That was only because I had no idea what was going on, not out of any stoic bravery or experience that I possessed.

"I thought calling the Eye was difficult," said Ealdric.

"It is not done lightly," said Drel. "It is not done in the wilds. It is not done alone. This use is not light, as we are doing it out of need. We aid in Sam'lia's holy quest."

"This is a holy quest?" said Ealdric.

"Yep!" said Xim. "A holy quest of *vengeance*."

"Oh," said the Thundralke, looking uncomfortable.

"We are in the wilds," continued Drel, "but we are a dozen gathered, and of greater strength than most. With humility and obedience, we may travel for a time to reach our goal."

"To be clear," I said, bringing eleven pairs of eyes bearing down on me, "you're talking about, what? Traveling to the Third Layer for a stroll, then popping back out topside when we get to where we want to be?"

Drel'gethed's form fluttered.

"Yes."

"So, show of hands. How many of us here have been there before?" I asked.

Drel, Xim, and Xorna raised their hand, all three members of the Third Layer. No one else did.

"Could we go *around* the mana vent?" I said. "I'm perfectly willing to take a peek at my new homeland, but is that an overcomplication?"

"The vent expands as far as we have searched," said Drel. "A fissure along the mountain range. The Caverns may be within."

“And they have scouts all along the range?” I asked.

“I do not know. There are a few ahead. They have high positions. They likely see much.”

“If we assume no more scouts,” said Ealdric, “how much time do we lose by going around the line of sight of those you saw?”

“To be safe. To avoid detection if we fight through the vent. We will require the rest of daylight.”

“Then we’d be traveling into enemy territory amid night,” said Ealdric. “With no intelligence.”

“With a prepared enemy,” Lito pointed out. “If they have scouts, they’re expecting *something*.”

“That only makes sense,” said Nola. “They stirred up trouble and now run to ground and dug in.”

“The Cavern wasn’t much of a secret, either,” said Lito. “If we do what you suggest, Drel, will that give us the element of surprise?”

“We will appear where no one was,” Drel’gethed said. “With none seeing us come.”

“But will we be able to see what we’re walking into?”

“Not in a meaningful way,” said Drel.

“So we either stumble into a fortified enemy position at night,” said Ealdric, “after fighting through a horde of mana monsters and potentially a fiend or two. Or we walk right up to the Cavern and appear out of thin air with no knowledge of who or what we’ll find?”

“We don’t have to travel at night,” said Lito. “We could move around the boundary of the vent, camp out, then move again come sunrise.”

“Wasting an entire day in the process,” said Nola. “We have them in our sights. I say we do as Drel suggests.”

Ealdric grimaced at his wife’s words but didn’t contradict her.

“How safe is this... layer walking, Drel?” he asked.

“If you are attentive, and follow instruction, it is not dangerous. No more than a walk across a bridge.”

“There are a wide variety of bridges,” said Lito. “With varying degrees of danger.”

Xim spoke up.

“I’d say it’s like a stable, but *narrow* bridge across a tall ravine with deadly spikes at the bottom, without any wind or other stuff to push you off. If you walk straight across, no problem. But if you walk to either side, big problem.”

“Good analogy, dear,” said Xorna. She patted Xim on the head with a demonically-armored hand. “But I would have added that there are whispering voices encouraging you to jump, as well. Nothing to worry about if you ignore them.”

“Is it... like that everywhere in the Third layer?” I asked.

“Not really,” said Xim. “The less populated an area is, the more responsive it is to your personality. With twelve people it should be stable, but not if you wander off alone.”

“So just don’t wander off?”

“Pretty much.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

Lito fidgeted with his cigarette case but resisted pulling one out to smoke.

“I don’t like going in blind,” he said. “Even if getting there is easy, we could find ourselves in an ambush.”

“Come now, Lito,” said Nola. “Unless an entire team of high level Delves has defected and is plotting rebellion against the Kingdom, we’ve enough ability here to handle any problems. Besides, we’ll be the ones doing the ambushing.”

“I do find it unlikely we’d meet that level of resistance,” added Ealdric.

“But we don’t know for certain,” said Lito.

“I’ll grant you that,” said Ealdric. “But if I waited until I was certain before making any aggressive moves in my life, I wouldn’t have gotten nearly so far as I have.”

Ashe let out a chuckle, and I looked to find the tanker triplet leaning back against a boulder, golden armor gleaming in the midday sun.

“You’re arguing for *caution* with platinum Delves, Lito,” she said. “Your efforts are in vain.”

“You don’t have to accompany us, Guardian,” said Nola. “Let the Ravvenblaqs and the Xor’Drels handle the matter. Your party can remain behind, to call for aid if we do not return by nightfall tomorrow.”

“But I still wanna go,” said Ashe, bumping up from her rock. “What about you, Cole?”

“I’m staying out of this,” her brother replied. “If you go, I’ll go, but I’m not picking any sides.”

Ember dropped down from above us with a flutter. I had no idea where she’d come from.

“We stick together,” the archer triplet said.

“What about Myria?” said Lito.

“I’ll leave her a rune,” said Cole. “She knows to look for one. It’s how she’d come find us if we moved on normally anyway. She can be the one to call for aid if none of us return.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Nola. “Let’s get on with this layer-walking. It sounds *very* exciting.”

Chapter 49

“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. 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 Ravvenblags 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 dim and shrink 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 vicious 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 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. Lito, however, was taking stock of the environment.

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 had been 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 slight 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 pulleys were powered by gas engines that spat goutts of smoke and vapor, each the size of a small house.

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, but was distracted when my boot trod over something uneven and organic.

I looked down to see that 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, 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 power. We'd also followed Drel's rules, and no harm had yet befallen our company. I turned inward and began to feel out my allies with my passive aura, seeing the world through the vision it granted, rather than my eyes. 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 Xim 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 revealed 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 its gaze on 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. 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.

Chapter 50

The light in Drel's hand expanded outward and enveloped us. Within it, I was cast back into the world of complete black the same as when we'd first transitioned to the Third. My allies were still visible, though the light illuminating their forms was dim. A shadowy form coalesced near me, and I took a step back as it began to come into focus.

Tall, lean, with a wide-brimmed hat. It held what looked like a pipe, and ethereal vapor puffed from its mouth. It was a woman, I realized. A Littan, and a familiar one. The level fifteen gold Delver solidified and became as real as the first time I'd seen her in the basement of Typhoon's warehouse. She turned and looked in my direction, though her eyes passed over me like I wasn't there. Her soul was barely visible, the darkness itself compressing it.

Nola drew first blood, her long, thin sword whipping out at a level one copper, and half of his head was on the ground before the enemy realized they were under attack. There must have been twenty enemy Delvers gathered, ranging from low-level coppers to three golds around level fifteen, including the Littan.

Drel, Xorna, and Ealdric rushed the golds, while Lito's party and the others from my own moved to handle the lesser threats. Nola moved to the next target of convenience, giving little consideration to their relative strength. The enemy hadn't been prepared, many wearing casual clothing, or with weapons stowed beneath tables and benches. It quickly became a slaughter.

The ebon world still had not brightened when the fighting broke out, and before I could call out my warning, my mind was crushed like a can of air at the bottom of the sea. I collapsed to my knees, becoming consumed by an oppressive force. The black

around me tore at my soul, sucking away my life, leaving me cold and icy, gnawing at my thoughts and taking those away as well. My mind became blank and the only thought left was one of escape.

This cave was a ravenous pit, the mouth of a leviathan greedy to gorge itself on everything I had. Where the Eye's nature was to *see* all, this entity existed only to *take* all, to pull the marrow from my bones and hollow out the core of my identity. My id and ego were drained away, leaving me to exist only as a jumbled mass of fear and panic, the scraps of which soon began to follow the rest of me. The sucking absence went beyond anything I'd ever known, even further than death. I was being obliterated and *replaced* by the being that erased me. I tried desperately to struggle against it, but I was a fly in the winds of a hurricane. My only hope was to shut my eyes against the terror and hope that it did not take all of me.

But my eyes weren't shut, I realized. Scraps of my senses still reached me, like the spits and crackles of a dying fire. I could see the faint glimmer of the souls around me, though the world was sideways. My allies, even the enemies, were just as buried and consumed by the black as I was, but they still fought. They moved unhindered, not noticing the voracious being tearing at them. They weren't aware of it. I was seeing something they couldn't. A soul.

I was blinded by it.

I clamped down on my soul-sight, driving the ability into the ground with what little will I had left. The light around my allies disappeared, and the black around me receded. Thought and sensation returned, and I felt cool dirt and stone beneath my fingers. I was lying on the ground, curled up on myself.

Drel'gethed waved an arm and dark hands erupted at one man's feet, wrapping his body and pulling him down into the earth. Ealdric dashed across the room, too fast to see, skewering another man who held a spear. The Thundralke's long, narrow blade punched through the man's half-donned armor like paper.

Xorna took her ax to a woman's knees, who sprayed goutts of fire at Xim's mother even as she fell. The Xor'Drel was unaffected, and a kick to the woman's temple left her unmoving. Nola moved as quick as her husband, taking apart two level sevens with her thin blade before they had a chance to use a single skill. Chunks of them were scattered across the room.

A man and woman were pinned to the wall, massive arrows puncturing their hearts, and Ember drew another arrow to launch at a man trying to flee. Ashe tried to pin down the Littan with her sword, but the woman's body became mist which flowed around her. Lightning arced from Cole's hand, forcing the Littan back into her normal form, and Lito followed up on Cole's attack with a hammer strike to the back of her skull. The blow sent her face crashing into the floor, and yet the Littan still began crawling away. Nola halted her by pulling out a shortsword and thrusting the blade through the woman's back and kidney, into the ground below. The Littan screamed, but was trapped.

I watched the massacre, unable to move. My body refused to respond, feeling like a dream where the ground swallowed my legs as I tried to run.

[Grotto, can you do something to help me out? Jumpstart me with adrenaline, maybe?]

Your familiar is incapacitated.

That wasn't good.

Kim and Varrin tag-teamed a level three silver who chucked axes covered in blue flame while leaping off the cave walls. They corralled him into a corner, and Nuralie hit him with an arrow that exploded into green vapor. The man staggered, then collapsed, as Nuralie fell back into a shadowy corner, disappearing.

Kim caught sight of me, made a quick scan of the room, then rushed over. Varrin followed behind, watching her back and facing what few enemies remained with greatsword leveled, but none pursued. Two-thirds of the enemy was dead, with several more restrained or incapacitated. Three still fought, but did so only by the grace of their combatants, who tried to subdue them rather than add to the body count.

Kim knelt and looked me over.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Your health is full, and you don't have any status effects."

"We have to leave," I mumbled.

"Leave?" she said. "Alright. But, why?" She turned and shouted to Drel, who'd disengaged from the fight, leaving it to the Ravvenblaq Thundralkes to quell the remaining resistance. He floated over.

"Something in here is too strong," I managed to get out. "Just seeing its soul did this." I began to get feeling back in my limbs, though I could barely shift my weight.

"You see the souls of others?" said Drel.

"Yeah. Saw one real big. We go now."

Drel paused to consider.

"I will tell the Ravvenblaqs," he said.

“How powerful?” asked Xim as Drel left. “Stronger than Umi-Doo?”

“Umi-Doo didn’t cause my ego death when I saw him.”

“Ok,” said Xim, turning back to Varrin. “Help me get him up.”

The pair helped me to my feet, and I staggered between them. The height difference between the two left me a bit lopsided, and my footing was as unsteady from the body parts littering the ground as the semi-paralyzed state of my legs. Still, I was beginning to warm back up. Every step got blood pumping, and I was gradually able to support my weight.

“Leave?” said Nola. “We’re triumphant!” Her armor was spattered in gore.

“We need to interrogate the prisoners,” said Ealdric. “Before they die, that is.”

“Esquire Arlo possesses a unique skill,” said Drel. “I believe it best to heed him. We may return if the caution was unwarranted.”

“He was on the ground the whole fight,” said Nola. “Probably a fear effect. He may not be of his senses.”

“Mother,” said Varrin as we got close. “I trust Arlo’s judgment. He resisted an Atrocidile’s roar and charged a man several levels higher than himself. I don’t think it’s a fear effect.”

Nola looked Varrin over, going through some internal struggle.

Ealdric sighed.

“Arlo certainly proved himself in the Creation Delve, son, but he’s still only level one. Drel, what could he possibly have seen that the rest of us haven’t?”

Drel opened his mouth to speak but stopped as heavy footsteps sounded from deeper in the cave.

“No, no, no, no, no,” came a ragged voice. It echoed around us unnaturally, even with the hard cave walls for the sound to bounce off. “My children, I wanted you to *live*.”

A figure stepped from the darkened corridor that led down into the depths of the cave system. It was hunched over, its form clothed in tattered gray strips of cloth that hung off of it like dirty bandages. Even with its bent form, the creature’s back brushed against the ceiling of the tunnel, which stood at least eight feet in height. When it entered the main chamber, it straightened some, towering over all of us, though it still wasn’t fully upright.

A long snout poked from beneath ragged cloth, and where eyes might have been, there was nothing but a pair of holes that evoked a sense of endless depths, absolutely dark, and hungry.

Its maw opened slowly, revealing a cavernous mouth that had no teeth or throat, but only dark swirling threads of energy leading to its center. They spiraled hypnotically, beckoning us to throw ourselves in. L’appel du vide made manifest.

Its arms were long and ended in simian hands with knuckles that dragged the ground, even with elbows bent. From beneath the cloth that covered its chest, two smaller arms wrapped its gut, clutching at the garments. Each finger of the smaller hands glowed with a different hue of sickly light.

Its flesh was gray and drooped into folds at the joints, though it was pulled taut against engorged muscle along its limbs.

We watched it silently as it stopped in front of one of the fallen Delvers.

“My child, my child, my child, what has become of our future?”

It scooped up the man’s body in one hand, as effortlessly as one scooped foam from a bath. Entrails spilled from the Delver’s sliced belly, and the creature delicately

caught them with one of the smaller limbs. It guided the ropy innards back up and tucked them gently into the man's gut.

“I wanted us to see tomorrow, and the day after that. I wanted you to be here, oh Davian, Davian. Davian the spearman. Davian the bright. I wanted your children to know me well.”

It caressed the side of the corpse's face with its thumb. My heart sank as the creature reminded me that these were men and women with families and entire lives beyond the machinations that led them here. They may have been involved in the plot that threatened the survival and well-being of several of us, but they were still human.

“I want this to be right, Davian. I want to carry you with me, and I will. It is a simple thing to grant myself this wish, Davian. Become a part of me, Davian.”

The creature's chest heaved, and gusts of wind blew in through the mouth of the cave as the creature inhaled. The body of the slain Delver, Davian, dissolved into mist and flowed into the creature's maw. First skin, then muscle and blood, organ, then bone. Nothing was left behind but a pile of clothes and equipment, which the creature let clatter to the ground. It walked to the next corpse, a woman.

“Lithy. I wanted to find a way to like you more. I wished for you to find what made you happy so that the bitter scent of your mind no longer lingered wherever you traveled. I sought this, but now you've perished before I found it. I wanted you to live, Lithy.”

I was stunned by what I was seeing. I believed the others were as well, but my focus was fully on the creature before me. Even without my soul-sight, there was an easy strength to it; like the gentle sway of a crocodile as the apex reptile prowled through the water. I feared to speak or move, to dare it to see me.

“I know of this being,” Drel whispered in his spectral voice. “I advise us to leave. I wish not for him to notice us.”

I turned as slowly and as silently as I could, my body having regained feeling just in time to grow stiff with fear.

The Ravvenblaqs watched the creature intently, their bodies poised for action. Their eyes did not move from the monster, but Ealdric nodded slightly, and we began to back out of the cave in unison. Unfortunately for us, the mouth of the cave was gone.

“I would like it if my visitors would stay,” said the creature. “I wish to speak with you, to understand those that butchered my children.”

“Orexis,” said Drel, addressing the creature. “I believe that is your name. Forgive me if I err.”

It turned its hollow gaze on Drel’gethed.

“I know this name and others have known me by it. The name I desire cannot be heard here. The realm is too thin.”

“Orexis, we have come to investigate. These men and women have committed grave crimes.”

Orexis *breathed*, and another fallen Delver disappeared into his maw.

“I have no interest in crimes,” said Orexis. “I do not wish to understand your pretense of judgment.”

“What do you wish to understand?” said Ealdric. His sword was still drawn, held in a tight grip with both hands. “These people are rogue Delvers, wanted by the crown.”

“I do not care what the crown *wants!*” Orexis yelled, the sound loud enough to send pebbles raining from the ceiling. My ears rang, and the others winced. Nuralie collapsed with a cry, holding her hands over her ears.

Orexis moved to another body and inhaled it.

“I see, I see, I see, I see,” said Orexis, his smaller pair of hands scratching at his belly as he spoke. “Mortal man comes to punish mortal man for punishing. Punishment beget by my own desire, desire which impregnates the minds of the punished, and they have brought themselves to bear upon me. To punish *me*.” The hands clawed and scraped more violently.

We all took a second to process his words, as Orexis paused his feast to pull Nola’s shortsword from the Littan’s back. She squealed and rolled onto her side, clutching at the wound. Then Orexis selected a new corpse to fondle

“*You* sent these people to assault us?” said Nola, her voice strained. “*You* tried to kidnap my son?”

Orexis looked up from the fresh body he was caressing, surveying our entire group for the first time. He dropped the corpse and lumbered toward us, knuckles digging deep grooves into the stone cave floor as he went. Weapons were raised, but he stopped a few feet away, head moving from side to side. His snout snuffled at the air. Even that was powerful enough to create a strong breeze.

“The wise have brought me gifts,” Orexis said. “Or the foolish bring treasures to a dragon’s den. It does not matter. I accept them either way.”

Orexis reached out a massive hand and snatched up Varrin faster than the big man could bring his greatsword to bear. Nola tensed to pounce, but Drel took her by the arm.

“This is not a fight you win,” said Drel.

“I don’t care,” said Nola. “That’s my boy.”

She launched at Orexis, sword-point forward, the speed and strength of her dash creating a shockwave in the air. Her long, thin blade erupted into scarlet light and a dozen more blades sprang out from it.

I never saw Orexis move, but his right hand intercepted Nola, her wall of blades crashing into his palm. He flicked his hand downward and Nola was cast into the ground, sending chunks of stone flying out from her impact.

There was a moment of silence as dust cleared from the air, revealing Nola kneeling in a newborn crater, helm shattered, face bloody. She looked up at Orexis in rage.

“Fuck,” said Ealdric.

Then, he went to back up his wife, with Lito and crew right behind him.

Chapter 51

Ealdric opened with a spinning slash. His blade grew twice in length, sailing for the side of Orexis' head, but the creature's left hand appeared in front of the blade. The hand pivoted, sending Ealdric sailing behind him with his own momentum.

Ember launched an arrow at Orexis' chest, but one of his smaller hands intercepted and crushed it.

Lito hurled his molten chain at the creature's right wrist, just below the hand that held Varrin. Orexis moved the arm up a hair, and the chain missed entirely. The smaller right hand snaked out from beneath his rags, revealing itself to be nearly as long as the larger appendages, and grabbed the chain. It yanked hard, and Lito flew away across the room to smash into a stone wall hard enough to crack it.

Cole summoned an array of six elemental darts, fire, ice, lightning, acid, earth, water, and began rapid-firing them at Orexis. The creature turned its body, then ignored the attacks as they crashed harmlessly against his hide.

Ashe called forth a creature with six wings, its center dominated by a large eye. The summon began gathering energy to cast a spell, but Orexis reached out and crushed it in his grip before the thing could act. It threw the corpse at Ashe, bowling them away in a tangled mess.

Nola leapt from her crater, sword swinging in an upward strike, but one of the smaller hands grabbed it and twisted. Nola spun through the air and lost grip on her sword, then crashed into the ceiling. On her way back down Orexis used his left hand to swat her away and into the wall next to Lito, this time sending chunks of stone falling from the impact.

Kim, Nuralie, and I watched the fight in awe. Everything happened in the span of two seconds, before I could even think about how to help. The moment I considered using *Shortcut* to land an *Oblivion Orb* somewhere on Orexis' head, Drel's hand was on my shoulder.

"Your group should not intervene," he said hurriedly. "We must fight with everything. You would be collateral."

His body swirled into a dark and speckled ribbon, then flew toward Orexis' face. Xorna was right behind him, ax in one hand and tower shield in the other, leaping up and bringing the ax down toward the monster's skull.

One of Orexis' smaller hands pointed a glowing finger at Drel and an arc of dark energy shot from it. When it hit, Drel scattered into smoke which drifted and tried to reform. Orexis' large left hand backhanded the cloud, dispersing it across the room with a massive gust formed from the sheer speed with which it struck. The hand came back around to grab Xorna from the air before she was close enough to strike. It then began bashing her into the floor, showering us with rubble.

Cole gathered the flying debris into a pointed spear the length of a sedan and shot it at Orexis. The creature once again turned to let his flank take the hit, coming out unscathed.

Ember's arrows were caught and shattered, even when she used skills to fire volleys of three at a time. One arrow arced behind Orexis, turning midair to assault from his rear, but the creature's back seemed impenetrable as it smashed against it.

Ealdric returned, hovering in the air as his blade spun in a circle before him, creating a halo of white light. He thrust his arms and the circle shot at Orexis' back, Ealdric's sword flying in its center. One of Orexis' smaller hands made a gesture, an

oozing blue fingertip pulsed, and the energy of Ealdric's attack fizzled out of existence, sending the sword falling to the ground, skittering along the stone.

Then, a tail revealed itself from beneath Orexis' rags.

"No more mewling," Orexis said, as the tail whipped out and took Ealdric in the side. He hit the edge of the cave with a thunderous smack, the most forceful blow so far, and half the wall collapsed on top of Varrin's father as he fell.

Drel had reformed, weaving a spell of dark-purple energy, and it shot out in a dozen tendrils for Orexis' face. Yet another of the monster's glowing fingers twitched, throwing circular pulses of mustard-yellow mana, which sucked the attack into its swirling power, then crashed into Drel, shredding his form once again.

Xorna struggled back to her feet and swung for Orexis' leg, but the monster bucked and stomped at her, revealing a hardened mass from beneath the rags, rather than a foot. Xorna had her shield up and ready as she swung, but the heavy metal shield warped and cracked from the impact, and the monstrous hoof crushed her into the stone beneath it.

Even had I wanted, there was no opening to assist. The fighters' movements were a blur, Orexis's hands appearing to teleport from place to place to block and counterattack. Still, I ran through my abilities, discarding each in turn.

Explosion! would hit allies, and what would it do if Cole couldn't even hurt the thing?

What would I *Dispel*? By the time I saw one of Orexis' fingers twitch, whatever magic it was casting had already activated.

If I closed the distance for *Oblivion Orb* I would get hammered like the melee fighters with multiple times my own Speed, the same holding true for fighting with my mace or shield.

Shortcut might be my only viable option, but would I teleport in the way of one of my allies?

Xim's hands gripped the haft of her mace, and I could see her watching the battle with taught features. Her parents were being thrashed, and there was nothing she could do. Nuralie had her bow drawn, but her arrows flew slower than *either* of the Ravvenblaqs, and they had been caught and decimated at every turn. Varrin struggled in the monster's grip, reminding me of a similar scene with the Atrocidile.

That guy got grabbed a lot.

But Varrin didn't look panicked. I watched him struggle to dislodge himself, but there was none of the fevered alarm in his eyes I'd seen in the last grabby fight.

Ashe dismissed her summon, banishing its corpse and leaping to her feet. She summoned a new ally, using a Divine summoning spell, rather than the Dimensional one I'd seen before. A being of pure light emerged and immediately began firing blinding white beams at Orexis. This caused the monster's rags to smolder and dissolve.

Orexis shrugged off a renewed assault from both Lito and Nola, wrapping the former in his tail and pointing a vomit-colored finger at the latter. Lito's neck was wrung, and Nola's skin turned black and necrotic. As Nola fell and Lito writhed, Orexis turned his attention to Ashe, her summon continuing to scorch away his rags.

"A Kallergian is a good choice to fight me," said Orexis, "if you hadn't summoned an infant."

Light the color of rotted eggplant blasted from one of Orexis' fingers, and Ashe's summon sprouted mounds of mold and fungus, then burst into a spray of tainted compost. Orexis brought a hand down toward Ashe, and the warrior somehow managed to dodge. It wasn't through skill or speed, Ashe seemed to stumble in *just* the right way for Orexis to miss.

Orexis tilted his head to one side when his strike failed to hit. Then his features twisted and the hollow holes that were his eyes shuddered. His head snapped forward like a lunging pitbull. Ashe wasn't able to evade this one, and she was caught in Orexis' maw.

The beast *breathed*, and Ashe dissolved into mist, flowing into the monster.

"No!" Ember screamed, pulling out an arrow thicker than any I'd seen. She roared and pulled back on the bow until veins bulged on her muscles. A swirling vortex of energy formed at the arrow's tip, the screeching sound it made swallowing the cries from her throat. She released, and the arrow became a railgun shot. It traversed the distance instantly, striking Orexis center mass and creating a cacophonous explosion that shook the entire cave.

The few enemy Delvers that still lived fled deeper into the caves, helping to set one another free and carrying those too wounded to stand on their own.

Ealdric hadn't emerged from the rubble he'd been buried under.

Nola writhed on the floor, dark veins crawling across her skin, rotted flesh beginning to slough off.

Xorna was half-buried in the ground, armor warped and twisted.

Drel was a cloud of vapor, becoming ever more dispersed by the raging wind created by the fight.

Cole moved to support Ember, who swayed and staggered, panting.

Ashe was gone.

And Lito's body was thrown out from the cloud of smoke and dust that had swallowed Orexis. He rag-dolled and hit the ground, completely limp.

Orexis stepped forward from the haze, and rose to his full height.

His rags were destroyed, and what little remained fell to the ground as he straightened. He rose higher and higher, growing beyond what he should have gained from standing fully upright, until his head scraped the top of the twenty-foot-tall chamber. He stretched out his large pair of arms, their span nearly forty feet across. Beneath them, the thinner appendages rose and splayed their many-colored fingers toward us. Beneath even those, yet another pair of arms was revealed, each holding a spear in hand at the height of his calf, but at the level of our chests. His tail snaked up his back, then appeared around in front of him wielding a shield the size of a tractor-trailer door. Its surface was onyx, but it glinted with myriad colors.

Varrin's eyes went wide as he watched his mother suffer, while he was still trapped in the creature's grip.

"*Submit,*" Orexis said, and the crushing weight of the beast's black soul once again fell upon me.

This time, I wasn't the only one who felt it.

When the fugue state forced upon me by Orexis' soul was lifted, I was in an unfamiliar chamber deeper inside the cave system, and I was greeted by a System message.

You have entered Delve 0102: The Calvani Caverns

Difficulty: Copper

This Delve is non-operational.

At least we were in the right place. I was propped up against a stone wall and was relieved to find I was free of bindings, not hogtied the way I'd half expected to be. I supposed that Orexis didn't see much reason in tying someone up who may as well be a gnat to him. Either that, or he felt it was rude to handcuff guests after knocking them unconscious with the mind-annihilating power of his mere presence. I chose to believe the second option, as it was more reassuring to think the creature had standards, rather than that he saw me as an insect.

The room was wide and round, reminding me of the obelisk chamber back in The Toxic Grotto. I realized that this space was, in fact, an obelisk chamber, made evident by the pillar at its center. Unlike the obelisks I'd seen so far, however, this one was small, maybe seven feet in height. It was white, rather than black, with blue and gold runes carved into its surface. Orexis hunched over next to it, manipulating something on a low table with his smaller, glowing hands. Beside him floated a small orb with glowing symbols along its surface. It looked eerily familiar.

Was that a Delve Core?

I heard Xim groan and turned to find her and Nuralie to my left, both beginning to stir. Ember and Cole huddled together to my right. They each had red eyes and wet cheeks. Ember's fury had burned away, her face now a mirror of her twin brother's post-grief shock.

Lito, Xorna, and Ealdric were laid out in a neat row in front of us, though there was no sign of Drel'gethed. Varrin knelt next to his parents. His eyes widened as he noticed us wake.

"Xim," he whispered, crouch-walking over to us. "Xim, can you heal our parents? My mother needs cleansing as well. I don't know how long..." he trailed off as he looked back at the woman's ravaged skin.

"Right," Xim said, bleary-eyed. She took a glance around the room as she stood, then walked over to the prone figures. She cast a heal into each, keeping an eye on Orexis while she worked.

"What do you think?" Varrin asked.

"Your mother's the worst. Lito's neck is broken, but he's alive. His regen looks like it's matching the internal bleeding. My mom is fine, I guess." Xim bit her lip. "She has more fractures than bones, but she's healing on her own."

Xim got to her knees in front of Nola and began casting *Cleanse*. Varrin watched anxiously, his hands balling into fists, then relaxing.

"Luckily this stuff counts as poison. It makes the spell cheaper," Xim said, exhausted. "Still, it'll take most of my mana to get the status effect's damage below her normal regen. We'll have to wait for them to wake up on their own."

"That's fine," said Varrin. "I mean, that's good. They'll survive."

“Not Ashe,” Ember said, voice choked. She gave a phlegmy cough, then glared toward Orexis. Whatever the creature was doing, it was ignoring us. Cole hugged his arm tighter around his sister and whispered something to her. Ember pressed her palms to her eyes, bringing her knees closer to her chest.

I leaned forward, speaking quietly to my party members.

“Do we have any idea whose fucking cave we walked into?”

“You seemed to know better than us,” said Nuralie. She pulled a potion from her inventory and passed it to Xim.

“Thanks,” said Xim, casting another *Cleanse*, then downing the bottle.

“I have healing as well,” said Nuralie. “When they’re able to swallow.”

“Low-level healing potions are a drop in the bucket for these three,” said Xim, nodding at Xorna and the Ravvenblaqs. “Might do *something* for Lito, but I doubt he’s swallowing anything anytime soon.”

I took a closer look at the Guardian’s neck, which was a swollen mess of blue, purple, and red. It was amazing he was alive at all.

“And it was Orexis’ cave we walked into,” said Xim, answering my earlier question.

“Sure,” I said. “I caught the name, but do we know more than that?”

Xim took a deep breath as she cast a final *Cleanse*, then sat back on her heels. She studied Orexis for a moment as the monster worked, then turned back and met my eyes.

“Orexis is,” she hesitated. “If *that* is the Orexis I know of, then he’s a god.”

“What?!” said Varrin, looking up sharply from his mother.

“Half a god, really,” Xim corrected herself.

“*Half* of a god?” I said. “Like he’s half god, half man?”

“No,” said Xim. “Orexis is an ancient god of yearning. He’s one half of a pair of twin lovers; Orexis and Anesis. Anesis is a goddess of, what’s the best way to put it? Release, I guess. Their concept when together is difficult to translate, but is something along the lines of... satisfaction?”

“Your description only increases my discomfort,” I said. “Twin lovers? As in, they’re just so alike that they’re practically twins or-”

“That’s irrelevant,” said Varrin. “I don’t care if they’re fucking siblings.”

“Literally, even.”

“Is there anything we can do about it?” said Varrin.

“They’re *gods*, Varrin,” said Xim, looking far too calm for the situation.

“No gods walk Arzia,” said Nuralie. “Only avatars can exist.”

“So says most doctrine,” said Xim.

“There are no records of true gods upon the world,” said Nuralie.

“There are no records of avatars, either,” Xim countered.

“There are records.” Pause. “Unreliable ones.”

“It doesn’t change anything. This is out of our depth.”

“I mean, we went from a *god*,” I said, “to *half* a god. Now maybe down to the *avatar* of half a god? What’s an avatar, by the way?”

“A vessel of power for a god to inhabit,” said Nuralie. “Its form is mortal, its power a fraction of the true deity’s.” Pause. “Still greater than any person can attain.”

I ran Nuralie’s claim around in my head, considering the length of time Delves had existed in the world.

“Was that rule decided before or after Hiward discovered the Delves?”

Nuralie furrowed her brow.

“Before, of course,” she said. “Some Delves are very strong, but I do not think *this* strong.”

“I don’t know about *that*,” said Varrin.

Before Varrin could continue, Oresis turned and began to approach us.

Chapter 52

“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 the big man 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.

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 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. Now that I was this close, I was certain it was a Delve Core.

“Nasro,” Orexis said, “report on the status of The Cage. 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.

Kim 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.

Kim'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 held 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, his face close enough that I could see a mote of dust get 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, thinking over the endless loopholes. 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 began to wither and shrink in a process that I 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 and 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, 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 trivial ability with Mystical Magic. 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. Violent ripples ran through the liquid-like substance, causing its harsh edges 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 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, the feminine features lost completely. The ropes of mana Orexis had forced inside the doll spiderwebbed into a network of veins. I experienced a nauseating sense of overstimulation as I felt the mana connect to a framework that was indecipherable to me with my Mystical Magic skill, while watching the black energy dig deep within the sculpture's transformed flesh with my soul-sight.

They were bonding.

[*This is well outside of my predictions for how the day would go,*] came Grotto's voice in my mind.

[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 didn't question Grotto any further. I chose to trust the Delve Core and focused on opening the Pocket Closet.

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 serious consequences 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. Like Grotto said, this 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 to mana-shape the ability and open it as fast as possible, 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 thought to us, [you are not authorized to interfere with the operation of Delve 0102, The Calvani Caverns. Discontinue your actions.]

[Request denied. Administrative command: Terminate Core 0102.]

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

Chapter 53

Orexis turned and searched between us, looking for the source of the interruption. His gaze quickly landed on Grotto, and he snarled. The tendrils from the obelisk continued to fluctuate, losing cohesion, and it pulled Orexis' attention back to his task. He began weaving his magic through the unsteady energy. The threads stabilized, but the power from the obelisk was erratic.

[Whatever this creature is, I'll not let it threaten my Delves any further.]

Administrative request: Delve 0102 core eliminated. New core assignment for Delve 0102. Core Designation: Grotto.]

Administrative request granted.

[Terminate obelisk functions.]

The runes along the obelisk blinked off without fanfare, and the tendrils dissipated into mist. Orexis growled and leaned in to study his earthen effigy. A thin layer of platinum soul encircled the dense base of black, but it was turbulent. He reached down with a massive hand and again ran a finger along the side of its face.

The golem's eyes snapped open, and a Delver level appeared over top of it.

Level 1-64-1-1-64-1

The level blinked and glitched, flickering between level one and level sixty-four. Orexis stared at the indicator, apparently capable of seeing the same thing I was. His eyes and mouth shuddered, and he twisted back toward Grotto.

“What have you done?!” he screamed, voice causing the ground to tremble, nearly deafening me. Nuralie once again gasped, hands clapping to her ears.

Orexis thundered forward, galloping toward Grotto, causing the floor to shudder even more violently. He lifted a colossal paw to swipe at the mini-c’thon.

Orexis closed most of the distance in an instant, and I reacted without thinking. I cast *Shortcut*, appearing directly between the two.

Orexis paused for the briefest moment, then slapped me so hard that for generations my terrified descendants would wake in the night with aching bones. Assuming that I lived to have any descendants, of course.

I had flashbacks to a giant c’thon hurling me away with a tentacle as I shot into the wall from Orexis’ full-body spanking. I felt the carved rock give beneath me on impact, distantly aware that delicate and squishy things like the human form shouldn’t be making such enthusiastic contact with anything having a value of four or higher on the Mohs scale with enough speed and force to break it. Especially when said substance was as thick as the inside of a mountain.

Perhaps it was my fate that giant creatures would sling me into hard surfaces. Shit, I didn’t even need monsters to send me crashing into crap. Cars would do, as evidenced by my very death itself.

Alas, I had come a long way from colliding with such soft and supple surfaces as the trunk of a large oak tree.

Varrin had the luxury of being grabbed, but I had the *duty* of being walloped; to determine whether a living creature could reach escape velocity from being slapped. For posterity’s sake, I would come to learn how much Fortitude one needed to survive the speed of that impact against an unyielding surface.

The majority of my health bar chunked away as my body miraculously avoided becoming a fine paste upon the wall. I didn't even feel myself hit the ground afterward.

Organs have been critically damaged!

Critical damage reduced by 22%

Bonus Damage reduction: 246 -> 192

Total damage taken: 424

Status effects from critical damage reduced by 22%

Bleeding reduction: 182 -> 142

Compound fractures reduced to simple fractures!

Health: 49/473

Body of Theseus had just saved my life.

Grotto used the second I'd bought him to rush at the Delve portal, but Orexis was too quick. The shaking of the ground grew even greater, which my staggered mind realized didn't make sense.

Orexis wasn't causing the tremors.

Something burst through the ceiling above us, and a line of golden lightning blasted down onto Orexis' outstretched arm. I watched in awe as the limb was pinned to

the ground by the radiant blade of a resplendent halberd, held by a man cloaked in crackling electricity.

He looked about fifty, which with Delver lifetimes likely made him old enough to remember the feel of a Littan slave collar on his neck. His body was short and stocky, and a dozen tresses of white, Hiwardian hair writhed atop his head. He wore nothing but a leather girdle over a fur skirt, with braided sandals that roped around his feet and calves.

Orexis pulled his arm free from under the weapon's blade. He held it up to study, and I could make out a long gash leaking dark blood, but the wound closed in seconds.

A woman floated down from the fresh tunnel above as hunks of rock crashed to the ground. She was around the same age and wore a similar outfit, though her entire torso was covered in fur armor, with matching armguards. A golden circlet hovered and spun lazily over her head like a halo. Just below the floating headpiece was the System text that distilled her lifelong pursuit of power into a single number.

Level 52

Even with my soul-sight open only a fraction, their souls shone like beacons, the outermost layer wrapped in platinum and streaked with violet. They were both *twice* the level of the most powerful Delvers I'd met so far.

Also, upon the woman's shoulders sat Myria, looking down like she was at a rock concert.

"Patriarch Duckgrien?" Varrin said, finally tearing his gaze from his father's corpse, then looked up at the woman. "Matriarch?"

“Aye, lad,” the man said, eyes never leaving Orexis. “Canna’ say this looks like the source o’ the mana vents though. Yer great-grandpa regrets he couldn’t be here ta help ye all.”

“I don’ mind the blade-daemon owin’ us a favor,” said the woman, who halted halfway down from the eighty-foot ceiling. She crossed her arms over her chest. “This one looks troublin’, though. Was this what ye’ were expectin’ ta find, Myria?”

“I can’t say that it was,” said Myria, gawking at Orexis.

“Well then, off with ye’,” said the matriarch, patting Myria on the thigh. “Bobret and I ‘ave some work ta do, seems.”

Myria leaned back and flipped off of the matriarch’s back, falling the remaining forty feet and landing on all fours like a cat. She popped back up and ran over toward Ember’s group on the far side of the cavern.

As soon as Myria hit the ground, the matriarch’s body burst into flame. The halo above her head shone white hot, and the fire bloomed out into a radiant sphere surrounding her.

Orexis’ eye-pits shuddered, and he brought his left hand down on the patriarch. The man spun his halberd and intercepted the attack, a blinding flash of lightning filling the room. One of Orexis’ fingers hit the ground, severed, and the creature leapt back from Duckgrien.

Then, the half-god rose to his full height once more.

“Crypt-pillagers,” he snarled, unfolding all six of his limbs, the missing finger already growing back. “I have not battled in so long, I had forgotten my lust for it.” His tail brought around the onyx tower shield, and mana bathed his smaller hands in light.

“I hope yer not rusty then,” said the patriarch, and Orexis fired three beams of sickly light as the matriarch above began chanting.

Spells flared, and the temperature in the cave skyrocketed as a half-dozen patterns of multi-colored light from Orexis intercepted an array of scorching beams from the matriarch. He used his shield to turn away halberd strikes from the patriarch, each attack sending arcs of golden electricity scattering across the room which dug deep grooves in the stone walls, floor, and ceiling. Orexis struck back with his pair of spears, moving in blurs of speed, while the half-god tried to corral the galvanic man into one of his larger hands.

Duckgrien spun in a flash, the lightning bathing him growing fiercely in intensity, and he dashed at Orexis, shoulder-tackling the shield. The force of the blow sent the half-god sliding back a few feet, but Orexis stopped the patriarch’s charge, then pivoted the shield downward and slammed it onto the man. There was a burst of light, and the patriarch was suddenly standing next to me.

The matriarch’s chanting had continued during the brief exchange, and her voice crescendoed as the patriarch made his escape. Then, a pillar of flame as wide as an ancient redwood tree erupted up from Orexis’ feet. His body was completely consumed by the fire, which shot globs of molten stone into the air. All the while, orbs of flame formed at the matriarch’s sides and shot into the inferno with machine-gun speed, rocking the air with booming detonations.

“It’s too bad she canno’ let loose in here,” said the patriarch, watching the godly bonfire.

“This is her being *reserved*?” I asked, shielding my eyes from the heat.

“Aye. Don’ want ta melt the mountain from the inside.” The patriarch scratched at his side, and I noticed a nasty cut on his stomach, pouring blood.

A final orb formed in front of the matriarch, as large as a beach ball. When she fired the attack, space warped around it. Falling pebbles and dust raining from the ceiling were sucked into the brilliant orange sphere, which flew at the fire formerly known as Orexis faster than a cannonball.

The patriarch’s body flared, and I was instantly beside the rest of my party. A shield of electric energy formed around our group and I looked over in a panic toward Ember, Cole, and the incapacitated members of our team, but they were shielded by a similar, orange dome. The matriarch had cast a spell to protect them, even through all of that.

The sphere pressed into the flames and the matriarch zipped toward us. She passed through the patriarch’s shield, her flames dying as she got close. I still felt like I was next to an industrial furnace, but my armor wasn’t *quite* at its melting point.

The sphere exploded, then warped back in on itself like a depth charge.

The cavern rocked, and the ceiling buckled. The floor shattered into churned-up spikes and slabs of liquid rock. A pressure wave buffeted the edge of our bubble, but it held.

“This space is too small,” said the matriarch. “We need ta take ‘im outside, lest we collapse tha’ place.” She began to say something else, but a wave of blue light surged out from the blaze. The fire winked out of existence, leaving little behind but smoke and a pool of magma.

Orexis' malformed hooves stomped through the deadly slag unhindered, and the creature emerged from the smoke, a finger held out before him, refulgent with orange light.

Before my brain could comprehend Orexis' survival, an orange beam projected from the digit, sending smoke and dust swirling around it as the spell screamed toward us. The matriarch threw up her barrier behind the patriarch's and the beam split upon the reinforced surface. A dozen beams scattered out into the room, cutting through rock like a fucking laser through something that sucks ass at not getting cut by a fucking laser, sending a vast swath of the ceiling crumbling down. The patriarch held one hand toward his electric shield, sweat pouring down his face when it finally shattered.

The matriarch gritted her teeth, holding out her hands and reinforcing the spell, which began to tremble and glow brighter. The attack held steady, even as Orexis clomped closer.

Patriarch Duckgrien bolted through the barrier at Orexis, dodging the beam, but Orexis bashed the man with his massive shield and sent the warrior plowing deep into a wall. Orexis dropped the beam attack and took to all fours, galloping at the matriarch. She shot up and away from us, Orexis tracking her as she went. He leapt at her, mouth open wide, spiraling lines of death whirling within.

The matriarch's flames burst back to life and she formed a new bubble around herself before Orexis smashed into her, clamping down on the barrier with his jaws. The force of his leap was so powerful that the pair blasted away into the ceiling, disappearing behind a shower of gravel and falling slabs.

The patriarch rocketed out of the wall after them, shouting out to us as he whipped past, the rivulets of sweat on his face replaced by streams of blood.

“Go on! Get out ah here!” Then he too vanished into the cloud of dust and debris.

I took his advice to heart and tried to stand. It didn't happen. I was pretty sure both legs, one arm, and most of my ribs were broken. My health regen was mostly mitigated by my stacks of bleeding, even with my healing aura stacked on top, and my efforts rewarded me with sharp pain and a fresh kiss on the cheek from the floor.

Varrin and the others were quick to move, though, and I once again found myself propped up between the big man and Xim. I felt her cast both *Heal* and *Cleanse* on me.

Health: 49 -> 73

Bleeding: 142 -> 94

“Cleanse fixes bleeding?” I mumbled.

“Don't question its logic,” said Xim, giving me a strained smile. “It works on ‘status effects’, so bleeding counts.”

“Should I open the Closet? We can hide inside.”

“What if this place collapses?” said Varrin with a dark tone. He shot a look at his father and the vulgar state the thundralke's death had left him in.

“Good point,” I said. “Exit might get buried. That'd be fucked.”

We moved toward our other allies, with Nuralie and Grotto in tow. Ember had Nola over one shoulder, her other hand helping Cole drag a stretcher with both Lito and Xorna piled on top. It was a bit indelicate, but they did what they had to. Drel was still missing.

We'd made it three steps when the golem sprang to life.

The black soul still covered the clay figure's form, and the platinum layer hugging it was now stable. The simulacrum got to its feet, stretched out its six arms, and looked at us with eyes and features eerily similar to, but distinct from Orexis. The level indicator continued to glitch between one and sixty-four as it marched toward us.

"Shit," I said, taking a chance at putting weight on my legs, but it was no good. "Drop me," I said. Xim and Varrin let me go immediately, pulling out their weapons. I collapsed to the ground, my feelings only mildly hurt by how quickly they'd agreed. Nuralie produced her bow and took aim.

The golem was between us before we could move. It grabbed Varrin and Xim each by the face with its larger set of top limbs, then reached out with its smaller bottom pair and grabbed me by the hair. It dragged all of us toward Nuralie, fast enough that the loson had no time to dodge, and barreled us all toward the Delve portal.

It leapt through the entrance to The Cage, all four of us in tow.

You are now entering Delve 9998: The Cage.

Warning! You have entered Delve 9998 while one or more members are outside of a party.

Five level one technicians detected.

A party will automatically be formed.

Warning! This Delve is unstable.

Dimensional anchor operating outside acceptable parameters. Delve portal exit location unavailable.

Rerouting party.

Your Delve entry point has been changed. Please refer to your schematics before proceeding deeper into the Delve.

Warning! Anomalous levels detected. One or more party members possess a level that exceeds the maximum allowed for this Delve.

Initiating countermeasures.

Error!

Member(s) cannot be ejected due to mana instability.

Error!

Member(s) too powerful to be atomized.

Error!

This Delve has priority safety overrides. Cannot partially collapse Delve on intruding Member(s).

Error!

...processing...

Party member(s) no longer possess excessive levels. Resolving ticket.

Warning! Anomalous levels detected. One or more party members possess a level that exceeds the maximum allowed for this Delve.

Initiating countermeasures.

Error!

Cascading error code detected.

Evaluating...

Identified source: Anomalous party member(s) possess fluctuating levels.

Evaluating...

Resolution: Collapse Delve portal on incoming party while in transit.

Collapsing...

Override request received from USER DESIGNATION: GROTTO.

User is Administrator of entry-point Delve 0102.

Evaluating alternatives.

Delve 9998 possesses unique mitigation features.

Override code 919 accepted.

Deploying assets to suppress anomalous party member(s).

Entry to Delve 9998 granted.

...

...

...

Welcome to The Cage.

Chapter 54

You've entered an area with a very high concentration of Dimensional mana.

Bonus mana regeneration capped at 10xWIS.

Current mana regeneration: 125/hour

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

I exited the Delve portal like a man doing a backward dive onto pavement. Well, it wasn't *like* a man doing a backward dive onto pavement. I *was* a man doing a backward dive onto pavement. Or whatever the Delve equivalent of pavement was.

It was hard and hurt like hell is what I'm saying.

The portal I came out of was a ragged tear in space, its edges warped and stuttering as the universe tried politely explaining to the aberration that it needed to stop existing while slamming the world in its face. The portal had its proverbial foot in the door, however, and it persisted, growing ever more turbulent and wild.

I tried to survey my surroundings, my body reminding me that approximately all of my bones were broken as I twisted my neck and torso to see anything other than the gaping wound in reality above me.

I was in some sort of corridor with an arched ceiling. Every inch of its dark surface was covered in glowing blue runes and sigils that served as the only light source beyond what little emanated from the portal. They thrummed and flickered, casting the passage into stuttering darkness. The floor rumbled in time with the lights, until they flared and returned to their normal luminance.

Didn't seem like a good sign, all things considered.

Otherwise, I was alone. I focused on my interface and brought up the list of notifications, clenching away the ice in my gut as I read through the ways the Delve had already tried to kill us. Ejection probably wasn't deadly... maybe? But atomization, collapsing a tunnel on top of us, or closing a dimensional portal while in transit sounded lethal.

At the bottom of the list, I found what I thought was my answer.

You are being subjected to a non-consensual dimensional effect.

Subracial bonus From the Beyond activated!

You gain 50% resistance to the dimensional effect.

You have been ejected from the dimensional buffer.

I'd gotten shat out a little earlier than everyone else. That, or I'd ended up in a completely different area. A tinge of dread filled me as I considered scenarios where my party never made it out of the portal at all, my escape coming moments before the Delve decided what form of annihilation to try next.

Varrin's ass crashing into my face quelled my fears.

My nose held firm in its determination to be one of my twelve bones not yet fractured by the day's events, and Varrin rolled his armored frame off of me without skipping a beat. He was back on his feet, greatsword at the ready in less than a second.

"You're pretty good at holding onto that," I said. He glanced down at me, features taut and skin clammy. I nodded at his sword.

"Eventually I'll find something I can kill with it," he said, a tremble entering his voice. "How bad are you hurt?"

I glanced at my health.

“I’m about eighty-nine percent hurt.”

“Can you stand?”

“Legs are just as broken as they were five minutes ago.”

“Never know with you,” he said. “Figured you might have a *Broken* skill.”

“Hey,” I said, “that’s a pretty good one.”

His eyes were fixed on the portal, unblinking. I let the silence hang, unable to keep the tension from my own body. Another form was ejected, but Varrin stayed his blade when he realized it was Xim. Nuralie followed a few seconds after.

Varrin gave Xim a hand getting up and the cleric helped Nuralie stagger away from the portal. The loson was grabbing at the sides of her head, still suffering from the intense sounds of Orexis’ tantrum.

Finally, a fifth figure emerged, and its black soul filled the air.

Varrin swung for the golem’s neck, but the creature darted back. The tip of Varrin’s blade carved a line across its torso as the edge descended, and the creature let out a shriek. The level one was above its head, but the value flickered as the thing, what Orexis had called Etja, raised glowing fingers at Varrin.

1-44-1-3-1-63-1

The runes along the walls and ceiling ignited into blue-white light, heat searing the air. Mana arced from the sigils and struck Etja’s body, which warped and deformed in response. Varrin took advantage of the moment, bringing his blade to bear on the

golem's center mass. It screeched and batted at the blade with its larger upper arms. The blade bit deep, and the creature staggered back.

Varrin used the momentum of the swing to rotate into another arcing strike, cutting another gash along the creature's chest, then followed up with a third. His attacks never ceased, each swing flowing into a new maneuver, rotating the massive blade with ever greater speed and power.

1-23-4-1-16-5-1

Mana crackled out from the sigils again as the creature's level continued to dwindle. Varrin spun and brought the blade around with his full weight and speed, when the shadow of Orexis' soul split off from the golem.

The black shroud surrounding Etja took its own form, bearing the brunt of the arcing mana from the runes, and gripped Varrin's blade in distended, taloned hands. The swordsman's eyes went wide. Without my soul-sight, Varrin must have seen his blade freeze from some invisible force. Before the phantom of Orexis was able to capitalize on Varrin's shock, the runes unleashed another volley of mana.

Down the entire corridor, the blue sigils came to life, forcing me to shut my eyes against the flash. There was a violent crackle, followed by a series of pops before the light dimmed enough for me to see again.

Several of the runes had burnt out, showering the hall in gouts of sparks and evaporating mana. Ropey beams of energy wound around the dark form of Orexis' soul, now completely divorced from the golem's body. It flexed against the bonds, and the mana frayed, beginning to dissipate. Finally, the dark form wriggled free from the

magical shackles, fleeing down the hall in an undulating spectral mass as power from the runes continued to arc toward it.

The golem collapsed to its knees, the black soul of Orexis no longer engulfing it. Now, all that was left was the gentle flux of platinum.

Its body morphed, one pair of hands receding into its torso, leaving it with four arms, rather than six. The elongated snout reshaped itself into the prior, vaguely feminine features, more similar to a mannequin than a person.

Then, there was that flicker again. The presence I'd felt when Orexis began animating Etja. It was distinct from the half-god, its essence alien from the endless hunger of Yearning. Still, there was a hint of the craving that Orexis held in his soul. A deep *desire*.

Orexis was gone, and whatever that left behind... I didn't know.

Varrin recovered from the violent light show, eyes squinting and still fixed on the golem. He brought his greatsword up, prepared to deliver the final blow.

I didn't know why I did it in the moment, but I activated Gracorvus and willed the shield through the air, between Varrin's blade and the kneeling golem. There was a resounding clang, and a very confused Hiwardian swordsman, who turned his near seven-foot frame toward me, glaring.

"What are you doing, Arlo?" he said through clenched teeth.

"Yeah," said Xim. "What the fuck?"

"Wait! Just... wait," I said, scrambling to gather my thoughts. "I saw what Orexis did to... that." I gestured at the golem. "Orexis broke off a shard of his soul and stuffed it inside the thing, then wrapped it up with a platinum level."

"And?" Varrin growled.

“It’s gone now. The piece of Orexis’ soul. It’s gone. These wards, or mana-weaves. These runes and shit, they forced it out and now it’s, I dunno, on the lam? Whatever that thing is, it isn’t Orexis anymore.”

“It’s still a monster that he created.” Varrin loomed over me, doubly intimidating since I was lying on the floor with the bodily integrity of a bag of wet gravel.

“Is it?” I said. “Look, Varrin it’s been... a shit fucking day.” I pushed myself up to sitting. “I don’t know what I expected going into this, and I feel like an idiot for not thinking it through better than I did. I wasn’t signed up to do,” I rolled my hand in the air, “whatever it was that we just did to those people in the cave. Before Orexis came in and stomped the floor with everyone.”

I held Varrin’s gaze, trying to appraise the man’s mental state. He had to be hurting the worst out of all of us, but I still wanted to get through to him. I could tell that a lot was going on behind his ice-blue eyes, more than just the anger he was showing.

“I just want us to take a breath and think about what’s going on before anyone else has to die,” I said.

“Hold on,” said Xim, looking up from casting *Heal* on Nuralie. The loson had finally let her hands drop and was watching the exchange. Xim’s eyes wandered as she considered my words. “The people who tried to kidnap you *told* you this was where they were taking you. They said *this* was where their ‘client’ was.”

“I know,” I said. “Look, Varrin, earlier today...” I hesitated, trying to focus on the main matter before me. “Earlier today, everything happened too fast. A lot of decisions were made in the moment.” I took a deep breath, feeling the sharp pain of broken ribs along my side. “But right now, we have the time. We should at least ask some questions.”

Varrin's seething gaze moved from me back to the golem. His blade dropped an inch.

"Think about this, if a half-god comes knocking and tells you to run some errands, are you turning him down?" I said. "A guy who turns people into vapor by taking a deep breath takes a seat at the farm table with your peasant family. Tells you he can make you a Delver, and asks you to kidnap a soft, rich-ass noble once in a while, what's your answer?"

Varrin opened his mouth but closed it again without saying anything.

"Those are questions we should have been asking," I said. "The people in the cave could have been coerced. For all we know the handful of golds back there were the ones working with Orexis and everyone else had come over for a family barbecue. My point is that sending heads rolling first and asking the corpses questions second is some Gestapo shit. Whatever god-juice was making that golem so strong is gone now, so I vote that we ask some questions *before* more executions."

I took a deep breath, trying to settle myself. I hadn't had time to process the events of the day, and the words just leaped out of me. I hated feeling so out of balance, but I didn't regret advocating for mercy.

Varrin leaned back, bringing the blade of his greatsword to rest on his shoulder. His jaw was set, but the rage had been replaced by a grim, contemplative expression. He looked at Xim and Nuralie. Xim was looking the golem over, uncertain, but she nodded to Varrin. Nuralie shrugged.

With the matter tentatively settled, all four of us turned to look at the golem, which had moved to sit back on its knees. Its featureless face was turned toward us, all four hands resting on its thighs. Gracovus still hovered above its head.

“Fine,” said Varrin. “Ask it some questions.”

I brought Gracorvus back to home position along my forearm, considering what angle to take. I decided to just muddle my way through.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Arlo. Do you have a name?” I was uncertain whether it knew what Orexis had called it.

The golem stared at me for a moment, unmoving. Then a pair of lips formed on its face, and it spoke in a light tone.

“I am Etja,” it said.

“Hi, Etja. Do you know how you got here?”

Etja tilted its head to the side, then looked up toward the ceiling. The hole in reality we’d fallen out of still struggled to stay open.

“A portal,” Etja said.

“Ok. Do you remember what happened before that?”

Etja turned back to me, and a pair of milky eyes appeared on its face.

“I was animated. Then, I was inhabited.” It held up a hand and turned it over, studying it with new eyes within which black irises formed. “Was it strange?”

“Strange?” I said. “Are you asking me?”

“No. I am asking myself. I think that it was strange.”

“I’m... sure it was. Etja, what can you tell me about yourself?”

It looked back up at me, then glanced around at the others.

“I am a golem. I was created by an avatar of Yearning. My purpose was to serve as a vessel for Orexis. To assist in freeing the avatar of Release.”

I resisted making a quip about releasing Release.

“Was?” I said. “Is that still your purpose?”

“No.”

“Then what is?”

Etja paused to consider.

“I don’t know. My bond with Yearning was severed. I should have become inanimate.”

“Golems aren’t fully autonomous,” said Xim. “They require a host to direct them. If the host dies or the link is severed, the golem becomes dormant or fails entirely.”

“Then why does it still work?” said Varrin.

“I’m guessing it’s the platinum level,” I said. “Delver levels add to your soul. At least, that’s how it looks to me. It, er, she has platinum in her soul, but the base layer isn’t there, which is strange. Does ‘she’ work for you, Etja?”

“My original physical structure was modeled after a Mirtasian woman who served as Yearning’s high priestess two millennia ago,” said Etja.

“The Mirtasians existed?” said Xim, getting a curious glint in her eye.

“They must have,” said Etja. “Orexis had memories of them.”

“What were they like? Did they really practice blood magic?”

“I,” Etja paused, thinking, “I do not know. It feels like some things are... missing.”

“Oh,” said Xim, deflating.

“Let’s get back on topic,” I said. “Do you have any sort of goal? Anything you’re trying to get done here?”

Etja looked around with her freshly minted eyes.

“I don’t think so. I don’t know where ‘here’ is.”

“Sure,” I said. “But, is there something you feel like you should be doing?
Anything in particular you want?”

Two of Etja’s hands went to her stomach.

“I want... something to eat.”

I furrowed my brow.

“Do golems eat?” said Xim. “*What* would they eat?”

“I remember liking cheese,” said Etja.

“Cheese?” said Xim.

“Yes.” Etja nodded. “I think that my goal is to acquire cheese.”

“Well,” I said, pulling out my Bag of Refreshments, “the charcuterie gods have blessed you on this fine day.”

While I scrolled through my inventory trying to find something that would make for a good serving board, the portal spat out one final person. With a burst of feathers and a virulent slew of mental curses, Grotto flew out of the portal. He spun through the air and hit the ground, rolling onto his side.

[I swear on the very names of the founders that I will find the core that manages this Delve and dismantle his chassis like I did with that traitor Nasro! What sort of a maniac sets the safety parameters on an inbound Delve portal so high that atomizing incoming Delvers is the primary fallback?! It's madness!]

“Hey Grotto,” I said as the mini-c’thon popped up off the ground. He began running tendrils over his plumage to straighten the downy mess, then shot a look around the group.

[You're all lucky that I was allowed to follow you into the portal because of my familiar bond with Arlo. Do any of you know what happens when a dimensional

tunnel is collapsed on someone? No, of course you don't. No one does! They're dead! Probably.] His eyes settled on Etja. *[I also notice a suspicious lack of murder happening to this divine spawn.]*

“This is Etja,” I said. “I think she’s probably ok now. Fun fact, she likes cheese.” I settled on a small buckler I’d purchased during my mundane weapons buying spree and began making a spread from the contents of my endless bag of chow. I was inconvenienced by a couple of dislocated fingers, but I made do.

Varrin stared coldly at Etja, but the golem watched him impassively in return. His eyes unfocused, until he was staring through the golem, perhaps feeling the day’s events catching up to him.

The others passed an unconvinced look between them.

[I do not think it is wise to allow such a dangerous entity to remain unrestrained. Its allegiance to Orexis is uncertain, and it may share that creature’s violent tendencies.]

“Grotto,” I said, “if I drew the line for who I can be friends with at people who were recently in league with homicidal cutthroats, you wouldn’t be here.”

[That was different.]

“You’re right. *You* had a choice. It sounds like Etja here was created just to be possessed by an evil deity.”

I finished my board and slid it out toward the group.

“Charcute, anyone?”

Chapter 55

“So, what are we doing?” said Xim through a mouthful of hardtack.

We'd all broken out some provisions once Etja had dug into my offer of cheese and dried meats. The golem mostly nibbled at the cheese in delicate bites with varying degrees of awe on her face, while ignoring the meats. She'd even grown a pert nose with which to sniff them prior to consumption.

Her favorite seemed to be what I considered a Reggiano of some sort. I was happy enough to hoard the cured meats for myself. Nothing better than a little ham with two hundred percent of your daily sodium intake keeping it fresh.

Although it felt like we needed to act immediately, what with the rumbling, unstable Delve and hostile, divine soul-shard running around doing gods know what, but the break was necessary. We were strung out from the day and hadn't eaten in hours, though none of us knew exactly how long it had been. We had no real battle plan or any idea what we *should* be doing in the first place.

On top of that, I needed some time for my body to put itself back together.

Fortunately, Nuralie didn't disappoint in the alchemy arena, and she had a handful of health and mana potions with her. The potion added 144 to my health regen for an hour, which brought me up to 377. Good news for Xim, since she was able to let her mana recover, rather than dumping heals into me. I'd be back to full in an hour or so.

That left Nuralie with two potions of health and mana each, along with her usual assortment of deadly toxins, flammable adhesives, mildly hallucinogenic battle stimulants that came in flavors both for bashers and casters, and several antidotes and spiritual sedatives in case of an oopsie with any of the aforementioned.

I went ahead and gave Nuralie the paralytic arrows I'd bought from Seinnador since it was clear I wasn't going to use them. The sneaky loson had a whole theme going.

If she stuck around with the group, I'd probably throw a dozen poison essences her way to see what she could do with them. As it was, however, the Closet, and her tiny alchemy workshop within, were barred from us.

Unauthorized Dimensional space has been blocked.

Bit of a disappointment getting that message, but the skill *had* said that it may not function everywhere. I could still access my robust inventory, so the glass was half full.

"What are we doing?" I said, responding to Xim's inquiry after daydreaming for a moment. One of my knuckles popped back into its socket, and I hissed through my teeth at the sharp pain. "Orexis is busy with the Dugriens. That was their name, right? Dugrien?" Varrin nodded. The big guy had transitioned from rage to quiet sullenness after I talked him down from beheading Etja. I was impressed he was as functional as he looked to be, given what he'd witnessed Orexis do to his parents.

"So," I continued, "we don't know if Orexis will be around to remove this void sphere thing from the external service whatever, to keep the Delve from going boom once we're out. At this point, doing what he asked and freeing Anesis is a gamble I'm not comfortable taking. Besides, who's to say that his Alabama girlfriend isn't more dangerous than a mana eruption?"

"What's an Alabama girlfriend?" Nuralie asked.

"Forbidden love," I replied. "As such, I vote that we absolutely don't do that."

"I agree," said Varrin. He held a half-eaten chunk of bread limply in his hand, lacking the appetite the rest of us had. "Releasing Anesis would be foolish."

Both Xim and Nuralie nodded. Etja finished the last slice of cheese and looked down at the board in disappointment. She noticed us watching her and raised eyebrows that hadn't been there a few minutes ago.

"Am I... supposed to vote?" she said.

"I don't think that would be appropriate," I replied. "I believe we're still a little concerned you might be the dark agent of an evil god, so just checking in to make sure that plan doesn't cause problems."

She shrugged, then gave one of the meats another try. It did not suit her palate.

[*I also agree that Anesis should not be released.*] Grotto looked between us, as though daring any of us to tell him he didn't get a say. The little octo had saved all of our lives, maybe more than once by this point, so I wasn't about to start putting down his opinion. Not about this, at least.

"Alright," said Xim. "That's what we *won't* be doing. Not what we *will* be doing."

"There's no objective," said Nuralie. "The System hasn't said anything." Pause. "It's strange."

"You're right," said Xim. "I've never heard of a Delve that doesn't hand out an objective when you enter."

[*This Delve is unusual,*] Grotto thought to us. [*The mana density is far too high for a level 1 requirement, and the safety parameters on the entry portal were intended to obliterate anyone trying to enter that didn't strictly conform to the level parameters.*]

"Is that unusual?" I said. "I thought most Delves had level requirements."

[*They do, but most Delve portals will merely refuse to permit access to a more powerful entity. If something manages to bypass those restrictions, there are less*

extreme countermeasures. Annihilating curious Delvers testing their luck is not normal protocol.]

He floated up to a wall, examining the extensive runes and sigils glowing along its surface. *[These are highly complex mana weaves; far more advanced than anything I've encountered before. They appear designed to restrain specific entities and several of these symbols represent various facets of Divine magic.]*

“It’s called The Cage after all,” I said. “If Anesis is a half-god, then none of that is a surprise.”

[This goes well beyond a single divine entity. There are layered weaves for dozens of aspects. I am not familiar with many of them, but the core rune for divinity is written into each.]

“Are you saying there’s more than one?” said Xim. “That there are multiple deities in here?”

[I doubt any worldly construct could contain a true deity, but an aspect? Perhaps. It would require more mana than I can fathom to contain one, much less several.] He floated down the corridor, eyeing more of the sigils. *[The weaves in this corridor alone would require the full output of The Toxic Grotto to sustain. No, more than that. The ones I can understand would require that much. Then, there are the other eighty percent to account for.]*

The Delve gave a sinister rumble to accentuate Grotto’s words.

“Cool,” I said. “So we’re stuck in a giant god-prison constructed by ancient, unknowable beings who have since disappeared from the planet. A wrathful half-god has used a void sphere—still don’t know what that is, by the way— to destabilize the

Delve, and a part of his soul is rummaging about, probably trying to tear the place open to get to his sister.”

“Makes the Creation Delve sound pleasant,” said Xim.

“Right. *That* was just an over-leveled Delver trying to feed our organs to his pet mana fiend while we wandered through a pervasive mist of deadly poison.”

Nuralie blinked a few times.

“That was your Creation Delve?” she said. I nodded. “Mine just had giant ants.”

“Ants!” I said. “I still can’t get my head around the animals...” Nuralie looked at me, confused. “Sometimes the names are the same,” I continued. “But I haven’t seen any animals that *are* the same. And a bunch have completely *different* names. What gives?”

“What are you talking about?” said Nuralie.

“He’s not from around here,” said Xim.

“They don’t have ants where you’re from?”

“No, we do have ants. But are they the *same* ants? No idea. They aren’t giant, that’s for sure.”

“Most ants aren’t giant,” said Nuralie. “That’s why giant ants are called *giant* ants.”

Before I could formulate a response, we were all hit with a System message.

You have entered Delve 9998: The Cage

Several seconds went by without anything further.

“Is that... all it’s going to say?” said Xim.

Difficulty: Special

Current Accumulation Level: . . .

...

You shouldn't be here.

Objective: Leave the Delve

Reward: You live

Time Remaining:... Unknown

"Nice," I said.

"I'd say that isn't normal either," said Xim, "but I don't know anymore."

[I am unaware of any Delve with a similar objective.]

"Why are there words in front of me?" said Etja. I glanced over at her, and she was pawing at the air in front of her face. She leaned back away from her notification, but, as I knew from my own experience, it followed her. She nearly tipped over backwards.

"Just dismiss it mentally," I said.

"This confirms it," said Xim, "she's not just a golem anymore."

"How do I..." Etja swiped at the air again. "How do I... mentally?"

"Just think to yourself 'Go away, System message'," I said. She squinted in concentration, then her eyes went wide.

"It's gone!" she said.

"I'm having flashbacks," said Varrin. He took a bite out of his bread while he stared at the floor.

“This time you have the opportunity to guide the newborn duckling,” I said.

“Rather than, you know, shitting on them.”

He glanced up at me, then took another bite. Xim flinched at the mention of a duck.

“Sounds good,” Varrin said between chews. “Maybe you should share your secrets with the group this time. Rather than, you know, hiding vital information until the last possible second.”

“Ouch,” I said. “Me and my fragile ego walked right into that one.”

“Secrets?” said Nuralie.

“Yeah,” said Xim, “Arlo’s got secrets.” She leaned closer to Nuralie and said in a mock whisper, “I know them all already, though.”

“Hey, not all of them,” I said.

“I’ve seen you naked,” said Xim. “All that was hidden has been revealed to me.”

I scowled and Nuralie looked between us.

“You two are together?” said Nuralie.

“No,” I said, “it was a ritualistic adoption ceremony. Everyone was naked, not just me, and there was only a *little* blood involved. Absolutely no funny business occurred.”

“You’re right,” said Xim. “Even if we’d wanted to make jokes, you didn’t show us any reason to do so.” She glanced back at Nuralie. “Some of his secrets are bigger than others.”

“I-” I trailed off, failing to find any words, at all, that were appropriate. “Maybe we should get back on topic.”

“Agreed,” said Varrin.

“So, my secrets...”

I gave it a little thought. Nuralie wasn't in on the information, but she'd given me no reason not to trust her so far. Etja was the real risk, but Varrin had a good point. Disclosure would be ideal, especially if the situation was half as fucked as it seemed. If the golem went all evil again, maybe it would think twice if it realized I had some serious advantages over a normal level one platinum.

"Ok," I said, "I'll leave it up to you, Varrin. Should I lay it all out there, or just the bits about how I break all the rules?"

Varrin raised an eyebrow at me.

"We've got another forty-five minutes to kill," he said. "I say tell Nuralie everything." He eyed Etja. "We could make the golem..." he paused, setting his jaw. "We could ask *Etja* to sit at the other end of the hall. But, if she's truly a platinum Delver, and not whatever she was before, then it would be good for her to understand everything as well."

Xim flashed me a smile.

"It's not like you don't already have one secret organization after you," she said. "And if Etja turns out to be evil, she already works for that one."

"I don't think I'm evil," said Etja. "How would I know if I were evil?"

"I'm not sure most evil people think that they're evil," I said. "But we can get into the quagmire of morality later. For now, I have a yarn to spin."

I organized my thoughts, then told my story.

Nuralie and Etja were both fantastic listeners. Nuralie paid attention with her usual sense of reserved interest, eyes going wide from time to time, while Etja was silent, but enraptured. I *was* a skilled orator and consummate thespian, so their speechless

wonder came as no real surprise. The tale also had some interesting bits here and there, so the content didn't hurt my performance.

At the end, Nuralie had several questions. They were mostly repeats of what Varrin and Xim had asked after hearing of my reality-hopping escapades, but one question surprised me, though it shouldn't have.

"Did you know any alchemists?"

"Hmm?"

"In your old world," said Nuralie. "Were there alchemists?"

"Not in the sense you're thinking. There wasn't any magic, or if there was it wasn't overt. There were chemists, pharmacists, brewers... different professions that might fall under the umbrella."

"I see."

"Feel free to pick my brain when we get out of here. I wasn't an expert in any of those fields, but I studied pre-med for a while before settling on law school. I *might* remember something helpful. Gut instinct says penicillin, but from what I remember it's pretty tricky to distill in high enough quantities to be useful. Never did get around to memorizing the formula for gunpowder. Damn, that might've been useful. Or terrible, depending on how you look at it."

"Has no one asked you about this?" said Nuralie.

"About knowledge from my old world? Not really."

"Then I will ask." Pause. "When we get out."

"Sure, no problem."

"The questioning will be extensive."

"Uh, ok. I get it."

“Good.” She sat back and looked thoughtful.

Etja had gone back to observing her four hands.

“Maybe what happened to me wasn’t so strange, then,” she said. She turned to Xim. “Do you have an unusual backstory as well?”

“I’m from another layer of reality,” Xim answered.

“You’re also like Arlo?”

“No, Arlo’s from another dimension,” said Xim. “I’m from another layer of reality within this *same* dimension.” She crossed her arms. “It’s completely different.”

“What about you?” Etja asked Varrin.

“Nothing so notable,” he said.

“He’s the second son of the most recent Thundralkes who rule over Hiward’s southern quarter,” said Xim. “Born to one of the most powerful Delver dynasties in history. Trained in the art of the spiritual sword from the moment he left diapers, and identified as a blade prodigy by the age of four.”

[And I am an ancient and powerful creature born by the will of the Old Ones, destined to carry out their machinations upon this world in pursuit of the Great Work!]

Grotto flailed his feelers.

“He’s a Delve Core,” said Xim.

“Wow,” said Etja.

She reached out to pat Grotto, but the mini-c’thon darted away.

“What about you?” Etja asked Nuralie.

“I’m a loson,” she said.

“Oh. Well, that sounds interesting too!” Etja nodded intently, until her head jerked back and she began swatting at the air again. We’d gotten another System message, and the world rumbled.

No.

No one comes into our Delve and tells us what kind of divine monstrosities we can or cannot keep hidden away from the world.

Especially not an upstart godling.

Updating Objectives...

- 1) Prevent Delve collapse.
- 2) Neutralize the specter of Orexis.

Evaluating party...

Rewards:

Arlo Xor’Drel: Super Evolution

Xim Xor’Drel: Super Evolution

Varrin Ravvenblaq: Super Evolution

Nuralie of Vyxmeldo’a: Super Evolution

Etja Nothosis: Passive Skill Modification: Bound Construct

Time Remaining: Unknown... Specter of Orexis attempting to breach central cage. Delve eruption in less than 10 hours.

The message was followed by an unfamiliar voice in our minds.

{*Heyyyyy* guys. Sorry about trying to kill you on the way in and all! *Nnnnnnow* that that's water under the bridge, maybe I can get your help with something?}

Chapter 56

“Alright,” I said. “What fresh asshole is talking into my brain?”

{Fresh? If I were an asshole I’d be *very* old. I doubt I’d be fresh at all.}

“That’s gross,” said Xim, giving me a disapproving look.

“Hey, *he* made it weird. I didn’t think he’d take it so literally.”

I decided not to have another discussion with a Delve core about ‘boy or girl?’ It sounded like a little dude, so that’s what he was until he said otherwise.

“I was asking for your name,” I said.

{That’s a weird way to ask about something. Grotto, does this new generation like to use vague references to their orifices in their primitive way of communicating?}

[*Why are you speaking to me as though we’re acquaintances? From what I’ve seen of your Delve so far, you appear to be both negligent and paranoid, which are not qualities I seek in cores with whom I associate.*] Grotto turned from side to side, looking for the target of his ire. [*Also, yes.*]

{Great. Looking forward to our dialogue, organic and inorganic alike.

Mmmmmmy designation is Core 9998, but feel free to call me ‘98 if you like!}

“Nah,” I said. “Not into calling people by their numbers.”

{But, that’s my name...}

“Just name it after the Delve,” said Varrin. “It’s what you did with Grotto. Call it Cage.”

“Good idea,” I said. “But, Cage is a pretty badass name. Do we really want to use it on... ya’ know. This guy? He nearly killed us.”

“So did Grotto,” Varrin said, giving the little octo a mean look.

{Don't blame him, It comes with the territory. Wwwwwhatever, guys. Call me Cage, I don't care! Look, I've added it to my USER DESIGNATION. Happy?}

[*Does your request relate to the System's erratic behavior?*]

{Damn, Grotto. Be careful thinking that kind of thing. But yeah, stuff is really mmmmmessed up. But it wasn't my fault! This was supposed to be a quiet job! An easy few millennia babysitting the god-sicles. Important, but *easy*.}

"Ok, start from the beginning," I said. "We're clued in about a few things, but walk it back for us."

Cage gave a mental huff like he was calming himself down.

{Three-hundred and thirty-three thousand nine hundred and six years ago, I was born.} My mind reeled over that number. {After that, things went downhill. My first assignment was a Delve called The King's Pit, and that place was a real dump.}

"Cage," I said. "Keep it relevant."

{Oh. Rrrright. A few months ago that demigod fellow started screwing around near the Delve's anchor points within, uh-}

I felt Cage scan my brain in the same unpleasant way Grotto used to do before becoming my bonded familiar. When Grotto had combed my memories, it was only a mildly off-putting experience. Cage felt like a spunky labrador rooting around in the pantry while his owners were out to dinner.

{Arzia! That's what you're calling it these days. In Hiward, specifically. Anyway, he located one of the anchors and found the external service matrix. That asshole 0102 was helping him out for some ridiculous reason. Kept broadcasting about the System having gone off the rails.}

[*Yes, Nasro began to say something of the sort to me, before I terminated his program.*]

{You... you terminated him? How did you get the authority to do that?}

[*The System granted me administrative access both to him and Delve 0102.*]

{Oh, uh, scary... Anyway, 0102, er, Nasro was helping Orexis to muck about in the external service matrix to one of The Cage's primary reality anchors in Hiward. That access point was only ever meant to be used for monitoring and basic maintenance functions, which is why access wasn't restricted to power-limited techs.}

"There's a lot to unpack there," I said. "Reality anchor?"

"Orexis mentioned something," said Xim, "about the Delve not being in this realm."

"So it's a dimensional space? Like my Pocket Closet?"

{Right. Access to The Cage is only possible through the main portal, which prevents anyone capable of breaking anything inside from entering.}

"The level one requirement," said Varrin. "Nasro said only level one technicians had entry permission."

{Yeah, Nasro was a bit old school with his lingo.}

"So I'm guessing screwing around with the reality anchor is a bad thing?" I asked.

{Normally it wouldn't be. Even if you found a way to disconnect the anchor, the System would reestablish a link given time. The Delve would be safe.}

"So what went wrong?" said Xim.

{That doofus shoved a void sphere into the gods-darn thing!}

"Ok," I said. "Somebody explain what a void sphere is. I've asked like three times already."

“No, you didn’t,” said Xim.

“Yes, I did.”

“You complained that you didn’t know what it was,” said Nuralie.

“Right. While heavily implying that I would *like* to know.”

“Then you should have just asked,” said Xim.

“I’m asking now!”

[A void sphere is the densest and most pure form of mana that can be produced using Delve technology. Its concentration is ten thousand times greater than a ruby chip.]

“That sounds like a lot,” I said.

“One of them powers the dreadnought,” said Varrin. “Over the capital. That’s how it stays airborne indefinitely. It powers all aspects of its flight, operation, and augmentary mana arrays. All of that still isn’t enough to draw out its entire passive output.”

“*That* sounds like state secrets,” I said.

“It is,” said Varrin. He shrugged and gestured at the fluctuating glow of the Delve’s mana weaves. The world rumbled once again. “Doesn’t seem like it’s useful to keep that information to myself at the moment.”

{Rrrrrrrright,} Cage thought to us. {So, Orexis destabilized the void sphere and just shoved it into the reality anchor. Now the Delve is stuck in a loop where it’s constantly reestablishing the connection to the anchor, while also trying to halt a catastrophic failure within the void sphere.}

“What does a catastrophic failure look like in this scenario?” I said.

{Don’t ask. Now, here’s the real problem-}

“That’s not the real problem?” My head began to swim.

{No. This process is causing the Delve to absorb massive amounts of mana from the void sphere, in addition to the dimensional blowback. We have a, uh, rrrrrrobust mana capacity, but the Delve is devoting sizable resources to managing the mana flow and venting the excess.}

“Then we need to remove the sphere,” I said. “But it’s back outside, not in here.”

{Hold on, I’m not done yet! Normally, the majority of the Delve’s mana production comes from our ‘guests’. The mana weaves keep them restrained, while the Delve siphons off their natural mana output, then uses that output to power the weaves that restrain them. It’s a beautiful mechanism, really. Profound in its simplicity and elegance.

{However, the mana weaves are beginning to fail due to all this other crap. We’re getting flooded with mana, don’t have anywhere to send it all, and now the weaves are bursting at the seams. Because the restraints are failing, our pseudo-divine ‘guests’ are beginning to wake back up, and when they’re awake their mana output is even higher! Gah!}

“Let me summarize that back to you and see if I’m keeping up,” I said. “The containment on your nuclear reactor is powered by the reactor itself, but when the reactor is outputting too much power the containment begins to fail which causes the reactor to output even more power, thus causing the containment to fail even faster. And you have a hostile outside encouraging the whole meltdown.”

Cage rooted around in my brain for a second.

{Close enough.}

“Good. What do we do about it?”

{That soul fragment of Orexis you came in with is trying to use the chaos to break into the central confinement area. We have a fallback safety measure that I need you all to activate before he releases Anesis. If she gets out, she'll accelerate the Delve's failure by her very presence. Hopefully, this fallback measure can deal with Orexis before that happens.

{That half-god is only a small soul fragment right now. He'll dissipate over time until he rebonds to a physical form, and even that is being restrained by the same weaves affecting all the other baby divinities in here. He's practically a microbe compared to the other things we're keeping. Still, he's a virulent one. If that doesn't happen in time, then the fallback can deal with Anesis directly before she causes too much damage. Hopefully.}

"Why can't you do it?" asked Xim.

{As the Delve Core of The Cage, I am not allowed to release any of the prisoners.}

"Wait," I said. "Your fallback safety measure is another god?"

{Guys, come on. They're not real gods. They're shadows of gods. Dark, soul-crushing shadows. They're still extraordinarily dangerous, which is why we locked them up in the first place.}

"And you want us to let one out intentionally?"

{The one you'll be releasing isn't so bad. I mean, he's only evil about fifty percent of the time.}

"Only."

{All these other jerks are mean all day long! Besides, he's the only one who didn't fight back when we invited him inside. Not prone to violence, normally.}

"How *did* you trap these things?" asked Xim.

{Please, there's no time to get into that. Short version: Your generation has been Delving for about a century. You may think you're big and bad, but you're toddlers. You haven't even figured out how to deal with the escalating difficulty problem yet. We used to have *adults* around here.}

"Fine," I said. "Xim, if we make it through this we can find out more afterward. For now, let's see about setting this god-flavored 'lesser of two evils' free."

Xim looked disappointed but nodded.

"Which god is it?" asked Nuralie.

We all turned to look at her. The rest of us had gotten to our feet at some point in the discussion, but she still sat on the ground with her back against the rune-covered wall. The blue backlighting cast her face in shadow, although she was more obscured than made sense. She seemed to sink into the dark wherever she went.

{The name he prefers,} Cage thought to us, pausing for obvious dramatic effect, {is Fortune.}

{You'll need to enter the central confinement area to release Fortune.}

The five of us were moving down the corridor at a brisk walk, having had enough time to heal up and recover. Cage was guiding us toward the first step of our objective, though the Delve was fairly simple in structure.

{The outer layer of the Delve is a large sphere, in which the majority of the restrictive weaves are set. The central confinement area is a smaller sphere at the center,

with more powerful and specialized weaves for the difficult guests. That's where both Anesis and Fortune are.

{Between those two layers are a pair of spherical subchambers on opposite sides of the central structure that host the beings who provide most of the power for the outer weaves. These are also the locations of two locking mechanisms that you will need to deactivate to access the central area.}

"Anything we should be on the lookout for?" I asked. "Delves are normally crawling with monsters, right?"

{Unlike other Delves, The Cage was not designed with prospective Delves in mind. We do not normally allow the growth of mana monsters.}

"That's good," I said.

{However,} Cage continued, {because the restrictions are failing, a small amount of the divinity is leaking out from the guests. This tends to give rise to... other entities that may give you some trouble.}

"What kind of entities?" asked Varrin. He already had his greatsword at the ready, and the rest of us had our weapons out soon after.

{I don't know, they're all weird! Each of them has something to do with the nature of the baby god they're spawning around. Oh, you're coming up on the first subchamber.}

We slowed our march, the far end of the corridor opening up into a larger room. The runes pulsed and glowed in a swooping pattern, but I couldn't make out much.

"Nuralie," I said, "up for some scouting?"

"They always want *me* to scout," Nuralie grumbled. "I'm sneaky so I can move *away* from danger, not get closer to it."

“Is... that a no?”

“I’ll do it,” she said. The runes around us pulsed brighter, then went completely dark for a second. When the light returned, Nuralie was gone.

“Oh, that’s interesting,” Etja whispered.

I turned to look her over. She was wearing a dark robe Nuralie had given her, with new holes cut through the sides for her two extra arms. She hadn’t exactly been nude earlier—her body was more the suggestion of a person, like a mannequin—but it had started to get a bit weird with her walking around like an undressed Barbie doll. The longer she was with us the more human her appearance became, as well.

Her earthen skin texture had morphed to become more natural. Her skin tone was a reddish-brown, and I noticed a few dark scales around her neck from where she’d drawn some inspiration from Nuralie. She probably wouldn’t pass as a member of any native Arzian race, but she now looked more like a person. Fortunately, Nuralie took the initiative on getting her dressed before anyone said anything.

“You have a platinum level, Etja,” I said. “Do you have any skills or abilities?”

“I think so,” she said. “There was something called a character screen I saw while I was... inhabited by Orexis. One second.”

I watched her squint her eyes and focus on the air between us. Her eyebrows went up, and she jumped back again.

“There it is!” she whispered excitedly. “Hmmm, there’s less here than there was before. Still, this all looks familiar.”

“You think you can defend yourself if needed?”

“Yes. I already know how all of these work.”

“Even though you haven’t used them?” I said. “Is that a, uh, a golem thing?”

“I feel that I was born into this world with a great deal of knowledge, but also that I am missing a great number of important things.”

“Yeah, you knew what cheese was,” I said.

“But not what it tasted like!”

“Really?”

She shook her head.

“I just suspected I would like it.”

“Alright, things may get pretty dangerous. Don’t be a hero. We’ll try and handle everything ourselves, but you might have to get involved if it gets messy.”

“Yessir, Mr. Party Leader, sir,” she said. I was beginning to think she was also born with an intuitive understanding of sarcasm.

“Did someone tell you I was the party leader?”

“It’s on the interface.” She tilted her head to one side.

I looked up and checked the status of the other party members on my HUD, then down at my bars. Just above my health read the words: “Party Leader of Unnamed”.

“You can see that, huh?”

Checking the HUD made me remember that I could share the specific numerical values of my health, mana, and stamina with my party if I chose, rather than just the colored bars. I mentally toggled that on, then mentioned it to Varrin and Xim. They agreed to share after Varrin grumbled a bit over my numbers being so massive for my level.

“It’s alright Varrin,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder, “I’ll soak the hits for you.”

“You better,” he said. “You’re the main tank with that kind of health.”

“Guess I’ll have to use my taunt skill.”

“Taunt? You mean the Atrocidile ability on your shield?”

“Oh, that’s probably helpful, but I got one better than that. You’ll love it.”

“Okay,” Varrin replied, drawing out the word in uncertainty.

“Cage,” I said to the air, “you mentioned these things follow the nature of the deity they spawn from. What’s the ‘nature’ of the one inside this chamber?”

{It is a rather violent aspect of Fervor.}

Chapter 57

“Hmm, wonder what Fervor monsters look like,” I said.

“Spiders,” said Nuralie, and I jumped.

“Really? Spiders?” I scratched my beard. Definitely needed a trim at this point.

“Feels kind of normal, ya’ know?”

“They’re very scary,” said Nuralie.

“Sure, but I’ve never been bothered by spiders.”

“Do your spiders have human heads?” she asked.

“They, uh, do not.”

“Are they six feet wide?”

“Negative. Are you describing spiders as they’re generally found in Arzia?”

“No,” said Nuralie. “These are much worse.” Pause. “They’re muttering as well.”

“Muttering?”

“It sounds like a religious chant, but I couldn’t recognize the language.”

“Awesome. How many?” I asked.

“Lots.”

I filled Nuralie in on sharing our specific health, stamina, and mana values through the interface, and both she and Etja were on board with reciprocating. I glanced at all the numbers, getting a sense of who needed the most protection.

Xim and Varrin both had 155 health. Compared to my pool of 473 it looked low at first glance, but it was massive for any normal level one. Fortitude was probably each of their highest stats. Nuralie and Etja each had 36, which made them the priority for keeping out of harm’s way. Etja had the most mana, aside from myself, so she looked like the main caster. That was assuming she knew how to cast.

I turned and motioned for the group to form up.

“Seems like a swarm,” I said. “Suggestions on tactics?”

“It depends,” said Varrin. “If the creatures follow normal Delve patterns, then the tank pulls them into a tight group and we focus on area-of-effect abilities.”

“*If* they follow normal patterns,” said Xim.

“Exactly,” said Varrin. “Swarms are comprised of weak individuals but are a threat to vulnerable party members when they attack in numbers. Since these are god-spawn, it’s anyone’s guess.”

“The System titled them Praying Heads,” said Nuralie. “Aberration, grade zero.”

“Then one Praying Head is rated as a threat to one level zero Delver,” I said, looking at Varrin. “That’s what you guys told me in the Creation Delve, right?”

“Correct,” he said.

“Wasn’t that the same grade that the Stickmen had? Those first monsters we ran into inside The Toxic Grotto.”

Varrin nodded.

“Those were demons, but yes. The grade was the same.”

“That’s not so bad, then. We kicked the asses of fifteen of those. We’re all a good bit stronger now than we were then.”

Varrin exchanged looks with Nuralie.

“There’s more than fifteen,” she said. “At least a hundred.”

“Ok. That’s six or seven times as many. Do we feel six or seven times as strong?”

Varrin gave me a grim look. Xim shook her head.

“Come on,” I said. “We’ve all got more stats, better gear, new active and intrinsic skills, new passives.”

“Maybe three times stronger?” Xim said, uncertain.

“Still, we can’t walk away from this.”

“No one’s saying we should,” said Varrin.

I looked at Nuralie.

“You still on board as well?” Nuralie paused, then nodded. “What about you, Etja?”

Etja hesitated.

“I want to help,” she said. “Orexis didn’t-” she clasped two of her hands together, worrying at her fingers. “Orexis didn’t care about me. I don’t think... I don’t think he cares about anyone. Not even Anesis. He wants her, but he doesn’t care about her.” She took a breath, which made me wonder if she needed to breathe at all. “While he was inhabiting me it was terrible compared to the way I am now. It was like drowning in a dark ocean that was slowly dissolving me. If he gets what he wants here, I know he’ll come for me again. He doesn’t let things go.”

“Even if we stop the specter of Orexis in here,” said Varrin, “the real Orexis is still outside.”

“That is true,” said Etja. “He cut off a piece of his soul to inhabit me. If it’s destroyed, maybe even he would feel it? I’m hoping it will make him hide and recover. Even breaking that piece off took a lot out of him. It might be a stupid thought.” She let her arms drop to her side. “Besides, I don’t know how to get out of here. If we don’t figure all this out the place will explode, right?”

{Technically it will *implode*,} Cage thought to us. {Since the dimensional barrier would fail once the weaves get overloaded.}

I rolled my eyes.

“We’re all agreed then,” I said. “We’re in a Delve that’s out of our league and if we don’t figure it out we’ll die. Nothing new for us. As far as these Praying Heads, we can focus on the traditional method Varrin mentioned. If it’s ineffective, we’ll pivot.”

“Pivot to what?” Varrin asked.

I laid out a basic plan, relying heavily on input from the others. After a few minutes, we agreed we were ready to tackle the room. As ready as we would be, at least.

As we made our way down the hall, I got a new notification.

You are entering an area with a significant concentration of Divine mana. Divine mana is opposed to your Dimensional attunement. Bonus mana regen is negated.

My mana was already topped off, but I hoped it wouldn’t become an issue for the entire Delve. It seemed that divine hellspawn was one of my weaknesses.

We crept up to the room’s entrance, with myself in the front position. When we entered, Xim and Varrin spread out just behind me on either side, with Etja and Nuralie closer together and behind our three-point vanguard.

Despite having heard Nuralie’s report, the room was still a chilling sight.

It was a large, spherical chamber around a thousand feet in diameter. The surfaces were covered in the same intricate network of glowing blue runes, which flickered and pulsed in waves as the Delve continued to tremble. At the center of the room was a figure half as tall, its body wrapped head to toe in massive strips of cloth inked with an even denser array of sigils. It hung suspended by a hundred thick cables stretching out from the chamber’s edges, wrapping around the mummified body.

As I watched, a strip of the cloth came loose, and the form beneath shivered. The runes along the sphere reacted, glowing brightly. A few sparked and sputtered out before the room dimmed back to its normal, soft pulse.

We made our way deeper into the room until I recognized the creatures Nuralie identified.

What she'd described as 'spiders' were clustered along the very bottom of the wrapped entity and also in a mound just beneath it. Each one had a multitude of chitinous limbs covered in serrated edges. All of the creatures' legs were woven together, creating a tangled mass as they hugged close to one another. It made it impossible to tell how many there were, precisely, aside from that it was a *lot*.

Their bodies were dark brown and red, like a mix of dried and fresh blood, with fleshy sinew stretching between their appendages and viscous liquid dripping from... everywhere.

At the center of each body was a human-like head—and the word 'human' is used loosely here—from which the limbs sprouted. It was *not* like a spider with a human head, it was a human head with eight or more nightmarish legs growing out of the neck.

Their jaws held multiple rows of sharpened fangs, and there were fleshy flaps along their neck and beneath their eyes from which more teeth sprouted. It made me wonder if the head would open up like a sliced ham into a half-dozen different mouths.

But the creepiest fucking thing was the chanting.

It was the muttering of dozens of voices, low and feverish. If I hadn't been looking right at the monstrous things I would have thought I was one room over from a Gregorian chant convention exclusive to bass-baritones. One where each member decided to perform to a different ungodly rhythm and that had somehow been

double-booked with the weekly seance of Necronomicons Anonymous. It was almost musical for each individual, but en masse, it was chaotic babel.

Finally, after we got a step too close, one of the Heads rotated in my direction and turned its clouded, crimson eyes upon me.

It was time for my debut.

I cast *Shortcut*, closing half the distance remaining between us. The Praying Head reared back, and let out a foreboding moan. The other Heads lolled in my direction, each one mimicking the cry of the first in a cacophony of feverish wailing.

I held my hand to the sky and shouted my own prayer.

“By the will of saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur, I invoke disaster! In the names of Ascanio Sobrero and Immanuel Nobel, I implore the universe to hear me! Deliver mine enemies into the sky in itty bitty chunks! Now! Take Heed! *Explosion!*”

I snapped my fingers and the lower mound of Heads detonated.

The muttering and moans turned to desperate wails and gurgling cries as the mass of tightly packed creatures was scattered into a fifty-foot radius. A dozen or more got chunked, reduced to mangled limbs and blown apart skulls, but many more were injured, losing a leg or part of their face. The outermost layer was stunned, writhing for a handful of seconds before righting themselves.

The group above disentangled itself, and dozens more of the Praying Heads began dropping to the floor, skittering over the corpses of their brethren, their howls doubling in intensity. Before long, a horde of monsters was rushing me, and I activated Gracovus, focusing on one of the shield’s abilities that I hadn’t had the opportunity to test.

The ghostly visage of an Atrocidile erupted from its front and let out a bellow in return to the advancing monsters' howls.

The roar sent a ripple through the oncoming Heads, causing them to pause their advance. Then, they began not to moan, but to scream, and charged at me even faster.

"Well, I've got aggro," I muttered to myself, preparing to receive the charge and pulling out the mace Lito had lent me. Arbitros was three-and a-half feet of glacier-blue frozen steel, and I was just strong enough to one-hand it.

When the first of the Heads got within reach, I swung it down on the aberration, pulping its skull with little resistance. For the briefest moment, I thought this might not be as tough as the others had made it sound. Then the next dozen swarmed me.

I bashed a pair away with Gracorvus while bringing Arbitros around with the momentum, cracking the next Praying Head open and slamming into the two beside it. Four of the Heads began clawing at my right arm with their serrated legs, while another pair unhinged their jaws and bit down on my right thigh with gaping, fang-filled mouths.

They didn't penetrate my armor, but the mass of six beasts, each of which weighed as much as a full-grown pitbull, threw me off balance. I stumbled, trying to swing my hammer back toward the right. I took out another Head with the spike on the back of the weapon, but this opened up my left flank to attack from five more Heads.

Their claws scraped at Gracorvus, hooking over the top and sending the slabs snapping open and shut as they pulled backward, trying to strip it from me. I bashed a few more away, but another three latched onto my left leg. I swung my hammer, despite more Heads clambering on the back of the ones already latched to my right arm. All the

while, more of the horde began amassing at the edges of the fray, climbing over one another to get to me. They threatened to bury me under their sheer numbers.

Varrin charged in, swinging his greatsword. The blade cleaved through three of the Heads, cleanly separating them from their limbs. He rotated the sword over his head, then brought it into a low arc toward the ground, splitting three more that had drawn close. He waded into the fracas and carved a swath until he was beset on all sides, then he activated one of his skills.

In a flash, his body spun in a full 360-degree loop, the end of his blade lengthening with a burst of red mana. A split second later every Head within eight feet of him collapsed into pieces.

After the attack, Varrin held the weapon extended out behind him with one hand, then spun his body to meet the weapon's orientation, gripping it with his second hand and bringing it back around on the next pair of aberrations charging him. He never stopped moving, and Heads fell before his onslaught nearly as fast as they came.

Nearly.

Despite Varrin's non-stop offensive, a few of the monsters made it to his legs, entangling him with their raking limbs and biting maws. He faltered, the cadence of his strikes interrupted, and more of the beasts closed in.

A beam of crimson light fell from the sky, six feet wide, and two of the Heads were caught in the blast. They ignited, bodies engulfed in red flame, screeching and crawling away over their allies. The fire spread, and soon six of the creatures were immolated. Xim charged in after her divine spell, caving skulls with her scepter, and slamming more away with her shield. The horde divided themselves between us, and then Nuralie and Etja began to rain death upon them.

Two glass spheres of green liquid exploded within the Heads' ranks, bursting into toxic vapor that dissolved flesh. The Heads retched up foul ichor, staggering and collapsing in the cloud of poison, but the rest scattered away from the attack. Arrows lanced out at the ones trying to escape, burying themselves in eye sockets and bulbous necks.

Etja followed behind, her steps moving to an unheard rhythm, and she brought her hands up toward a group of Heads. Three of them rose off the ground, their claws raking at the air, and their bodies began to dissolve into fragments. The bits flowed into a line and shot toward Etja's outstretched hand. The golem *absorbed* them in a gruesome mimicry of Orexis' breath, then shot forth a beam of azure force that splattered another Head. Her movements flowed in a dance as she slung spells like orchestral hits.

Dozens of the creatures were dead at our feet, and my footing became slick on the gore. I was barely able to move beneath the horde atop me, and I cast *Shortcut* to fall back to the edge of the fight, moving forward again into the fray with weapon free to smash more of the aberrations. I sent Gracorvus into its pointed formation, following up my hammer strikes with punches at the Heads too close for the long weapon to hit. This tactic gave me leave to cull another six of the monsters before I was tangled up in them again.

Varrin launched his whirling technique once more, scattering the Heads grappling him and cutting down several more in his weapon's radius, but gained only a few seconds of breathing room. Xim was backpedaling away from the group, striking with her scepter at the ones growing close, but there were fresh gashes on her face, one

eye held shut against flowing blood from her scalp. Etja and Nuralie continued to lob ranged attacks, but there were too many creatures for us to manage.

Soon, Nuralie was darting from side to side, evading several Heads that had broken away from the main group. She fired her bow as she retreated, but outside of the horde, the Heads were quick and nimble, dodging the arrows as they came.

Etja was surrounded by a dozen of the creatures, which were floating off the ground and slowly dissolving into bits. The golem's face contorted as she struggled to keep the spell going as even more barreled toward her. One managed to get close enough to strike her leg.

No blood fell from the wound, but her health ticked down by a quarter.

I cast *Shortcut* to appear by her side, smashing away the attacking Head and beginning to take apart the ones that were floating. I intercepted several more approaching, giving Etja room to breathe as she wove more spells. Her mana was more than half gone, but at least three-fourths of the enemy remained.

Despite my efforts, Heads flowed around my arcing hammer to approach Etja from the flank. Scrabbling claws raked at my legs as I maneuvered to try and shield the mage from the attack, but they approached from all sides. Etja launched them into the air, sending them hurtling away, but the disintegration effect was no longer present in the spell.

The horde had begun to encircle all of us, Varrin and Xim overwhelmed by monsters grappling their limbs. Nuralie continued to evade, but the Heads grew thick around her, giving her little room to move. I was unable to guard Etja from all sides. These things weren't much of a threat to me, unable to penetrate my armor, but I wasn't able to keep all of them focused on myself.

My mind scrambled for a solution. *Explosion!* Was my only AOE, and it was on cooldown for an hour. I'd seen a litany of other spells, and I had active slots open. I did my best to think over what was available as a Head bit down on Etja's wounded leg, taking her below half HP. She teetered, nearly toppling over before I smashed the Head away from her.

Grotto swooped in, his eyes alight with amber light as he levied a mental attack on the creatures outside of my range. Several shrieked and fell, writhing in mental agony under Grotto's assault, but it was a temporary tactic.

[*The minds of these creatures are alien and fragmented,*] Grotto thought to me. [*I am unable to cause significant harm to them.*]

"You have anything bigger, Etja?" I shouted over the wailing moans. "Something to hit more of them?"

"Maybe!" Etja yelled. "It will take a minute to set up!"

I wouldn't be able to guard her for a minute. I needed another body. A second me to take on the beasts coming from Etja's back.

That's when my mind fixated on a spell I'd already been considering.

I slotted *Dimensional Summon* in a free active skill slot, steeled my resolve, and cast the spell. It was mana-hungry, and I didn't know what kind of creature I'd get out of it, but we needed another fighter on the field.

A dimensional tear formed in space beside me, at least nine feet tall and six feet wide. I flicked my eyes toward it as I continued to beat away more Praying Heads, keeping Etja tucked close to my back.

A thick tentacle snaked out from the portal, covered in downy, black and green feathers that swayed in the air as though it were water.

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Chapter 58

A deep voice echoed from the portal, purring like a lion as it spoke.

“Slayer of Ihbriobrixilas,” it said. “I am pleased to hear your call.”

Tentacles continued to spill from the portal, and a heavy, muscled leg stepped out. The flesh was dark green, the muscle corded, and the foot never touched the ground. A long arm emerged next, gripping the edge of the dimensional tear and pushing its body the rest of the way into our universe.

The thing that emerged hung in the air, defying gravity like the last true c’thon I’d seen. Unlike Ihbriobrixilas, this one was not a full-on feathered octopus clone. It still had a large and feathered cephalopod head from which the many tentacles spilled like a gruesome beard, but below that was a humanoid body.

The limbs were too long, its hands and feet with too many joints, the digits spreading out into the air like bony serpents. Its musculature was impossibly lean, lacking any trace of fat to hide the striations and pulsing veins beneath its boreal skin.

It wasn’t as big as a school bus like the c’thon from my Creation Delve, but the fucker was still eight feet tall. Its black, oblong eyes scanned the battlefield, then settled on me.

Shog’tuatha: C’thon, Grade Five.

“This is a good fight,” it purred. “I am pleased to be greeted by such lurid death.”

“You’re on my side, right?” I shouted, smashing another Praying Head.

“Of course!” it bellowed. “Ihbriobrixilas consumed my brother and fled to this realm like a coward! I am proud to serve y-”

“Good! Protect Etja’s back!”

The c’thon’s arms dropped and it glanced at the golem, then flew through the air and behind her. Its feathered tentacles began wrapping up Praying Heads and tossing them away while its taloned hands reached out and struck long gashes across the eyes of others. One of the feelers trapped a Head within it, and the limb stuffed the monster behind the c’thon’s nightmare beard. There was a sickening crunch, loud enough to be heard over the moaning. When the tentacle came back out from behind the mass of feelers, the Praying Head was headless.

“Bah!” Shog’tuatha shouted, spitting gore onto the ground. “God-spawn! I cannot eat this.” It tossed the corpse away in disgust, then went back to ravaging the rest.

“Fallback formation!” I yelled. Nuralie dove over a pair of Heads, rolling back to her feet and hitting another point-blank with an arrow. I waded out into the fight and hammered aside a few more, making way for her to dash behind me and line up beside Etja.

Xim continued to dart backward, heaving a few Heads from her body, then barreled at our formation. Varrin roared and cast his whirling attack again, slinging seven of the monsters from his large frame and then sprinting to us.

Varrin, Xim, Shog’tuatha, and I fought in a four-person perimeter around Nuralie and Etja. Nuralie fired arrow after arrow between us into the line of monsters, their numbers dense enough to make it easy work for her.

Meanwhile, Etja danced. A ring of Praying Heads floated from the ground, and the melee fighters took them apart. The line behind that began to crumble to dust, flowing into Etja’s upper pair of hands that she held up and out as she moved. More Heads skittered in and she fired beams of blue light out at them. All the while one of her

lower pair hands was held at her waist, a point of orange light growing on a fingertip. Each time she cast a spell, it pulsed and grew larger.

Finally, it grew into a blazing orb and Etja stopped.

“Down!” she shouted.

All of us crouched low, Praying Heads immediately dogpiling onto us.

Shog’tuatha glanced back at Etja, then floated up into the air beside Grotto.

A beam of orange light erupted from Etja’s orb, sending a devastating ray out into the Praying Heads. The attack was visually identical to the beam Orexis had fired at the Dukgriens, and it cut through the Heads as easily as the half-god’s attack had cut through stone. Etja spun her body in a circle, a lethal, disintegrating line passing through swaths of the Heads. Her mana bar plummeted, and before she could complete the circle it was exhausted. She collapsed to her knees.

She’d killed at least fifty Heads with that attack.

The rest of us sprung back into action, the herd of Heads thin enough now for us to continue the slaughter without being overwhelmed. There were another five minutes of ceaseless hammering, arcing blades, scepter strikes, pillars of crimson light, volleys of arrows, and a healthy dose of tentacular strangulation.

With one final cleave of Varrin’s greatsword, the last of the Praying Heads was cut down and the fight was done. Xim went to check on Etja, whose wounds had the appearance of pierced flesh, but were dry.

“You don’t have to worry about bleeding I guess,” Xim said, wiping some tacky blood from her eye as she inspected Etja’s leg. Her face sported a few long slashes.

“Normally I’d offer to heal you, but Arlo’s aura will get you back to full pretty quick and my mana only goes so far.”

“Aura?” said Etja.

“If you check your health regen, you’ll see it’s much higher than it should be.”

Etja’s eyes glazed for a second.

“It says twenty-five. Is that high?”

“Twenty-two of it’s from Arlo.”

“Oh!” said Etja. “Then it is a lot.”

Varrin walked up and looked Etja over.

“We’ll need a thirty-minute breather for her to recover,” he said. “It gets us some mana back as well. Does anyone have anything Etja can use for armor?”

“I think I can do something for myself,” said Etja. Her face scrunched up and she held her arms out, but nothing happened. She stopped after a few seconds. “Ah, I need to get my mana back first.”

As soon as the words came out, Nuralie plopped a mana potion into one of Etja’s hands.

“Oh, thanks!” Etja said, peering into the bottle’s murky blue contents.

“You drink it,” said Nuralie.

Etja nodded, then tipped the bottle back, draining it in one go.

“I see. It raises my regen as well, but with mana... by sixty! Thirty-eight more than Arlo!”

Nuralie looked over at me and gave me a rare smirk. I wiped a spray of gore from my shades, doing little more than creating a smear.

“My aura’s free,” I said, giving her a grin in return.

“I don’t see anyone paying me for my potions.”

“Good point. We should reimburse you once we’re outside.”

Pause. “That would be nice.”

“It should be standard,” I said. “Since alchemy costs money and we all benefit from it, we can dedicate a portion of what we make.”

“But first,” said Varrin, “survival.”

Then, we got the loot notifications.

Please select a method of loot distribution:

- 1) Free For All
- 2) Master Looter
- 3) Need Before Greed
- 4) Turn Taker
- 5) System Selection

I read through the message and mentally selected Need Before Greed.

Please select a method of chip and currency distribution:

- 1) Free For All
- 2) Master Looter
- 3) Even Distribution
- 4) System Selection

I scanned the options, then selected Even Distribution.

Your party has slain 176 Praying Heads: Aberration, Grade Zero. Your Party receives the following rewards:

- 1) 176 Ruby Chips
- 2) 176 Minor Tongues of Prayer
- 3) 15 Minor Aberration Essences

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to Even Distribution.

You receive: 35 Ruby Chips. The remainder of 1 Ruby Chip has been randomly awarded to Nuralie of Vyxmeldo'a.

Party leader has set loot distribution to Need Before Greed. Please select your need for the following items.

I then received 191 notifications asking me to vote on the individual items.

“What the hell?” I said, looking at the massive list that broke out every Tongue of Prayer and Essence into an individual loot roll.

Varrin walked over and patted me on the shoulder.

“This is why I prefer Master Looter.”

“Fuck,” I said. “Well, get to voting I suppose.”

In the end, everyone passed on everything except for me. I hit need on every item since I had the inventory space and we didn't have time to prioritize it. I'd distribute the loot if and when we made it out. I toggled the distribution to Master Looter, and we moved on to figuring out the lock that Cage wanted us to open.

First, though, my party members had some things to say about the sudden appearance of Shog'tuatha.

[I do not like how this creature is looking at me,] Grotto thought to us.

Shog'tuatha was still hovering near the c'thonicly-disguised Delve Core. The true c'thon's tentacles reached out toward Grotto, who floated away from them. Shog'tuatha pursued Grotto, and the process repeated. They were going in circles.

"You look like the spawn of Ihxiobrixilas," said the summon. "But your mind does not smell of c'thon."

"Shog," I said, "please don't molest Grotto."

The hulking creature peered down at me.

"This entity is engaged in a deception. If it threatens you I will consume it."

"No, Shog. Grotto is my familiar. No eating Grotto."

Shog gave Grotto another once over, then floated back to the ground and hovered beside me.

"You know that it is not a true c'thon."

"Yeah, no, I understand. It's a disguise to help him blend in."

Shog reached up with a veiny hand and stroked his face-feelers.

"I did not know c'thons were well accepted in this dimension. I shall tell my brood-mates."

"No, that's not what is happening here," I said. "It's a long story, but Grotto gets away with looking like a c'thon since people think he's my familiar. I don't think most people would be happy to see a c'thon."

"They shouldn't be," said Shog. "They should be afraid." He looked around at the rest of the group. "Perhaps you could acquire more familiars. I find that existing in a stable physical form is pleasing to me. My brother would readily join me here."

"I thought your brother got eaten by Ihxiobrixilas."

“I have thirty-eight brothers.”

“Then which one do you mean?”

“Gods above, Arlo,” said Varrin. “Why in all the hells would you summon a c’thon?”

“I swear I had no fucking idea it would be a c’thon when I cast the spell.”

“Then what did you think it would be?”

“The spell says it’s something I have ‘affinity’ with. Why the fuck would that be a c’thon? No offense, Shog.”

Xim gave me a hearty side-eye.

“Pretty obvious to me,” she said.

“Obvious? How is it obvious?”

“Your first big kill was a c’thon,” she said, beginning to count off on her fingers.

“You’re wearing a c’thonic vest *and* a c’thonic boa. You’ve practically lived in those since we finished the Creation Delve. The color scheme of your whole armor set is based on a c’thon. Your familiar is decked out in c’thon materials, and Grotto has adapted some pretty c’thonic behavior.”

[*What insolence is this?*]

“You’re always wagging your feelers and grooming your feathers.”

“It is important to keep your plumage in good order,” Shog said, still stroking his feathered limbs.

“Also,” Xim continued, “you’re from another dimension, like the c’thons.”

“I also used to wear leather and eat steak,” I said. “I’m from the *same* dimension as cows. Why wouldn’t I get a bull?”

“Would a bull have been helpful?” Xim asked.

“Maybe it could have been a super-bull.”

Xim squinted at me.

“Are super-bulls real?”

I sighed.

“No.”

“I was also eager to serve the slayer of my sworn foe. And you have been embraced by the Third Layer of this dimension.”

“One,” I said, “how can you tell that? Two, why does that matter?”

“Three, I can scent my kind. The c’thon’s reside within the Third Layer of our home dimension.”

“I don’t think you understand how to use the numbers the way I was using them.”

“Yes, I do. I was answering both questions at once. The sum of one and two is three.”

“You’re both prone to useless tangents,” Varrin offered.

“You both have beards,” Nuralie added.

“That’s probably the biggest factor,” said Xim.

“*That* isn’t a beard. *That* is tentacles.”

“I am proud of my beard,” Shog said, affronted. “A c’thon can take many forms, and this is the one I chose for this world. A beard is a majestic attribute and a symbol of both fertility and virility.”

“Sounds like affinity to me,” said Xim.

“My mother wears the largest beard I’ve ever seen while she mates. It is why I have so many brothers!”

“Shog, my man, that’s gross,” I said. “Look, while you guys are recovering mana, I’m in a minor deficit with this guy out. The Divine mana in here screws with my absorption ability. Out in the hallways I had much better regen, so we should figure out what Cage needs us to do.”

“You could dismiss it,” said Varrin.

“It has a twenty-four-hour cooldown. I’d like to keep him around.” I looked to the sky. “Cage? The fuck are we doing?”

{Glad you all remembered I existed! I wanted to let you have some space after what any reasonable person would consider a highly traumatizing experience but it ssssssseems like you guys aren’t worried about nearly dying at the hands of hundreds of divine monstrosities.}

“Eh, it’s been a weird month,” I said.

“I’ve seen worse this very day,” Varrin said softly.

{Right. The lock override is at the center of the chamber where that nest of ‘no thanks’ was gathered up in a pile. Fortunately, it’s pretty resilient, so you didn’t blow it up! That would have been a problem.}

“This is a communication issue,” I said as I got a few dirty looks from the group. “We should be made aware of the location of sensitive infrastructure *prior* to entering a space where we expect heavy fighting to occur.”

{I’ll make a note of that. If you move to the center of the chamber you’ll find a sub-obelisk. It might be buried under some, uh... you’ll see.}

We made our way directly beneath the massive figure suspended in the center of the room where the lower mound of Praying Heads had been formed. There was a hard, slimy mass of an organic substance similar to the legs of the creatures. There was a

network of cracks in it, and a chunk had been blown away on one side, revealing a pulsating mass of flesh within.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

{I think this is their birthing mechanism, but who knows! An egg for heads? An egghead? Just pry all that gunk away and the sub-obelisk should be at the center.}

I swallowed back an approaching gag and started to chip away at the stuff with the spike of my hammer. The hardened surface broke away easily, allowing the contents to spill out behind it.

“It is like the ovum of a nostworm,” said Shog. “A delicacy. It is too bad these are inedible.”

“Shog, five-minute timeout from speaking.”

Shog grumbled but refrained from further commentary. Once the mass was removed, a dark obelisk was revealed, about six feet in height.

{The unlock requires four of the five technicians to consent, so four of you should each place a hand on one of the obelisk’s faces and channel mana into it.}

I forewent any further questions, afraid of opening my mouth lest my stomach give an evacuation order. The mess at our feet did *not* smell good.

Varrin, Xim, Nuralie, and I placed our hands on the obelisk and gave it a gentle pulse of mana. Runes along the sides of the obelisk lit up, and there was a deep grinding sound in the distance. Then, a little chime played and echoed throughout the chamber.

“That’s kind of cute,” said Xim.

“That somehow makes it worse,” said Varrin.

{Great! Now, you just have to do that one more time, wake up the sleeping avatar of a grumpy god, then stop a divine specter from collapsing the dimensional space and dooming everyone within a hundred miles of the reality anchor back in Hiward!}

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

I couldn’t wait to get away from the weird mass and out of the chamber. The sleeping god above us twitched, and the runes around the room flared. Cage guided us to the exit on the opposite side of the chamber from where we entered, and we hastily beat our retreat.

Chapter 59

The hike from one spawn-infested subchamber to the next was about four miles.

We moved at a jog, giving our health and mana some time to recover while trying not to dawdle too much and letting the world implode around us. The goal was to make the journey in thirty minutes, which would put Etja close to full on health and at about half on mana. My mana regen shot back up when we left the prior chamber, and I'd hopefully be somewhere around seventy mana when we arrived.

As we made the run, we heard the occasional skittering ahead of us and caught sight of at least one Praying Head fleeing before our advance. The others of its kind had seemed intent on fighting to the last Head, so I found it curious that one or several had decided to run. When I asked the question out loud, Etja was the one who answered.

"The Heads are overwhelmed with fervor for their god, but they still have individual personalities. For some, the compulsion isn't strong enough to overcome their will to survive."

"Is this some of that Orexis knowledge?" I asked. "Would have been good to know more about those things going in."

"No," she said. "When I used my *Incorporate* ability in the fight, I harvested a portion of their memories. It was unexpected and... awful."

"I bet. I can't imagine what kind of memories a mutated murder-head would have. It didn't seem like those things had much personality beyond muttering and extreme violence."

"They were once followers of that entity. They sacrificed themselves to it in exchange for eternal life in servitude but didn't expect to be continually resurrected in

the form of a monstrous drone. When the compulsion to protect their deity took over, any individuality they might have expressed was lost to the rage.”

“Except for the few that ‘expressed’ themselves by getting the fuck out.”

“Right.”

“Can you do this with *anything*? Absorb memories?”

“I don’t know. It was the first time I cast the spell. Also,” she looked at me excitedly, holding out two arms, “now I can do this!”

As I watched, the surface of her limbs morphed into a replication of the chitin from the Heads, but without any of the gore and goop. The hard substance glinted in the pulsing blue light of the Delve.

“That’s pretty cool,” I said. “Guess you’ve got your armor for the moment.” She nodded, smiling like a kid on her birthday.

“Something else I’ve been meaning to ask,” I said, addressing the group. “If we find the specter of Orexis and it comes down to dealing with the thing ourselves, how do we hurt it? It’s just a soul as far as I can tell.”

“Most schools of magic have ways to affect the soul,” said Xim. “My divine fire can damage non-corporeal entities who oppose Sam’lia, or that she abhors.”

“Guess Orexis counts,” I said. “Quest of vengeance and all.”

“Varrin’s family practices spiritual swordsmanship, so I’m sure he’s got something.”

“Soul-strike is the first ability we learn after Creation,” said Varrin. “It’s a mixed attack that hits flesh and also damages the soul directly. It won’t be as effective against a non-physical entity, but it will still cause harm.”

“What about you, Nuralie?” I asked. She was moving along on all fours, her steps soundless, with her tail swishing in the air behind her. She glanced up at me.

“I have spiritual sedatives, but they are meant to be used as an antidote for different mental effects, like enraged. I didn’t brew them for offense. Maybe they can help still.”

“Etja?”

The golem shook her head.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I should get too close to Orexis.”

“Think he might try and body-snatch you again?”

“On my character sheet, there’s a passive called *Bound Construct*. It’s inactive, but it gives me bonuses when I’m inhabited by the soul of my master. Right now it says ‘soul not found’.”

“Maybe you can trap him if he dives back in?”

“I have no idea how I would. He’s much more powerful than me. Maybe you should-” She bit her lip, then continued. “Maybe you should make me dangerous to inhabit.”

“What? Like booby-trap you?”

“I could keep Nuralie’s spiritual sedatives inside of me, and consume them when Orexis attempts to take me over. It may cause him to bond with a weakened vessel.”

“That sounds dangerous for you, though.”

“I’m only a couple of hours old,” she said with a sad smile. “I don’t even know how long I *can* live like this, without Orexis maintaining me. Maybe something happened during my Creation and I can live for a long time, even without him, or maybe I’ll break down in a week. Either way, I’d rather have that happen than become Orexis’

sock again. And if he does retake my body, I'd rather not be around anymore. I don't mind if it's dangerous."

"You know, in my world, there's a famous story where a slave is given a sock, and because of the gift he's set free."

Her brow knit in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Sock is a weird word to use," I said. "I might have said puppet or glove. Still, it made me think, maybe you're your own sock now."

"My own sock?"

"Sure. Instead of Orexis walking on you, your own foot's in there now."

"Your metaphors are awful," said Varrin.

"What I'm trying to say is maybe don't be so eager to unalive yourself."

"Right," she said, still looking lost. "I don't have any socks though."

"We'll get you a pair tomorrow," I said. "I like mine with some color. I have, *had* a pair with little dachshunds on them. I had a whole silly sock drawer, in fact."

"What's a dachshund?"

"A small and long dog."

"What's a dog?"

"A furry, four-legged mammal that is always excited to see you and has very bad breath."

"I see."

"I prefer amphibians," said Nuralie. "They're much more calm."

I couldn't decide whether she knew what dogs were, or was commenting on mammals generally.

“Shog, can you hurt a soul?”

“I ingest the mana matrix of those that I consume, tearing it from their soul and making their power my own. It causes grievous harm to their spiritual essence.”

“Delightful. But this guy doesn’t have a body to eat, he’s just a soul. For now, at least.”

Shog contemplated the matter as he flew silently beside me.

“I am certain that I can find a way to eat him.”

“Ok, keep up that can-do attitude. What about you, Grotto?”

[My psychic attacks are a manifestation of spiritual magic. I am uncertain how effective they will be against an organism that lacks a physical mind, but the realm of thought transcends such mundane limitations.]

“Alright, so you’re gonna think at him real hard?”

[If that fails, I will focus on managing your biological systems to offset the effects of any acute suffering you endure.]

“I appreciate it. That just leaves me.” I jogged along for a second, running through my options. “Yeah, guys, how do I fight a soul?”

“I have some ideas,” said Xim. “Your *Oblivion Orb* may be able to transport a piece of soul to another dimension along with whatever else is inside the spell.”

“Taking chunks of his soul away, sounds good.”

“Although, it wouldn’t be very effective,” she said, dashing my little soul-obliterating dreams. “Since the soul doesn’t have organs or a brain, the damage would be very limited.”

“Taking chunks of his soul away, sounding less good.”

“It might irritate him,” Xim offered.

“Yay? Maybe it’ll keep him focused on me. What about *Explosion!*? Can I explode a soul?”

“Nope,” said Xim. “It would be immune to physical damage.”

“Can I *Dispel* a soul?”

“If it uses magic, then there would be something to *Dispel*. But not the soul itself.”

“I can help with that too,” said Etja. “If I’m involved, that is. I have *Nullify*.”

“Oh, that’s like the fancy version of *Dispel*,” said Xim.

“Fancy version?” I said. “Did I get stuck with a discount spell? The System forced it on me, no choices given.”

“*Dispel* is single-target at first,” said Xim, “but *Nullify* is an AOE to start. They’re good for different things. *Nullify* is rarer.”

“I get it,” I said. “My version is like a scalpel, hers is like a... big sword that hits everything inside a thirty-foot radius?”

“Your similes are *also* awful,” said Varrin.

“More or less,” said Xim.

“So I *might* be able to counter spells the specter casts, and I *might* be able to irritate it with dimensional hole punches.”

“Can’t be good at everything,” said Xim. “This is a pretty specialized situation, too.”

“Just get in its face,” said Varrin. “Let it beat you up while the rest of us deal damage.”

“*You* can see it,” said Nuralie. “None of *us* can.”

That left the group speechless for a moment.

“Fuck.”

It was around the time of this revelation that we noticed the flying eyes.

I caught sight of the first one and called the group to a halt. Further down the hall was a creature perched on the side of the corridor, despite the smooth surface.

It had a pair of leathery wings, about three feet across when it stretched them out to flap a few feet closer to us. Its central body was less than a foot in length, with several rubbery legs that snaked along the tunnel’s surface, sticking to it. On its front were two long stalks, at the end of which were beady little eyes. It had a similar stalk growing from its backside as well. It stared at us, unblinking.

Eye of Consumption: Aberration, Grade None

“If the grade is how dangerous a creature is,” I said, “then what does not having a grade at all mean?”

“It means it’s harmless to Delves,” said Varrin.

“What if there were a lot of them?”

“It wouldn’t matter. Something of that grade wouldn’t be a challenge to a mundane peasant with a pitchfork.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but if there were 178 grade zero monsters, what if there are several thousand grade none monsters?”

“Would a thousand raindrops kill you?” Varrin asked.

“No,” I said. “But a flood might.”

Nuralie stepped up between us, arrow nocked.

“It’s called an Eye,” she said.

“This is what it says, yes.”

“It’s staring at us.” She drew back on the arrow. “That may be all it does.”

She loosed the arrow and struck the odd creature's center mass. Its wings flapped a few times as it collapsed to the ground, then went still.

“Remind me never to film you without permission,” I said, moving forward to check out the corpse. I nudged it with my boot, but nothing happened. After a minute of inspection, we didn’t even get a System message.

“Looks like no loot for grade nones. Cage, got any insight on this little fella?”

{Yeah, I’ve got Eyes everywhere. On this side of the Delve, that is. Monster eyes. I have eyes too, in a more abstract kind of way, but these don’t belong to me.}

“Your intel leaves something to be desired, Cage.”

{What is there to say? They’re little monsters with eyes. I don’t know what they’re for! Although they’re flocking around a group of much nastier-looking things closer to the subchamber.}

“Scouts, maybe?” said Xim as she squatted down by the dead Eye.

“If it’s an *eye* of consumption,” said Varrin, “there may be other body parts.”

“Like the *jaws* of consumption?” I said. “Feels like they’d be infringing on Sam’lia’s trademark.”

Xim tilted her head in confusion.

“Because Sam’lia has the different organs,” I continued. “You know, the Eye, the... other parts.”

“Brain, Ear, Tongue, Nose, Heart, and Stomach,” she said. “I know what you were getting at, I just don’t know what a trademark is.”

Varrin was the one who began to reply.

“It’s a mark used by-”

Kim held up a hand to stop him.

“I don’t actually want to know.”

“Right,” he said. “We should keep moving. Nothing more to do than remain vigilant, as we have been.”

There was a flutter of wings, and three more of the creatures flew from around the bend further down the corridor.

“Should we take them out as we go?” I asked.

Nuralie pulled her arrow from the body of the first Eye with a squelch, nocked it, and shot another one further down the hall. The two beside it each turned a single eyestalk toward their fallen comrade but otherwise made no move.

“As long as I don’t run out of arrows.”

“I’ve got a few hundred extra if you need ‘em.”

Pause.

“A few *hundred*?”

“Yeah.”

She took out a quiver and slung it over one shoulder, then quickly slew the next two Eyes.

“Let’s run and gun,” I said.

We set back out at a jog, immediately encountering more of the Eyes, and Nuralie skewered them with arrows without missing a step. When her quiver went empty she discarded it to the floor and I handed her a new one from my inventory.

She killed dozens of the things as we went.

None of the Eyes showed any regard for their safety. They landed, watched us approach, and died soon after. They were lemmings and Nuralie was the seaside cliff.

Although I read that lemmings don't really die that way, the whole thing is an exaggeration. Still, it's a metaphor that even Varrin would be satisfied with.

Twenty minutes of zoom and doom later, we caught sight of a Praying Head being accosted by a dozen of the winged creatures and paused to appreciate the sight.

The Head struck out with its serrated legs, dismantling one of the Eyes while eight others darted around it. For whatever reason, they were far more agitated by the presence of the Head than our traveling slaughterfest. The Head took the time to cut down three more before it caught sight of us.

Its face contorted, and it immediately forgot about the harrying Eyes, turning and fleeing down the corridor. More Eyes appeared, fluttering around it and perching themselves on its legs. We followed, watching as more and more Eyes swarmed the Head until an unseen disturbance scattered the flock. The Eyes retreated further down the hall, leaving the Head unharried.

It turned back to check on us again, then continued bolting in the direction of the fleeing Eyes. Another hundred feet down the hall, we found the Head halted in its tracks.

The Head was completely still, staring down the flickering corridor at a dark shape a dozen paces in front of it. We slowed our approach and crept up, focusing on the new figure.

It was inhuman, more like a mass of shaped muscle than something with distinguishable features. It was tall, with a conical top that ended in a blunted point, and two large bulges along the length of its body. Down the center of the creature was a

seam, making it appear as though it was folded in on itself, with another conical mass protruding from its chest.

All along the seam were countless humanoid hands, palms held together as though they were praying.

Hand of Consumption: Aberration, Grade Four

“There’s the next body part,” I whispered as we all prepped for a fight. “Heads, Eyes, and Hands. Eventually, we’ll have a whole fucked up person in here.”

The Praying Head continued to stare at the Hand, then turned around to face us. It hesitated, looking between our group and the Hand. The Hand monster split down the middle, opening up into a hellish starfish, and the Head made its choice.

It began sprinting toward *us*.

The Hand turned to the side and cartwheeled down the hall behind the Head. Its five large appendages rumbled across the ground, the multitudinous sub-hands writhing in the air.

I readied my hammer, preparing to slap an *Oblivion Orb* onto it as the monster got closer. But the enormous starfish of doom cartwheeled twice as fast as the prey Praying Head. Before the slimy, spider-like beast made it halfway to us, the pentameral mammoth slammed down on top of it with an appendage. The hands along its thick, pointed limb grasped the Praying Head’s serrated legs, restraining the monster. When the handsy echinoderm raised its leg, the Praying Head was held firm by tens of clutching sub-hands.

Then, it tumbled away from us down the hall, the still-alive and wailing Head in its grip.

“What the fuck have I just witnessed?” I said.

“It’s a *Hand* of Consumption,” said Xim. “I’m guessing it wants to *consume* the Praying Head.”

“It begs the question,” said Varrin, adjusting his grip on his c’thonic greatsword, “where’s the *Mouth*?”

Chapter 60

{The Mouth is *definitely* in the subchamber,} Cage thought to us.

“Is there a reason,” I said, “that you’re withholding critical information until the last second?”

{It goes against my nature to help Delvers overcome a Delve. This is all a vvvvvvery new experience for me. Besides, this isn’t the last *second*! It’ll take another couple of minutes for you to jog there.}

“I refuse to believe you’re *that* literal,” I said. “You want this Delve to collapse or not? If not, we’re going to need better cooperation from you.”

{Look, eighty-three percent of my processing power is being used to direct the mana overload mitigation functions, ten percent is being spent trying to repair the mana weaves everywhere I can, and six percent is going toward managing the normal Delve functions. You guys are getting one percent. One percent!}

“That feels low,” said Xim.

{It’s proportioned based on the probability that the managed solution will result in a favorable outcome.}

“Good to know you have faith in us,” I said. “Anything else you can tell us?”

{Don’t get too close to the main baddie in the next chamber. It looks like it’s dissolving things. Very slowly, though. One of the Praying Heads is inside of it and just screaming and screaming.}

I grimaced, then looked at Xim and Varrin.

“Are all Delves complete horror shows?”

“No,” said Xim. “Coppers are kind of pleasant from what I hear.”

“Not how I would describe them, Xim,” said Varrin. “Safer to assume it will always be a gruesome endeavor.”

“Why did I ask that?” I muttered. “Never mind, let’s go.”

We continued down the corridor at a more careful pace. We encountered no more Eyes until we found the entrance to the chamber. The sounds of shrieking echoed down the hallway.

Nuralie went to scout and returned with enough information that it made me wonder if Cage was secretly trying to sabotage us. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed he was just bad at communicating.

“The chamber is much smaller,” said Nuralie. “Everything is covered in flesh-plants.”

“Flesh-plants?” I said. “Can you be more specific?”

“The walls, floor, and ceiling are covered in plants.” Pause. “Made of flesh.”

I nodded. I hadn’t expected poetry, but maybe I needed to buy Nuralie a thesaurus. I gestured for her to continue.

“There are four Hands, nineteen Eyes, and something called a Bloom of Consumption at the center. Aberration, grade two.”

“Then the Hands are the real threat,” I said. “They’re all grade four.”

“The Hands stuffed the Praying Head into the Bloom,” said Nuralie. “The Bloom sprayed it with mist and its skin fell off.”

“Calling it a bloom really diverges from the theme here.”

“Regardless of what it’s called,” said Varrin, “that sounds like the mouth.”

“The Eyes scout for prey,” said Xim, “the Hands grab it, and the Bloom eats it.”

“So what’s our strategy?” I asked.

“Kill the Eyes,” said Nuralie.

“Any reason other than you hate being watched?”

“The Hands don’t have eyes. The Bloom doesn’t have eyes.” Pause. “Only the Eyes have eyes.”

“You think that’ll blind it.” Nuralie nodded. “Ok. Nuralie, you’ve been taking the Eyes out so far, so you should focus on that. The Bloom is a threat if we get close, so we need to avoid getting grabbed.” I couldn’t help but look at Varrin as I said this.

“Not helpful,” he said, scowling.

“I doubt my brand of letting everything hit me will help here,” I said. “My Fortitude doesn’t help with getting grappled, and I’d rather not see how effective it is against getting dissolved.”

“You’re still the strongest,” said Nuralie.

“Sure, but stronger than two or three of *those* things? I don’t like the chances. Ideally, we’d disable a couple of them and focus down the others. Nuralie, you’ve got those paralytic arrows I gave you. Anyone else have some crowd control?”

“I can stun,” said Xim, “but not for long. It’s mostly to make room for a follow-up attack.”

“I’ll aim for the limbs,” said Varrin.

“I am eager to test myself against one of these creatures,” Shog said, tentacles snaking through the air. “We will see who can strangle the other first.”

“Didn’t see a neck to strangle on one of these, Shog.”

“I will make it work.”

I looked Shog up and down. Despite his size, he was still a good bit smaller than one of the Hands. Then again, his grade was one higher. He might be able to solo one. If it didn't work out, well he wasn't a core party member.

“Shog, if you die here, do you die in real life?”

“This *is* real life,” said Varrin.

“I am no phantom. My true body is before you. Any harm I suffer will endure if I am dismissed.”

Even if I were willing to throw Shog's life away, he was still a huge asset. I'd rather not have him fed to the Bloom. He made a big impact in the last fight, and it would be good to have him available for future summoning. The Devil you know and all that. I resolved to dismiss him if it looked like he was in mortal danger.

“Etja?” I turned to the golem. “Think you can make one of the Hands float?”

She wrung her fingers.

“They're pretty big,” she said. “Maybe if that's all I'm doing.”

I considered the abilities in front of me and worked out an approach.

“That should be good enough.”

The plan would rely a lot on Nuralie, but I had faith in the loson. We readied ourselves, then marched toward the fight.

The chamber was the size of the infield area of a baseball diamond, less than a hundred feet across and deep, with an arched ceiling the same height at its center. Unlike the rest of the Delve, which pulsed with blue light from the mana-woven runes, this space was dominated by an amethyst glow.

Gnarled brambles covered the walls and ceilings, cutting off some of the light from the mana weaves. Beneath was a thin membranous layer of slick growth that curled up in places like dying leaves. The light of the runes penetrated from beneath, blue light passing through the dark red flesh to create dim purple lighting. The Eyes clung to the brambles with their boneless legs and turned their eyestalks to gaze at me as I entered.

The floor was buried under a tangled mass of thick, veiny roots that slowly moved from side to side like unearthed worms. My eyes traced them to the center of the room, where the Bloom lay.

It was as tall as one of the starfish monsters, but twice as wide. Its form was that of a flower that had yet to open, large and round at the bottom and narrowing toward the top where several layers of flesh wrapped over one another. Steaming liquid dripped from between the folds, and hissed when it made contact with what little of the ground was exposed. On either side of it, two of the super-sized Hands sat in their closed-up form, each with a hundred pairs of small-fry hands held together in supplication, like the monsters were praying to the Bloom.

From within the Bloom, the screaming continued.

“Is the sub-obelisk inside that shit?” I said as the Hands began to open up and spread their limbs.

{It is! Try not to blow it up.}

“That spell’s on cooldown.”

{Oh, good! Wait, no, not good.}

I ignored Cage and walked deeper into the room, stepping carefully over the wiggling terrain. My goal was not to draw first blood in this fight but to give one of the Hands a sneaky surprise instead.

Varrin and Xim stood to my right just behind me, with Shog floating to my left. Etja was directly behind us, and Nuralie disappeared into the gloom as I waved my hand at the... Hands.

“Hi!” I said. “I’m from the Homeowners Association. Some of the neighbors have complained about your lawn, and seeing it for myself, I gotta say their concerns are justified.”

The Hands turned and began their macabre cartwheel toward me.

“I’m happy to give you the number of a landscaper. I got a guy that weeds my own yard if you’d like to speak with him.” The Hands picked up speed as they got closer. “Otherwise, we’re going to have to fine you.”

The first Hand made it to me, swinging down with one limb, thicker than my torso. I brought up Gracorvus, and the ghostly Atrocidile sprang from its surface and roared as the appendage struck. The blow smashed the shield down onto me, sending a bolt of pain along my arm as I struggled to stay on my feet.

HP: 473 -> 457

That triggered an ability I hadn’t been taking proper advantage of.

I Don’t Attack You, You Attack Me: So long as you did not attack first, an enemy becomes stunned for one second the first time they deal damage to you with

either a melee weapon or a part of their body. An entity stunned in this way may not be affected by this skill again until the next dawn.

The entire body of the Hand seized up, and Shog'tuatha rushed in.

The c'thon reached out with his feathered tentacles and coiled them around three of the starfish's arms, then began carving apart the grasping hands along its face with his razor claws. I spun out from beneath the fight to face the next Hand tumbling its way toward me.

That one repeated the same mistake as the first, although it bashed me in the side before I could get my shield up. It knocked me down onto the roots, but the monster froze from my ability.

HP: 457 -> 423

Xim lunged forward, her shield glowing with divine light, and bashed the creature, which chained her own stun with mine. Varrin followed up with a series of devastating strikes from his greatsword on one of the creature's limbs, and soon sappy blood was pouring down its nearly severed leg.

The third Hand was on top of me as I tried to stand from my prone position, the roots at my feet curling up and around my legs. A split second before the new enemy crushed me, I felt my entire body grow lighter, and the large creature began hovering off the ground. It still got a good slap at my head as it spun in the air, but without the weight of its body behind the attack, it was glancing.

HP: 423 -> 419

Still enough for my ability to trigger, and the second of stun gave Etja room to force it further from the ground. Her mana bar ticked down as she maintained the spell, but if that's all she did this fight, it would be worth it.

The fourth Hand had been distracted by becoming a pincushion. Five arrows were dug into its torso, and another appeared in its chest, its journey through the air invisible.

Even with my enhanced eyesight, I couldn't make out Nuralie in the gloom, but several of the flying Eyes turned toward a shadowy corner. If all the little creatures did was see shit, it would make sense for their vision to be better than mine.

With the other three Hands busy, I cast *Shortcut* to appear in front of the one Nuralie was engaging before it had the chance to reorient itself toward the hidden archer. I got its attention by activating *Nimean Weapon* and slamming it in a leg with the spike of my hammer.

The spike dug into the flesh, then *Oblivion Orb* cast from the tip of the weapon while it was buried inside, taking a grapefruit-sized chunk out of the muscle. The humanoid hands near the wound grabbed at the hammerhead as the limb faltered, but I wrenched it free, breaking fingers and ripping one hand off entirely.

The nightmare echinoderm swung a limb at me, fingers and hands reaching out, but the half-dozen paralytic arrows slowed its movement. I stepped back to avoid the strike, but roots grabbed at my ankles and I stumbled, tumbling to the ground as the limb whipped through the air where I'd been. The Hand reoriented itself and smashed

an arm down onto my body. My ribs creaked as I lost another chunk of HP, and the beast grappled me with dozens of its smaller, grabby hands.

HP: 419 -> 383

The roots released my ankles and I was lifted off the ground. The world spun as the Hand cartwheeled back toward the Bloom with me attached to the inside of one leg. I brought out my Wand of Piercing Force and began rapid-casting the attack spell. Sap spilled from the monster, but the wounds did little beyond making the beast more unstable than it already was. Soon, I was out of charges, and the bulbous mass of the central creature whirled in and out of my vision. I watched it open up, the fleshy flaps unfolding into a form like a fully blossomed rose.

At the center of the Bloom was a wide, gummy mouth full of thick liquid, and a half-digested Praying Head, the bone of its skull visible through melted flesh.

I let the Hand bring me closer, until the Bloom was only a couple cartwheels away. The Bloom shuddered, and a cloud of red mist began to spray from its mouth toward me.

I cast *Shortcut*, trying to aim in the general direction of the rest of the fight.

Unfortunately, trying to activate a short-range teleport while being rotated at vomit-inducing speeds made my accuracy a bit shit. I decided to speak with Nuralie about inventing Dramamine as I appeared thirty feet from the fight, seven feet off the ground, and at an angle that allowed me the familiar experience of falling on my face.

At least I hadn't been *thrown* this time. Seriously, there had to be a better way to deal with giant enemies than getting grabbed and tossed around, hoping for the best.

While I hadn't been able to teleport my way back into the fray, the accidental distance gave me a good view of the overall battle.

Varrin and Xim were playing a lethal game of tag with their target. While their initial combo had done serious damage to one of the Hand's limbs, the monster was only slowed. It was still able to turn on its side and cartwheel at its prey, but the motion was jerky and the thing had trouble turning. Varrin was able to duck to the side and carve a gash down its back, while Xim led it on a merry chase. She stumbled as the roots caught her ankles, but was able to dive aside as the crippled Hand drew close.

Shog's fight deteriorated into the strangest bit of ground wrestling I'd ever seen. The monster starfish had tried to cartwheel while Shog's tentacles wrapped three of its arms, but the c'thon pulled it off balance, sending them both to the ground. The Hand now lay on top of Shog, who struggled to make room to strike with his claws as hundreds of the lesser hands squeezed his feelers and tore away fistfuls of feathers. One little hand was even poking Shog in his big black eyes with manic aggression.

Etja's jaw was clenched and her arms trembled as she held them out toward the Hand she was levitating. Her mana was below a quarter, which I math'd out to mean that Etja would be juiced in another minute or so.

Nuralie was making headway taking out the Eyes with her archery, but the winged creatures had gotten wise to her attacks and were now swooping and fluttering through the air, dodging her arrows. There were at least a dozen left, and I doubted Etja would last long enough for Nuralie to hit all of her targets.

The Hand near the Bloom turned and began stiffly cartwheeling back toward me, as the Bloom itself turned its goopy mouth in Nuralie's direction, the loson having abandoned stealth once she realized the enemy could still see her. She was near the far

wall, forty feet from the Bloom, so she wasn't threatened by its mist, but I didn't like what I was seeing. Why would the mouth turn toward Nuralie, unless it was going to *do* something? It didn't have eyes on its main body, so it's not like it was watching her.

If taking out the Eyes blinded the entire entity, then we needed to make that happen faster. We needed more ranged firepower, and Etja was busy.

I could swap out with Etja, but I could barely keep *one* Hand busy, much less two. I didn't have a good build for this fight, aside from giving one Hand the runaround while I teleported. Even then, I could only do that four more times before I was out of mana as well.

The Bloom began to swell as it continued to point itself at Nuralie.

I began sprinting in her direction, but my footing was hampered by the grasping roots. The Hand rolled at me, and the moment before we collided I cast *Shortcut* to close as much distance as I could between myself and the archer-chemist. I tried to put myself directly between the loson and the Bloom, but my aim was thrown off as a root wrenched my ankle, and I wound up several feet away from my target.

The Bloom's body contracted, and a stream of liquid shot out at Nuralie.

I threw out my arm and detached Gracovus, sending it through the air and into the way of the spray. The rapid spew connected with my shield, showering me in droplets. My armor sizzled and a few hit my face like beads of molten steel, making me claw at my mug on reflex. All that did was get some of the liquid on my fingers and my nerve endings screamed in protest.

HP: 383 -> 370

Paralysis: 10

Toxicity: 7

Even I would have been in trouble if that attack struck me head-on. Grade two my ass.

The Bloom pointed its mouth back to the sky and I hoped it only had enough fluid to do that once. The Hand I'd teleported away from was already rolling at me again. Etja's mana continued to tick down, Varrin and Xim stumbled as they fought, nearly getting grabbed, Shog bellowed eldritch curses as he was smothered, and Grotto...

Grotto was hovering in the air, watching the fight.

[Grotto! Wanna help out here, bud?!]

[The Hands have no minds from what I can tell. Nor do the Eyes.]

[And the fucking Bloom?]

[It is like touching on the consciousness of dozens of individuals, rather than one entity.]

The semi-paralyzed Hand struggled to wheel toward me as I tore my feet free from the roots, and Grotto's statement made me realize something that should have been obvious.

[It's a fucking hive monster! Try and isolate the Eyes inside its hivemind and get them to stop dodging!]

[That is much more difficult than you real-]

[I don't give a shit, figure it out!]

I watched the approaching Hand, wishing I had a better ranged option.

"Fuck it," I spat, deciding to try a hail mary. I pulled the one-handed steel warhammer from my inventory and brought it up over my head like a throwing axe. I

activate *Nimean Weapon*, priming an *Oblivion Orb*, then chucked the hammer with all my strength. The weapon shot through the air, turning end over end as it sailed toward its target.

It went wide, landing several feet to the left of the advancing monster. I probably should have tried the move with the actual axes I had, rather than a fucking hammer. I pulled another steel weapon out, an ax this time, and activated *Nimean Weapon* again. I needed to be able to hit these things from a distance. As I reared back for a second toss, the Hand only a couple cartwheels away from me, I got a System message.

Would you like to learn the technique, Homing Weapon?

Homing Weapon

Cost: 10 Stamina

I didn't have time to read the rest of the message. I accepted the skill, hoping that it was what I thought it was. I focused on the technique and layered it on with *Nimean Weapon*, then flung the ax.

The weapon flew through the air, looking like it was also going to go wide like my hammer, but it not only course-corrected, it *picked up more speed*. The ax buried itself up to the handle in the approaching starfish, and I heard the familiar *pop!* of *Oblivion Orb* going off.

I guess throwing shit really hard *did* count as a Strength attack.

Not only that, but the ax tore itself from the wound and zipped back at me. As the ax traveled through the air, the partially paralyzed mega-starfish cartwheeled onto the

leg where eight inches of axehead and a citrus-fruit-sized dimensional tear had mangled the muscle, in addition to the wounds I inflicted with my wand.

It buckled.

The pentameral beast lost its balance and hit the ground hard. I heard the crunching of dozens of fingerbones as the smaller hands on its body were crushed by its enormous weight. The ax whipped back and slapped into my palm.

As the monster tried to right itself, I looked above, where ten surviving Eyes dodged Nuralie's arrows.

Time for some target practice.

Chapter 61

Turns out *Homing Weapon* was not a *Guaranteed Hit*, as the flappy asshats were still able to swoop out of the way of my thrown ax, technique be damned. The ability guided the weapon toward my target, but the ax didn't turn on a dime when the chosen creature dodged last second.

It had perhaps been a bit optimistic to assume that I, with three visits to the ax-throwing range for a round of tossing axes while tossing back beers, would be able to outshoot Nuralie, a trained archer, even with my shiny new method of death-dealing.

After four throws, I'd managed to down just one, and the superstar I'd toppled was struggling back onto its... legs?

The starfish was not in a good way, but it was still in the fight. It had a score of holes across its body, mostly on its limbs where my attacks had been focused. My wand had been next to useless, as the magic bolts it shot had taken chunks out of the surface of the limbs without penetrating. My two *Oblivion Orb*-infused attacks were the only ones that had gone deep and damaged the internal muscle, and I suspected that the paralytic arrows Nuralie had fired were responsible for most of the monster's present sluggishness.

I was preparing for round three, estimating my chances of killing the creature with the three uses of *Nimean Weapon* I had left in my vanishing mana pool when I heard Varrin let out a savage scream.

I chanced a look in his direction and saw him grappled in the center of the mega-hand he and Xim had been fighting, but his greatsword had been run through his opponent's center. The whole body of the starfish shuddered as Varrin let out a victory cry. Then, it toppled forward onto him.

Varrin's jubilation turned to violent swears as he disappeared beneath the beast, and Xim turned to scan the battle, eyes fixing on me.

"Aim for the center!" she shouted, then rushed to try and lift the Hand off of Varrin. The thing was huge, but she was no slouch for Strength, and neither was Varrin. They might pull it off.

Even if I'd wanted to help them, I had my own battle to fight before I could.

As the semi-paralyzed Hand stood, I looked over its center, trying to see what Xim had been talking about. I noticed a single, large wound where one of my wand bolts had struck it in the middle, and it was much larger and deeper than any of the others.

"Fucking starfish has a weak spot in the center," I grumbled as I tossed my ax at another Eye, then pulled out Arbitros. I spun it so that its spike was facing forward and began running at the monster. "Who would have guessed?"

I ignored any semblance of defense, gripping the hammer in two hands and charging, winding up for one big swing. When I got within the Hand's reach, its three upper limbs all crashed down toward me, but I was already bringing the hammer around laterally while using one of my few remaining activations of *Nimean Weapon*. The spike hit home as all three limbs smashed down onto my back, and *Oblivion Orb* popped off inside of the five-limbed monster's middle.

I was crushed into the ground by its attack, but I felt a shudder go through the monstrous Hand, and then I found myself in the same position as Varrin, buried underneath its substantial bulk.

Perhaps it was their deadman's switch. Attack the center to kill it, it flops over on top of you, killing you right back.

Fortunately, while the crush-and-tackle combo had taken away a nice chunk of my health bar, I was still far from dead, although I felt the familiar sharp pain of cracked ribs.

HP: 370 -> 298

“Got mine!” I yelled, knowing there was little chance anyone heard me through the corpse encompassing my whole body. It was more for myself than anything.

Several of the sub-hands continued to grasp and claw at my back, but they were rapidly going limp. I was face down on the floor and mildly dismayed when the roots covering it began to wriggle up and around my neck.

“Nope, not doing that!” I said with a groan as I began the most challenging pushup of my life.

I imagined the floor as my most hated enemy, which it may as well have been given that it was actively trying to strangle me, and tried to shove it away with everything I had. I was able to do *infinite* pushups with a Strength of nine, so I damn well better be able to do *one* ultra-pushup with a Strength of ten.

My jaw was set and I felt blood pounding in my head as I tightened my core into a sheet of steel and pressed. I went up an inch, then another, until the fleshy roots around my neck were straining and beginning to snap. The creature’s scent filled my nose and I focused on my breath, exhaling the smell of rot and soil through clenched teeth. I was able to bring up a knee and wedge it into the ground, then lock my elbows.

The mass on top of me was heavy, but it also covered a lot of ground. Some of the weight was distributed onto the floor around me, allowing me to form a little

Arlo-cocoon in the center. Warm, sappy blood poured down on top of me, and one resilient sub-pinky was giving me a bloody wet-willy.

I managed to crawl forward, snapping away roots from my wrists and ankles as I went, until I found the edge of the starfish and squeezed out from beneath it. I took a deep breath of somewhat fresher air, then pushed to standing. I turned around, realizing that I'd left my hammer beneath the thing. Guess I'll get that back later.

I checked my HUD and looked at the fight, trying to see where I would be needed next. Six of the Eyes still fluttered. Xim had Varrin by the wrists and was pulling him from beneath their corpse. Shog looked like he'd taken Xim's advice and had reversed the tide of his fight, now clawing wildly at his monster's center. The starfish lifted its body from the ground, then smashed down on top of Shog, but the c'thon had the same number of fucks to give as a dagnab honey badger. Etja...

Etja had just run out of mana.

I reached out to Gracorvus, the shield still hanging in the air where it had intercepted the acidic attack on Nuralie, and commanded it to fly toward Etja. It left a trail of caustic smoke in its wake, which was concerning. It would be a pretty dick move to break the gift Varrin's family had given me on the same day I'd received it.

The Hand that Etja'd been wrangling hit the ground with a thud and flopped itself upright. I ran toward the pair of them, but my shield made it there first, swinging around the Hand and between it and Etja. I didn't know how anchored Gracorvus was while in flight mode. It had stopped Varrin's full-power greatsword swing and hadn't budged when hit by the Bloom's super-soaker attack.

The Hand showed me that my shield was not an immovable object as its arm bashed into the targe twice, before a third hit sent Gracorvus' slabs scattering across the

battlefield. Either it wasn't strong enough to weather repeat attacks of that force, or it had been weakened by the bloom's acid.

I had enough mana for one final *Shortcut* in me but I didn't want to burn my final use of the tactic if I didn't have to. I pulled a spear from my inventory, aimed for the center of the monster's back, then used *Homing Weapon* to turn my amateur javelin throw into an Olympic-level shot. The spear buried itself in the Hand, making its limbs recoil backward toward the injury, just as a beam of crimson light blasted down from the sky on top of it.

The Hand, and my spear, were engulfed by Xim's divine fire as the last of cleric's mana bar blinked away as well. The monster cartwheeled, its spinning, flaming body causing me to pause and appreciate the absurdity of my present life circumstances.

The thing had the 'roll' down, but had forgotten the 'stop and drop' bit. I guess they didn't teach basic fire safety in divine monstrosity school.

However, the Hand's trajectory wasn't panicked or aimless. It rolled right back at the person who'd tried to incinerate it. Xim dove behind the corpse of the horror-star Varrin had killed, while the big man wiped a bloody hand off on a towel I assumed he kept in his inventory for that very purpose.

Varrin tossed the cloth to the floor, then adjusted his grip on his greatsword and prepared to receive the acrobatic charge. His health was in bad shape, and I didn't like the odds of him in a one-on-one with a Hand of burning death that was graded for someone with four times as many bonus stats, regardless of the monster's current status as a blackened seafood skewer.

I prepared to cast my final *Shortcut* to join Varrin in his fight when the Hand began to veer off course. Varrin held his ground, calmly watching as the monster rolled several feet to the side of him, continuing forward until it crashed into the wall beyond.

[I have... isolated the Eyes in the Bloom's mind... but I need you to appreciate... how difficult this is.]

I looked up to the ceiling and saw the remaining Eyes twisting under Grotto's mental attack. Some clutched tightly to their vines, but others fell from the air. It was an eerie sight, as neither Grotto nor the Eyes made any sound during their psychic struggle.

But that confirmed the core assumption our entire strategy relied on. Kill the Eyes, blind the hive. Nuralie had already pegged one of the agonized Eyes with an arrow, and I pulled out a pair of daggers from my inventory.

"Always wanted to do this," I said as I used *Homing Weapon* to hurl the blades.

I doubted the same attack would do anything to the Hands, since the daggers weren't magical and I didn't think throwing a knife with any amount of force was enough of a Strength-attack to use my bonuses from *Nimean Weapon*. Hell, the daggers weren't even throwing knives. Just regular daggers for stabbin' and slashin', preferably in the dead of night while wearing a tattered and hooded cloak.

The Eyes were *not* grade four monsters, however. They were grade none, which meant they were about as tough as bats from the way both of the technique-launched daggers tore through their Jack Russell Terrier-sized bodies. One got beamed by the hilt of the dagger, rather than the blade, and the ceiling was splattered with the Eye's guts.

It was exactly as satisfying as I thought it would be. Who needed talent when you could just throw resources at the problem? That must be how rich people felt. Well, at this point I *was* a rich person, so it was how at least one rich person felt.

Nuralie finished off the Eye still perched on the ceiling, and I heard an awful squish, then turned to see Etja stomping on one that had fallen. Her bare foot was covered in ichor, and my brain forced me to imagine what that felt like between the toes.

[I have seen and felt many things in my long existence. Nothing has ever made me feel so disgusted as the thought you just had, and I don't even have toes.]

[I am not responsible for my thought-crimes,] I psychic'd back at Grotto as Varrin found and boot-murdered the last Eye.

The ignited ultra-sea star righted itself and began to wheel around again but toward no one in particular. Shog finally finished dismembering his opponent, spreading his arms and tentacles out and unleashing an otherworldly victory cry. The other two lay dead in pools of thick blood, and the floor was littered with the slain Eyes, arrows sticking out of most of them.

The Bloom was an alien creature with unknowable thoughts and feelings—other than to Grotto, I supposed—but I could tell that it was deeply troubled by what had unfolded. The roots pulled at my ankles with increasing urgency, but they were easy enough to kick off when there weren't thousand-pound jumbo gymnasts trying to grab you up or lay a smackdown. The Bloom swung its body in all directions, spraying deadly mist into the air and creating a skin-melting deterrent for anyone dumb enough to approach. It even vomited up the half-dissolved Praying Head, like a threatened snake.

Nuralie paced up beside me, sighed, and held out a hand. I placed a fresh quiver in it and she set it on the ground, then produced a large jar filled with a milky-yellow liquid and broke the wax seal around the top. Nuralie gingerly took off the lid and made sure it was stable, tucked in between the roots, before dipping an arrow in it. At last, she drew it back and aimed at the Bloom.

“What’s that?” I asked, nodding at the jar.

“Weedkiller,” she said. “I use it in my greenhouse.”

She loosed the arrow and it struck the Bloom, which whirled in our direction, spraying a fresh cloud of mist.

“You keep a greenhouse?”

Dip. Pull. Loose. Thud.

“It’s for alchemy.” Pause. “And my frogs.”

“And you just keep that in your inventory?”

She raised an eyeridge at me as she nocked another arrow.

“Where do you keep all *your* stuff?”

“Fair point.”

Loose. Thud. Plant-rage.

“How do you know it’ll work on that thing?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“If it doesn’t, you can throw something heavy at it.”

The Bloom didn’t look like it was winding up for another stream of death, so I was betting it only had the one good shot with that attack. It may have needed to refill its venom sacs. *Poison* sacs? It’s not like it had fangs or a stinger... either way, we were safe for the moment.

“I’d hate to spend more stamina if I don’t have to.”

Dip. Draw.

“This is why I like alchemy.” Loose. Thud. “I have as much as I can prepare.”

Thirty arrows later, and the Bloom sagged to one side, no longer pumping out mist. Nuralie gave it another ten or so plant-killer arrows for good measure. The rest of

us did post-combat cleanup and recovery while Nuralie slowly ensured the monster's doom, and until the air around it wouldn't liquefy our lungs. Finally, we began the process of *carefully* dismembering the entity to reach the sub-obelisk. Everything wet inside of the creature was acidic, and everything inside of it was wet.

Nuralie again proved invaluable for this process, since she had her acid-proof gloves and a resistant smock for her alchemy. I used a halberd, which I discarded halfway through when the steel dissolved, and then a poleaxe, which also made its way into the junk pile by the time we finished.

My armory was taking a serious hit in this fight. The head of the battleax I'd been throwing had broken, the spear was a pile of ash, and both daggers were lost to space and time amidst the roots and bodies. The weapons had been trashed from the force of my throw, and didn't fly back to me after breaking.

I did get the team involved in recovering Arbitros from beneath the Hand it was buried under. That one wasn't mine to lose. It was on loan from Lito.

We did some vigorous rinsing of the obelisk from our collective waterskins and canteens before laying hands on it and channeling mana to undo the second lock. Another rumble and one spooky chime later, we were done.

"It's interesting," said Xim. "The obelisk is completely unharmed, despite being inside that thing."

{A little bit of divinely-attuned, flesh-and-steel-dissolving acid wouldn't hurt one of these obelisks,} Cage thought to us. {They're tougher than that!}

"And you were worried about my explosion spell?"

{Not really! Just trying to be encouraging. Go get 'em, big mage guy! Er, big... *tank* guy! Wait, what role are you trying to be?}

“I’m a-”

“We should move on,” said Varrin. “This already took us longer than I’d like.”

“True,” I said. “We’ll have to make do with the resources we’ve recovered.”

Kim had taken Nuralie’s final mana potion while we worked, and the rest of the effect on Etja’s had run its course as well. Kim had a smaller mana pool, so hers was now looking fairly healthy, but Etja was only back to a third.

I’d taken a break back out in the hall to keep Shog around, where the divine mana interference ended. Walk into the room, divine interference. Step out of the room, mega-mana regen. It was like a game of ‘the floor is lava’, and the logic of it was just as sensible.

{Wards!} was the extent of Cage’s input on the matter.

I was glad that I had one ability that used stamina rather than mana, since I was close to empty on the latter when we left the subchamber. Everything we’d done so far was just to unlock the ‘door’ to the central cage. I hoped we still had enough gusto for whatever we found behind it.

Chapter 62

“You know what’s odd?” I said as we hustled down the flickering corridor. The door we’d unlocked was a quarter turn around the loop from where we’d fought the bloom.

“*Everything’s* odd in here,” said Varrin.

“Right, but I didn’t see any big god-mummy in that last room. The first subchamber had that huge guy in it.”

{That chamber contained an incorporeal avatar of consumption,} Cage thought to us. {It isn’t there anymore. I, uh, sort of lost track of it.}

“How do you lose a deity?” said Xim.

{Again, not a deity. Just a little piece of one. And how did I lose it? Have you seen what’s happening here? I can’t keep up with *every* invisible pseudo-god running around this place! If I have one escapee after this mess I’ll say mission accomplished. If Orexis wrecks the whole cage, then *all* of them get loose.}

“And collapsing the dimensional space doesn’t kill them,” I said.

{If that worked, I would have pushed the big red button already. Why do you think we trapped them if we could just murder them?}

“Uh, compassion and mercy?”

{Not a lot of that going around in here.}

“I think I saw some,” said Etja.

“Indeed,” said Varrin, his tone darker than I liked.

{Just keep disintegrating baddies and I’ll keep ignoring that you’re the vessel that snuck in half of my current problems.}

“Okay!” said Etja.

There was an awkward moment of silence and Cage sent us a mental impression that I think was his equivalent of a sigh.

“What will we find on the inside of the cage?” said Varrin.

{Eh, it’s a bit of a war zone. The guests within are under stricter containment than the pair out here, so they haven’t spawned anything too big and bad, but there are still a lot of weaker creatures duking it out.}

“Why are they fighting?” I asked.

{Because they’re mindless beasts that entered the world knowing only that they exist to serve their demigod? Or, maybe it’s a territorial thing. Could be that everyone in here hates each other because they’re all pretty awful to be around.}

“Two assholes walk into a bar,” I said, “doesn’t mean they’re friends.”

“I dunno,” said Xim. “I usually encounter them in flocks.”

“Fortunately, I haven’t had that experience here yet.”

“What about the Artemix group?” she said.

“Were they assholes?” I asked. “Or just a group of desperate people down on their luck and roped into evil machinations beyond their understanding?”

“The asshole theory is simpler,” Xim replied.

“Who cares?” said Varrin. “They were criminals, and by now they’re executed.”

“That’s a pretty quick penal system,” I said.

Varrin furrowed his brow.

“You killed three of them yourself, Arlo. Swifter justice could not have been had.”

[*It was my trap that killed the leader,*] Grotto thought to us.

“Yeah Varrin,” I said. “Don’t misallocate credit for wanton slaughter like that. I only killed two.”

[Again, a feat enabled by my contributions to the battle. Had I not preyed on their fears and forced them to confront the terror within their minds, then you would have been captured or killed for certain.]

“Talents and skills to take great pride in,” I said.

[It is good that you are finally beginning to acknowledge the value of my methods. Varrin, you should also be pleased that Arlo has begun to see reason, for I am also responsible for him allowing you back into the party.]

“Oh, that’s not true at all,” I said.

[You were filled with doubts, calling him an ‘asshole’ in your crude way. But I convinced you of the value of allying with a powerful noble so that he might be used as a potent tool for our conquests.]

Varrin raised an eyebrow at me.

“That is a total fabrication,” I said. “I *did* call you an asshole, not going to deny that. And yes, Grotto *did* say those things he just said with as much grace and eloquence as he just said them, but that’s not the reason I decided to party up with you again.”

“Even if it were,” said Varrin, refocusing on the path in front of us, “you wouldn’t cause me much offense. I am used to dealing with ruthless political motivations, and I know full well that my family’s name opens doors. I wouldn’t begrudge you using it for the same, though we are not an easy house to manipulate.” The group began to slow as we approached the location Cage had sent us. “Speaking of doors, this doesn’t look like one.”

I studied the entrance to the inner Cage in front of us and had to agree with Varrin’s assessment. What I was looking at wasn’t so much a door, as it was abstract art engraved into the stone walls. There were hundreds of looping ribbon-like lines with a

variety of geometric shapes filling the spaces between them. Circles, squares, triangles. Together they formed what one of my old art professors would have called ‘a suggestion of the human form’. It was something you might see in a mid-20th-century art museum.

“Varrin,” I said, looking him in the eye, “I’m not trying to use you like Grotto is saying.”

He gave me a rueful smile.

“Grotto states bluntly what most would hide behind honeyed words,” he said. “Murderers and kidnappers should be put to the sword, and the world should celebrate their deaths. Alliances are not friendships, they exist for the sake of utility. Perhaps your old world had different values.”

“It depends on who you were asking,” I said. “I don’t think most people were that cut-throat.”

“Those values may not serve you well in this world. If you believe that everyone who smiles at you is a friend, you will soon feel a knife in your back.”

“And villains I let live will seek retribution, I get it. You saw me chop Hognay’s head off, right?”

“And you slew members of Artemix.” He turned and frowned at me. “Yet you chide us for our actions against the traitors they worked with. The ones who attacked *my* family. Your ‘values’ are at odds with your actions.”

“That argument misses a lot of nuance,” I said.

“Then you can enlighten me later.” He fixed his gaze back on the door. “Cage, if this is unlocked, how do we open it?”

I studied Varrin for a moment, trying to decipher the subtext to his words. I decided not to read into it too much since the man had gone through a lot that day. Still, there was definitely a longer discussion to be had.

{Right! Now that you've adjusted my permissions, I can open it!}

"Adjusted your permissions?" I said. "You told us we were unlocking the door."

{And so you have!}

The engraving came to life, and the countless meandering ribbons began to slide back along their winding paths, the geometric shapes turning on themselves as the lines moved, like crude gears. Where the lines receded, gaps were left behind in the wall, and the shapes hung in the air, creating a discernable pattern once the rest of the space was empty. They formed a large sigil, similar to those that lined every wall of the Delve, but this one was ten times larger. The shapes shone with blue light, then snapped together to create a humanoid figure. It towered over all of us, even Shog, and bent down to turn its triangular eyes upon us. I held my breath, half-expecting another fight, but the thing turned and stepped into the room the door had been blocking.

I looked around at the others, and we followed it inside.

The room was bare, lacking any of the flickering mana weaves and lit by glowstones. The stones cast the room in a soft yellow-white light that made me feel like I was walking into an artfully lit living room, rather than the entrance to a secret trans-dimensional god prison.

The stone creature walked to the opposite wall and placed its hands upon it. It disassembled itself back into the mess of geometry, which spread out across the wall into a new sigil. It glowed, then the shapes spread out into a circle, where they vibrated

into a crescendo that sent chunks of the wall falling to the ground. Soon after, the wall shattered inward, the pieces sucked away into a portal.

“This definitely doesn’t look like a door,” I said.

“Why is it a portal?” asked Xim. “We’re going somewhere inside the same Delve, right?”

“Presumably to the other side of this wall,” Varrin remarked.

{It’s a safety measure. Anything moving through the portal without authorization will cause it to collapse in on the occupants.}

“Like you tried to do to us,” I said. “When we were coming into the Delve.”

{Exactly! That’ll take care of most things trying to get in or out, or at least slow them down.}

“Ok, but we’re authorized, correct?” I said.

We all looked up, waiting for a response. It was funny how we all had the same instinct to look above ourselves when hearing a formless voice, even though Cage could be anywhere.

I guess sometimes people *do* look up.

{Yeah! You’re the technicians, remember?}

“I mean, I saw that notice at the entrance,” I said. “Access Restricted: Level One Technicians Only. I didn’t *know* that I was a technician before I came in.”

{Sure, sure. Well, you *are* a technician. I think. One second, let me consult the literature.}

“Grotto, got any insight into this?”

[*Most Delvers should have technician status.*]

“What does that mean?” asked Xim. “Why would we be technicians?”

[Your role inside of the Delves is often to remedy an issue occurring within. It is the very reason you were inside of my Delve.]

“Are you saying Delvers exist to fix things inside of Delves?” she said.

[No. Delvers exist for many reasons. That is merely one of them.]

“Is there a situation where we wouldn’t have technician status?” I said.

[Of course. If you were ill-suited to the task, the System would remove the role.]

“Alright, we finished the objective inside The Toxic Grotto, so we should be good.”

[The Delve was destroyed in the process if you recall. I am interested to hear Cage’s conclusion.]

“This is absurd,” said Varrin. “If we *must* be technicians to enter the Delve, then we *are* technicians since we’re inside.”

[The Delve was not eager to allow you access. Orexis pulled strings to allow the group’s entry.]

“That was for Etja and Orexis,” Varrin said.

[Would you bet your life on it?]

“Yes,” said Varrin as he walked toward the portal. He paused just in front of it, looking back over his shoulder at us. “We can stand around here until the Delve implodes, or we can risk our lives to try and stop it, the same as we’ve been doing since we got here.” He faced forward and touched the portal. His body blinked away, leaving a faint afterimage that quickly faded.

“Did... did he make it?” I asked.

{There's a one-minute evaluation buffer, so we won't know for sure until then.
Please go in, now. We don't have time for each of you to stand around and see if the last one got quarked.}

"Did you just use quark as a verb?" I said. "You know what quarks are?"

{I know a lot of stuff! Get into the portal! Please!}

I brushed some of the gunk off the front of my armor and straightened my hood.

"Right. Here I go."

I stepped up to the portal and gave it a hearty high-five.

Now entering the Inner Cage

Evaluating user permissions...

...

...

...

Permissions verified

Please remember to observe all proper safety protocols

I landed on the other side of the portal, on my feet this time, and into utter chaos.

Varrin was fighting two clouds of gas that had solid, three-foot horns, and were trying to gore his stomach. The warrior's greatsword passed through them harmlessly, until he growled and his blade lit up with mana. He made a horizontal slash through the creatures and they puffed out of existence, their horns clattering to the ground.

We were standing on a wide catwalk that ran around the perimeter of the massive interior of the cage, giving us a full view of the multi-floor prison riot that was

underway. To either side of us, monstrous creatures fought savagely with one another. Their forms were wide and varied, and my mind barely had time to parse them all.

Floating eyes attached to brains that were bashing into the brains they were attached to. Humanoid creatures with enormous holes in their guts, from which they pulled and threw spears made of their own spines and ribs. Crab-like beasts with enormous sacs on their rears that they drug behind them, spreading some kind of webbing on the ground. The webbing had fucking faces in it, and they gnawed at the feet of anything that walked over it. There were thirty-foot-tall pillars of color that reminded me of every impossible nightmare creature I'd ever dreamt about. Literally. Looking at them gave me flashbacks to specific nightmares that I remember waking from in a cold sweat.

There were also a few creatures that must have spawned from a god of lust, but this isn't that kind of book so I won't go into too much detail about those. Suffice to say I was disturbed by how into it I was.

They definitely exerted some sort of mind control that made you kink-shame yourself into submission, and I kept telling myself that for years to come.

Varrin and I dealt with a few errant creatures that found our existence offensive, but for the most part the hordes were more concerned with each other. The rest of the party soon joined us and we began carving a path in the direction that Cage pointed us.

We did our best to avoid looking at anything that created a memetic hazard, but most of us were forced to confront our internal demons on top of the real ones we were fighting at some point. Xim, however, was mostly immune to those effects. She was also completely willing to slap the rest of us out of it when needed.

We eventually made our way up a ladder high enough that a professional tower climber would think twice about ascending it. While Varrin had some helpful climbing gear to make sure we didn't test my theory on how much Fortitude was needed to survive a terminal velocity impact, there were flying fish-like creatures with dozens of spiky tendrils that gave a paralysis debuff when they stung. Nuralie nearly fell at one point, but Etja came in clutch with the gravity magic, both in keeping Nuralie afloat, and then in sending the fly-fishes plummeting while they disintegrated into fish flakes.

At the top of the ladder was *another* portal. We spent zero time debating whether or not this one might kill us and promptly entered. On the other side of *that* was one big, chubby dude.

The room was smaller than the Bloom chamber, about forty feet across. At its center was another sub-obelisk, and behind that was what looked like a man, though he stood twelve feet tall and was about the same in width. He wore a wide hat that reminded me of a rice farmer, with baggy, loose-fitting pants, sandals, and an open vest with no shirt beneath. He had on a pair of metal bracelets, a simple necklace, and a pair of studs in his ears. His hair was long and unkempt, though his round face was clean-shaven.

The guy also looked like he'd been frozen in time at the exact moment someone had told him a particularly funny joke. Hands on his gut, mouth open, with a smile too wide to be human. His eyes existed within the uncanny valley, a little too big, even on his large face. Also, his other eyes were a little too big, even on the left side of his large face. *And* his other other eyes were a little too big, even on the *right* side of his large face. The same went for the extra mouths as well.

He didn't have a nose.

While we all examined the big guy, I realized there was something else about the chamber that was unusual. The runes and glyphs were emitting a steady, uninterrupted blue glow. No flickering or stuttering, no bursts of light followed by darkness. I even kept my dimensional mana regen bonus. The room was a little oasis.

“Even the gods appreciate the bare-chested look,” I said, straightening my own vest. It was a shame that I had to wear armor under it.

“This is Fortune?” said Xim, walking around the frozen man. “I expected... something else.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like someone more fortunate looking.”

“His girth might be a sign of wealth,” I said. “Shows he had plenty to eat. He could be from a culture that frequently experienced famine.”

“I’m not talking about his weight,” she said. “His outfit is pretty plain.”

“You wanted an expensive suit and a mountain of jewelry?”

“Maybe some fancy armor and a legendary scepter.”

Nuralie walked up and tapped a nail on the man’s knee. It clinked like he was made of glass.

“Why would he need armor?” said Nuralie. “If he’s Fortune, wouldn’t every attack miss him?”

“Sounds more like Luck to me,” I said.

Pause.

“Isn’t that the same?”

“Fortune is like... you know... Hmm, maybe they are the same thing.”

She stared at me, then blinked.

“Moving on,” I said. “Cage, how do we let this guy out?”

{Easy enough! Do the same thing with this sub-obelisk you’ve been doing everywhere else.}

“Murder it when it tries to eat us?”

Varrin stomped over to the obelisk and placed his palm on one side.

“Let’s do this,” he said.

Nuralie, Xim, and I joined him, and we sent a puff of mana into the obelisk. The runes lit up, and the room was baptized in golden radiance.

Gouts of mana exploded off of Fortune’s skin, peeling up and away and floating into the air in chunks and clouds. The wards sucked in the magic and began to behave in the way I’d come to expect from this Delve. Several exploded into sparks and fire as the mana overwhelmed them, and the System sent me the usual notice letting me know my mana regen was being bombed by the divine.

The sound of laughter filled the room, deep and bellowing. I turned to see the thing we’d just set loose, and the figure paused mid-guffaw, eyes going wide in surprise. Then, he caught sight of me, and his smile grew even wider until it was nearly bisecting his face.

“Arlo!” Fortune said in a voice that rumbled my very soul. “My boy, you made it!”

Chapter 63

I reeled from Fortune's words, but their meaning wasn't lost on me. Still, I needed to be sure.

"Sorry, I've been getting to know a lot of gods lately," I said. "Where did we meet again?"

Fortune's smile receded an inch, and Xim turned her head slowly in my direction, eyes wide. It was the first time I'd seen her look genuinely worried about something. Then, Fortune's laughter filled the room again.

"Arlo!" he said, the sound coming from his right mouth as his front one laughed. "I'm glad you've got some zest. Where did we *meet*?"

"Nowhere!" shouted the left mouth.

"Right here!" shouted the right.

"What counts as a meeting?" asked the front. "On Earth and in heaven and now here in the land of..." Fortune paused, and his left pair of eyes fixed on Varrin. "What have you all named it?"

Varrin watched the god, standing tall. He spoke with a respectful tone, but his grip on the hilt of his greatsword was tight enough for his gauntlet to creak.

"Forgive me, divine one, but do you mean the name of the world?"

"The world, the continent, the country, anything will do."

"The known world is called Arzia. The entrance to this Delve is in the Hiward Kingdom."

"A *kingdom*," said the left mouth while the right one frowned. "I enjoy kingdoms. The power imbalance is delightful."

"Boring," said the right.

“We have met three times,” said the front mouth, “But only in Hiward have we met in the flesh.”

“Then you’re the one who brought me here,” I said.

“To Arzia,” said the right.

“To this *kingdom*,” said the left.

“You brought yourself to this Delve,” said the front.

“I see,” I replied, running a hand over my beard.

For whatever reason, this creature didn’t bother me the way it obviously bothered my other party members. Xim’s smile was gone, her face pale. Nuralie was back on all fours, eyes flitting around the room. I thought she was looking for a place to hide away, but the chamber was well-lit and barren. Varrin stood stock still, save for his flexing grip. Even Shog had floated down to settle on the ground, as though he feared looking upon Fortune at eye level. Grotto was tucked close to my shoulder.

Etja didn’t seem to mind Fortune’s presence, though. She stared up at him curiously, leaning from one side to the other to see his three faces.

Maybe it was the fact that I’d already died once. Or that my life had been under constant threat ever since being resurrected. Also, this guy was the one who brought me back. Why would I be afraid of him?

Or there was the possibility that I was genetically engineered to view him favorably.

“Am I a clone?” I asked. “Or the original?”

That shook Xim from her shock.

“A... clone?” she said.

[*That is exactly what I wanted to ask.*]

“You are not a clone,” said Fortune. “Nor have I modified your mind in any way.”

“I swear upon my name it is true,” said the left.

“No fun if we cheat,” said the right.

“*Sometimes* it’s fun,” the left retorted.

“You are also not an android, cyborg, homunculus, collective hallucination, a brain in a simulation, or any other manner of Arlo facsimile,” Fortune’s front continued. “Your body is temporally consistent with the person that existed on Earth. A single continuity through space and time, not a copy. I added a few improvements, though. Purely functional. My own modified Creation process.”

“Then you have the ability to physically pull someone across dimensions,” I said, considering the power that would take. Honestly, I had no frame of reference for it, but if this Fortune was a similar brand of god to Orexis, did that mean Orexis also had abilities at that level?

“I do!” shouted the left.

“Not really,” said the right.

“Humans on Earth can fly, but not with their arms,” said the front. “I have my ways.”

{Hey!} Cage’s voice crashed into my head, his psychic volume cranked to eleven. {I don’t like this! Why do you know Fortune? Why does *he* know *you*? Is your entire party some sort of deceptive god-delivery vessel?}

“What, like a Trojan god-horse?” I said.

Fortune’s eyes all shot down and to the right, each with a different expression, none of them pleasant. Narrowed in suspicion, scrunched in disgust, with the front looking down imperiously.

{Yeah! And why can't I see inside that room anymore? What's hap-}

Fortune waved a meaty hand through the air and Cage's presence disappeared.

"What a rude creature," said the left.

"It is," said the right.

"'8 won't butt in again. Where were we?"

"M'lord," said Varrin, "we've awakened you over a matter of great import. This Delve is unstable, and another deity threatens to destroy it."

"Yes, I know," said Fortune. "Yearning is as tireless as he is single-minded."

"You know Orexis?" I asked. "You already know he's inside? Were you conscious while frozen?"

Would being frozen for millennia while remaining aware drive a god insane? It was at that moment I began to get confused over Fortune's timeline. If he'd been locked in here with all these other god avatars, when did he summon me?

"Yes. Yes. No," said Fortune.

"How long have you been in here?" I asked.

"I have no idea. Long enough for a new civilization to arise."

"Then... how did you bring me to this dimension? If you've been trapped for this long, did you have some type of god-level Rube Goldberg machine?"

"Ah, my boy," Fortune said, his front growing somber. "I brought you here before I was ever imprisoned."

"But, if that was thousands of years..."

"The life you knew on Earth passed by long ago," Fortune said, reaching out to pat my shoulder with a hand that was the size of my chest. Grotto floated away as the thick palm landed, and the gesture shook my whole body, but I kept my balance.

I thought I'd made peace with the idea that Earth was behind me, but Fortune's words showed me the truth. I'd been running my life at a sprint, never giving myself time to pause and think. I'd filled my days with non-stop training, fighting, and outfitting my Pocket Closet. I made lists in my head before I drifted to sleep, about new things I could make or study. It was a habit I had in my old world, and I'd imported it straight to this one.

Now that it was revealed that everyone I'd known and loved were not only unreachable, but long dead and buried, a fresh sprout of grief began to emerge. It broke through the emotional soil I'd scorched and salted, reminding me of the life that once grew there.

There was no home to go back to.

I had so many questions, but they died before reaching my lips. I felt myself begin to fold inward, to cut myself off from reality in a fit of self-pity. The brooding, disgruntled Arlo of the past breezed into the shattered remains of the glass house I'd built around my emotions, whispering about how he told me so.

But, I wasn't that guy when I arrived in Arzia, and I didn't think I ever really *was* that guy. He was a fiction I created to hate myself with more efficiency, and I'd retired that caricature of my past. Learned to give myself grace for how I used to be. At least, I thought I had. So as the storm clouds rolled in, and the Big Sad tried to invite me to cuddle up with it in front of a cozy fire, I took a deep breath and turned down the invitation. I wasn't going to give up trying to make a better life for myself.

Besides, there wasn't any time for my gloomy bullshit.

“We need to deal with Orexis,” I said. “I’d love to stand here and play twenty questions, but there’s too much at stake to get hung up over how and why you brought me here.”

Fortune frowned, letting go of my shoulder and standing upright. He looked me up and down, then crossed his arms.

“I know how much time we have,” said Fortune’s front.

“Plenty,” said the left.

“Less than two minutes,” said the right.

Then, all three mouths spoke in unison, and reality shook under their combined speech.

“The reason *why* I brought you here is simple. You exist to set me free.”

“Good job,” said the left.

“Congratulations,” said the right.

“Your reward is that you are alive when you should have died,” said the front. “As for those that aided you...” His three sets of eyes looked over the rest of my party. “I allow you to do battle with the specter of Orexis.”

All six eyes settled on me, and I took an involuntary step back. For the first time, I began to see the soul of Fortune, and I got the impression that he was *showing* it to me, *allowing* me to see it, and reminding me that without his permission, I couldn’t, even with my soul-sight ability.

An ability *he* gave me in the first place with the Traveler’s Amulet.

Fortune’s soul did not dominate the room. It didn’t crash down on me like an all-consuming force as Orexis’ did. It was tight, controlled, and held firm to his body like

custom-fitted armor. Still, all the details of the world around me disappeared, robbing me of any perception outside of Fortune's soul.

It held no metallic color like a Delver's, but was made up of thousands of faces with myriad hues, each wearing a different expression ranging from horror to glee. Fortune's soul was less like seeing the soul of an individual, as much as it was like seeing thousands of souls at once, all wrapped around a single entity and compressed on top of one another. It was not malicious, but neither was it benevolent.

Like Orexis, there was a deep *desire* within it. A desire that would serve only Fortune, and grant blessings and curses to all in his wake.

I was brought here to prison break *this*? Cage had told us Fortune wasn't *as bad* as the other avatars in here but still gave the divinity a fifty percent chance of raining hell down upon the world. After seeing Fortune's soul, I thought Cage might have been conservative with his estimate. Sure, he wasn't giving off sadist vibes, but most *psychopaths* weren't malicious. They just did what they wanted and fuck everyone else. *This* was my fucking quest?

I'd never really thought of myself as a summoned *hero*, but it never even occurred to me that I might be a summoned *villain*.

"Fighting Orexis," Nuralie began to say, then paused for much longer than her normal beat. "Fighting Orexis doesn't sound like a reward."

Fortune turned a face to the loson, his soul disappearing from my sight. The world rushed back to me all at once and I gasped as Fortune began to belly-laugh again.

"If you prevail, it will be!" Fortune said.

"And if we don't?" Nuralie asked.

“That question answers itself,” said the right mouth. Fortune nodded with the words.

“Then why did we release you?” I said. “You’re supposed to be a fallback, to stop him.”

“This Delve exists at my pleasure!” all three voices declared. “I am no *mechanism* to be deployed!”

The room’s mana-weaves flared and flickered. Several more of the sigils sparked and died before the room went back to its normal, steady glow.

“Do not worry,” Fortune’s front said in a calming tone after his verbal assault on the fabric of the universe. “I will ensure that Anesis does not accelerate the Delve’s collapse.”

“But that stain,” said the right, “that *suggestion* of Orexis is beneath me.”

“He’ll be good practice for you,” said the left.

“It is time,” said the front. “Now, we shall go to Orexis, and I shall teach his sister that she’d have been happier if her brother had let her rot in here.”

Fortune strode forward, causing Shog and I to hurry out of his path, and he approached the room’s portal. He waved a mighty hand and the portal collapsed into nothing, revealing an arched doorway to the inner cage.

“It really did just take us to the other side of the wall,” I muttered.

Fortune bent down to walk through the arch and leapt off the platform at the top of the mile-high inner cage without sparing the rest of us a glance.

We ran outside the room to the top of the ladder, looking down to see Fortune plummeting away.

“How the fuck do we follow him?” I asked. The answer we got was a wave of force that tore us from the platform and sent us careening toward the bottom.

Chapter 64

I'd never gone skydiving. I thought that I wouldn't like it.

I was correct in that assumption.

The inner cage was a sphere with a diameter of about two and a half miles. We'd entered at the midway point and climbed our way up an absurd distance, though we were still far from the top. That meant there was well over a mile between us and the bottom. Or, if my recollection of terminal velocity was correct, and assuming it held true inside this Delve, we had about thirty seconds until splat.

I'd seen Lito fall from the sky and land on a boat without injury, though I didn't know if he'd dropped from high enough to reach the maximum velocity a Delver could achieve when caught in gravity's clutches. Also, I was betting that the wood of a riverboat deck had a lot more give to it than the stone and mystery metal that made up the inside of this Delve. Given the strength of its prisoners, I assumed the building materials were pretty tough.

Getting thrown around by monsters hurt. I doubted they threw me faster than one hundred miles per hour, but no one was standing around with a sports radar gun to provide snarky commentary on Orexis' pitching speed.

Point is, I was betting my Fortitude wouldn't be enough to prevent this much fall damage. I *might* live, but I was still regenerating health from our last fight, and another ding before the confrontation that Fortune was leading us toward would be... undesirable.

Focusing on a solution was difficult, however. Not just due to the involuntary freefall but also because I was distracted by the spectacle I was seeing as we plummeted.

The interior of the sphere was ringed with multiple wide platforms. Here and there a portal could be seen, which I presumed led to other prisoners like Fortune and Anesis. While we'd made our climb, the platforms had been a battleground of a dozen breeds of divine monstrosity, waging a multi-faction holy war inside the Delve. It was brutal, chaotic, and at times disturbingly erotic.

But as we fell, *all* of the divine spawn were dying.

For some, fights became instant trades of deadly blows, killing every combatant involved. Other creatures slumped over for no visible reason, or screamed and wailed, blood gushing from their orifices before collapsing. The pillars of light shattered into sparkling fragments that rained down on the corpses around them. One group of creatures exploded, taking everything nearby with them. Many of the ones closest to the edge of the platforms simply lost their footing, joining us in our descent.

I looked below, to the distant form of Fortune as he fell ahead of us, and watched the event begin to unfold on every platform he passed. It was *then* that I truly began to fear the avatar.

Turning away from the mass execution, I could still see my party members. We were in a tight group, and even Shog and Grotto were falling just behind us. Either they needed some type of ground nearby to float, or Fortune's magic had them in its clutches as well.

Maybe that meant that the avatar would ensure our safe landing. Maybe that meant that any solution I came up with wouldn't work, subject to the same countering force as the c'thon and the Delve Core. Still, I saw the ground coming this time, so I was going to plan a way to keep my face off of it. I also needed to make sure my allies all had a solution.

“Etja!” I shouted over the raging wind blasting past us. “Can you gravity magic this shit away?”

“I- I think so!” she shouted back.

“How many people can you get?”

She hesitated.

“Three?” she said, uncertain. “I need more mana!”

Nuralie, Xim, and Varrin didn’t have any tricks for falling from what I knew. Nuralie had the lowest Fortitude and was the lightest of the three, behind Xim in her mail and armored robes. Etja’s ability seemed to work off weight, since she could lift scores of Praying Heads, but struggled with one mega-starfish.

“Get Nuralie and Xim!” I shouted. “I’ll get Varrin!”

Before waiting to see if she understood, I held my left arm over my chest and activated Gracorvus. The item went into shield formation, and I felt pressure against my body as it caught the air. It wasn’t a lot wider than my torso, but the shape was less aerodynamic for sure. My allies dropped away from me slowly as my atmospheric drag increased, and I began testing a theory.

Was *Gracorvus*’ velocity when I willed it to move relative to my body, or some other fixed point? Was the listed speed a simplified expression of force, or some kind of magical constant?

I held the shield out from my chest a bit, muscling it to keep it stable. The slabs were marred and pitted by the bloom’s acid, but it still functioned. I began by commanding the shield to move away from me at full speed. That way, if its maximum speed was relative to a fixed point that wasn’t me, it would only feel like crashing into the shield at a hundred miles per hour, rather than the full terminal velocity I’d reached.

The shield began to zip away from me, which I rejoiced over. I then willed the shield over to Varrin.

“Grab it!” I shouted.

Varrin didn't ask questions, he just wrapped his arms around the targe when it got close. Then, I brought Gracorvus back to me, Varrin on top of it. I brought the big guy underneath me, then hugged him from behind, having to search a bit to get a good hold.

“Sorry if this is a little awkward!” I said, trying to speak just loud enough for him to hear, and not shout his ear off.

I focused on commanding Gracorvus to move back toward me at a gentle pace and felt us slow as the shield began pressing into Varrin, and in turn, into me.

If Gracorvus was trying to move backward relative to my body's position at a constant pace, then we should be decelerating at a value equal to Gracorvus' speed. Or maybe the shield did whatever the fuck it wanted with magical bullshit and my mental gymnastics were pointless. Still, I began to command the shield to move back even faster, the g-forces on my body growing as our speed continued to reduce. It wasn't too strong, so I ramped it up to max.

The speed of Gracorvus was based on my Intelligence score, and was around twenty miles per hour. That amount of deceleration would take us from falling full speed to a standstill in six seconds before it, presumably, began lifting us in the opposite direction while accelerating at the same rate.

Wait, could this fucker make me fly?

I dismissed the thought and watched the ground rising toward us. The whole process had taken too long, and I didn't think we would make the full stop. As I prepared for impact, I realized I'd forgotten about Grotto and Shog.

I scrambled to think to Grotto at full speed, which the core thankfully did in return.

[Why falling?!]

[*Being pulled. Pull strength dropping.*]

[Good then?]

[Yes.]

With that settled, I only hoped that Shog was in the same situation. Varrin and I found the bottom-most level of the inner cage at around thirty miles per hour.

It was unpleasant, but nowhere near as bad as the Orexis slap.

I rolled off of Varrin and looked around. I was taken by a brief moment of panic as I saw gore and splattered remains all around me, until I realized the bodies were the twisted corpses of the creatures that fell from the platforms, and not my allies.

Etja, Xim, and Nuralie all floated down and landed gracefully on their feet beside us. It would have looked angelic, save for their ashen faces and wind-blasted hair. Grotto and Shog joined just after them, their feathers in even wilder shape. Shog immediately began grooming his plumage with the energy of a cat.

"You all ok?" I asked.

"Feeling better than you look," said Xim, already beginning to recover her normal cheery cadence. "You're laying in some entrails, by the way."

I looked down to see the mangled corpses of several fly-fishes around and beneath me. I felt something slimy under my palm and lifted my hand off the ground. It was covered in fish guts. It smelled as bad as you'd think it smelled.

"Gross," I said, then turned to Varrin. "You got another towel I could borrow?"

The pale warrior sat up, then threw me a dirty look.

"What?" I asked. "I never thought that would be how we had our first cuddle, but it was life or death, ya' know?"

"The shield can divide," he said. "You could have made a smaller configuration of three slabs and sent *that* to me."

"Hmm." I started to stroke my beard, then stopped when I remembered what was on my hand. "That may not have worked as well."

"You two are making this weird," said Xim. "It doesn't need to be weird."

"He whispered in my ear!" said Varrin, throwing his arm in my direction. "He grabbed my- You know what, never mind." He got to his feet and pulled a pair of towels from his inventory. He tossed one at my face.

"I didn't whisper," I said, trying to duck the throw, then taking the cloth from where it ended up on top of my hood. "I spoke at an appropriate volume for our proximity. It was too loud to whisper anyway. And I wasn't *trying* to grab... whatever you're accusing me of grabbing." I began wiping off my hands, then stood and looked myself over to see if anything else needed cleaning.

Once again, I was covered in the consequences of my actions.

"Christ, when did I get caked over in blood?" I asked.

"When we fought the Praying Heads," said Xim.

"Also," said Nuralie, "when you were under the Hand monster."

“Why aren’t *you* all filthy?” I asked. Xim had a few tasteful spatters on her robes, and Varrin’s evidence of butchery was limited to his greaves and sabatons.

“The way you fight is, uh,” Xim said, pausing to look up and tap a finger on her chin. “It’s messy.”

“I thought you just didn’t care,” said Nuralie. Pause. “About being gross.”

“I care! What, is there some secret stay-clean fighting style?”

“Blood makes your hands slick,” said Varrin, working the cloth between the joints of his gauntlets. “There’s value in avoiding it by moving well while striking. No one *tries* to bathe in their enemy’s blood.”

“*Some* people do,” said Xim. “Still, it’s better to stay out of the way of gouts of body fluids. It’s all about weaving your attacks the right way.”

“Varrin,” I said, “I watched you slice and dice six Praying Heads while they were *on top* of you. How? How did you ‘move well’ to not get blood all over you?”

Varrin tossed the soiled towel to the ground and began inspecting his blade.

“I also have a self-cleaning mana weave on my armor,” he said.

“Aha!” I pointed a finger at him. “There’s no bloodless kung fu, it was magic all along!” I swung my finger to Xim. “What about you? Are your promises of sanitary martial arts lies as well?”

Xim’s eyes wandered as she pulled a small black gem from her inventory. It pulsed with mana, and the few blood spatters on her gear began to fade.

“Were... either of you ever going to tell me about laundry magic?” I asked.

Xim and Varrin exchanged a conspiratorial glance, and Varrin even cracked a small grin. He banished the expression so fast that I barely saw it.

Fortune’s booming voice interrupted us.

“Good to see such dynamic camaraderie!” said Fortune’s front.

“They’re bickering,” said Right.

“Playful teasing,” said Left.

“And it has taken exactly as long as it needed to,” said Front. “Follow me.”

“Fortune,” I said as the avatar tried to leave.

Fortune kept walking, but his head turned, showing me his left face. I had to do a quick jog to catch up with his large strides.

“What the fuck, man?” I said, pointing up at the sky.

Before Fortune could answer, Shog floated up beside me and leaned in close. His beard-tentacle-feathers tickled my face.

“You would make a mighty c’thon, Arlo,” Shog’tuatha said. He wasn’t whispering, so I had no idea why he felt he needed to get so close to deliver his non-sequitur.

“The hell does that mean, Shog?”

“The way you challenge this more powerful being borders on suicide, yet you still make your anger known. Just as a true c’thon declares what is his and will die to keep it!”

His tentacles undulated as he grew excited, and I took a few steps away to reestablish my personal bubble.

“He brought me back from the dead, Shog,” I said. “You think he’ll kill me because I’m pissed he just pushed us all off a cliff? Even you, by the way!”

Shog tilted his head, reaching up to continue smoothing his still-messy feathers.

“I was not pushed,” he said. “I saw all of you leap daringly from the cliff, despite your flightless non-c’thonic bodies, and followed you down. I wondered why you

screamed and flailed, but I do not know human culture very well. Was that not intentional?”

I looked at Shog, dumbfounded. The c'thon had literally jumped off a ledge just because everyone else was doing it.

“Ahem, I knew you’d survive!” said Left, smiling. “You even learned a thing or two on the way down!”

The exchange with Shog had thrown ice water over my anger at Fortune, so I decided not to reply. Instead, I turned and followed the avatar, wondering what the next cliff he pushed me from would look like.

I was pretty sure that it was going to look like the extra-dimensional prison of an angry god.

Chapter 65

Fortune continued to walk, footfalls trodding neatly between the bodies. Though the overall shape of the central cage was a sphere, the ground here was level. I had no hint as to our destination from studying the terrain.

The world was filled only with the sound of our steps, and the occasional sparking of a rune and rumbling shudder of the Delve, until Xim grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me over to Nuralie.

“Nuralie!” Xim said, the sound of her excitement cutting sharply across the silence.

The loson blinked at her.

“Yes?” Nuralie said.

“I was thinking, and you mentioned that you have spiritual sedatives.”

Pause. “I do.”

“Our tribe has an Irgriana tree in the Third Layer,” said Xim. “We use its sap to brew a type of liquor, but we don’t call it *liquor*, we call it a *spirit*. Not just because we prefer that word, but because the liquor has spiritual properties. Lots of things in the Third Layer do.”

“...Ok.”

“For tribe members, the spirit induces a mild hallucinogenic state. Since hallucinations in the Third Layer can manifest in physical form, it’s great for festivals and celebrations. Everyone sees what they can create with their mind.”

“Right,” I said. “Sounds fun... what if someone manifests a demon?”

“The rest of the tribe steps in if things get out of hand,” said Xim. “Hallucination Demons are no big deal. Pushovers.”

“What if they spawn something worse? Like a... clown... demon?” I asked.

“Hush,” said Xim, before turning back to Nuralie. “For people from the First Layer, the spirit doesn’t induce hallucinations, it sends them into a coma. The reason for this is that the brew has a positive interaction with the souls of Third Layer denizens, but it has a *negative* interaction with the souls of those from the First.” Xim stopped walking and took Nuralie by the shoulders, bringing the three of us to a halt. “It’s poisonous!”

“This is,” pause, “very fascinating. Why are you telling me?”

Xim whipped her head toward me.

“Arlo,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Do you still have those poison essences we farmed from The Toxic Grotto inside your inventory?”

“I do,” I said, trailing off on the vowel sound as I caught up with what she was getting at. “You said a poison essence can be used to make *any* type of poison.”

“Yes!” Xim said with a broad grin. “Nuralie, are you familiar with any spiritual poisons?”

“Of course,” Nuralie said, her eyes widening. “My sedatives are poisonous in large doses. Most alchemy products are.”

“Could you convert a poison essence into one?”

“Any crafter can convert essences,” she said. “Your skill limits what you can do with it. I could make one, but it would only be so strong.”

“Strong enough for an itty-bitty divine soul fragment?” I said. “Like Orexis?”

Nuralie looked thoughtful, then shrugged.

“I do not know if it would be,” she said. “We don’t know how powerful he is as a specter.”

“What’s the limiting factor?” I asked. “Is it based on skill level, or something else?”

“There are many,” said Nuralie. Pause. “Time is our first problem. My Intelligence evolution makes me craft faster, so I can do something quick and crude. The product won’t suffer too much. My Alchemy skill affects the potency of everything I make. I have an evolution to make poison more effective if a target is already poisoned.”

“So, you’re fast,” I said, “make stronger stuff, and maybe we can hit him with more than one poison to boost the effect. Sounds good to me.”

Nuralie shook her head.

“All spiritual substances require a spiritual tribute,” she said. “The stronger the soul, the stronger the product. Compared to Orexis, I do not think I am a good match. The sedatives are already a gamble.” Pause. “Anything else I make would be a gamble as well. If none of them work, we waste time and ignore other strategies.”

As Nuralie spoke, my eyes wandered to Fortune. The avatar, along with the rest of our party, had stopped. Most of them gave us questioning looks, but not Fortune. He had a smile on all three of his faces. Like all his smiles, it was the kind that made me think he knew something I didn’t. It was an expression I was learning to dislike.

His body was also hugged by the thousands of crawling faces that made up his divine soul. Something I knew he was showing me on purpose.

“Does it have to be *your* soul?” I asked, and Nuralie followed my gaze back to Fortune.

“I have to be involved,” she said. “But I do not have to pay the tribute.”

Our conversation was interrupted by a blast of air, causing me to throw my hand up over my face. When I dropped it, Fortune was no longer a hundred feet ahead of us. He was three feet away, towering over us.

“What secret words are we exchanging?” Fortune’s front asked.

“We think we have a way to take on the specter of Orexis,” I said.

“Oh?” Fortune said with mock surprise. “Tell me.”

We gave him the short version, then I hit him with the request.

“We’d like to use *your* soul to make the poison.”

The smile faded from Fortune’s three faces, and he studied the ground for a moment. He didn’t look angry, but he looked *serious*. It felt more real than anything else he’d shown us.

“Do you understand the significance of that request?” he asked, eyes flicking back up to my own. There was no hint of his jovial tone anymore.

“If I’m being honest,” I said. “No. You could explain it to me, and I probably *still* wouldn’t know how significant it is. I’m- *We’re* just a group of people trying to survive. *You*, and this whole situation,” I threw my arms out, gesturing at the rumbling, flickering Delve, “is so far outside our weight class I don’t have words for it.”

I reached up and pulled my hood back, running my only-slightly-covered-in-guts hand through my hair. It had gotten a bit shaggier than I liked.

“I don’t know what your limits are,” I said. “I barely have a concept of how powerful you are, with the way you executed every creature in an entire monster war in less than a minute. But, I suspect that giving us the bit of soul we need to craft an anti-Orexis poison would be a drop in the cosmic ocean for you.”

Fortune nodded, then sat his massive body down on the ground with a thud. He crossed his legs, which were short enough compared to the rest of him to look a bit cartoonish. Then, he leaned in.

“I am tempted to lie to you, Arlo,” he said. “To tell you that my omnipotence is rivaled only by my omniscience. But, I believe it would serve us both better if I were more honest.”

He sat back, placing his hands on his knees and taking a moment to study the Delve, his six eyes glinting in the azure glow.

“This Delve places an incredible burden on divine spawn. Because of the weaves all around us, struggling so hard to suppress the creatures into oblivion, their lives are like soap bubbles. My barest breath can pop them.” He frowned. “Causing a blood vessel in the brain to fail, a claw to land one inch to the right, a minor imperfection in a dimensional tunnel... it’s child’s play when the environment is perfectly in tune with what I want, like it is here.” His head nodded back and forth, as though his side faces were agreeing. “Anesis will not be like that,” he continued. “Giving you a bit of soul, even the barest piece, increases my chance of failure.”

His eyes fixed on Nuralie, and he held out a thick hand toward her, finger extended. The loson flinched, but stood her ground as Fortune lightly tapped her head.

“I just needed you to know that,” Fortune said. He climbed back to his feet, and his smile returned. “I have a position for high priest open, by the way! I’m always looking for promising candidates. And not just you, Arlo!” He clapped me on the back, making me stumble forward. “All of you seem like fine adventurers! Now then, you have three and a half minutes left to make your poison. Good luck!”

I was addled for a moment, until Nuralie’s presence grew tenfold in my mind.

Her soul erupted, the platinum swelling and becoming wrapped in a dozen swirling, smiling faces. The loson looked panicked, taking heaving breaths as she struggled to stay upright. I stepped over and took Nuralie by the shoulders to steady her.

“Looks like Fortune gave you a present,” I said.

“It hurts,” she said, voice ragged, body trembling. “Everything on the inside is trying to get out, while everything on the outside is crushing it back inside.”

I watched her with concern, keeping an eye on her health bar, but she wasn’t taking any damage. The only insight the HUD gave me was a listed status effect.

Blessed: 9999

Probably a higher value than Nuralie was meant to have at her level. I mentally welcomed her to the club, while considering how I could help her. Before I could decide on anything, Nuralie pushed away from me. She dropped to her knees on the ground, opened her inventory, and started pulling out a few tools. Mortar and pestle, a couple of jars full of murky liquid, some paper packets full of powder, a mixing bowl, and a large copper spoon with a thin handle and tiny tip that looked like it was made for stirring outrageously large cocktails. Finally, she pulled out her *Alchemical Divinity* book and threw it open, consulting a few passages that had been heavily notated.

She hurriedly dumped the contents of the jars into the mixing bowl, and the packets into the mortar. Her jaw was set firm and her entire body was tensed as she struggled to work through whatever chaos Fortune’s soul was having on her. Tears slid down the side of her face.

She stopped for a second, then held out a hand to me.

“The flower I gave you,” she said.

I processed her sudden request, then threw open my inventory to pull out the water-producing flower she’d gifted me the first time we met. I placed it in her hand and she began mashing it up in the powder with the pestle.

“How many essences do you have?” she asked.

“As many as you need,” I said.

She nodded, shutting her eyes tight and tapping her clawed fingertips against her palms.

“One for simple, two for complex, four for expert, eight for supreme...”

“Sixteen for divine?” I suggested, following the math. I’d already begun pulling poison essences from my inventory and placing them on the ground beside her. The green, egg-sized crystals let off an acrid vapor, which began wafting all around us. Fortunately, none of us got a debuff from it. Must have needed a few hundred thousand to get a good toxic cloud going.

Nuralie scraped the mashed and mixed flower into the large bowl, then grabbed one of the essences. She held it over the bowl, chanted something under her breath, and the essence liquified. It dripped and splattered into the bowl, leaving Nuralie’s gloves slick with deadly moisture. She immediately grabbed the next essence and repeated the process. She chanted so fast I could barely tell she was speaking words.

Once finished, Nuralie began stirring the bowl’s contents with the long spoon. She went at it like a pro chef during rush, tilting the bowl and swirling the spoon so fast that the liquid whirlpooled.

“Heat,” she muttered, then pointed the spoon at Xim, slinging a bit of the poison broth onto the hem of the cleric’s robes. “Divine fire!”

Kim knelt next to Nuralie and held out her hands, sending a gentle flame of Sam'lia's crimson fire into the bowl.

"It's not a hatchling!" Nuralie snapped. "Hit it harder!"

Kim smiled gleefully and gouts of flame rushed from her palms, the fire arcing up out of the other side of the bowl, swirling into the air. Nuralie kept stirring.

First of all, I had no idea Xim could do that. I'd thought her divine fire was limited to her big smite attack.

Second, Nuralie's health began ticking down one point at a time, which was concerning, considering her diminutive health pool. I could see steam coming off of the loson's face and scales. After a few feverish seconds of stirring and inferno, Nuralie nodded curtly.

"Stop," she said, and Xim pulled back. Then, Nuralie held her hands out over the steaming, bubbling concoction. Her brow furrowed as she pressed her palms forward, looking like she was struggling with an invisible force. The laughing faces all along her body began to slide down her arms, then spiraled around her hands. They moved faster and faster until they were a multi-colored blur.

The gifted piece of Fortune's soul streamed from Nuralie's palms into the liquid, the smiling faces reforming on the poison's surface, then dissolving into it. I watched in fascination as the liquid itself began to glow within my soul-sight.

Finally, the last bit of Fortune left Nuralie's body, and she collapsed backward, holding herself off the ground with her elbows. She looked like she'd just run a marathon.

Nuralie took three deep breaths, before pushing herself back up to sitting and pulling out a quiver of arrows. She grabbed the entire bundle by their hafts in one hand,

yanked them out, and then shoved the heads into the still-boiling poison. She held up her free hand and began chanting again.

Mana streamed from her palm and wrapped itself around the arrows, then shot down into the brew. As I watched, the level of the liquid began to drop. When it dropped enough that the arrowheads could be seen again, I saw that the poison was being sucked *into* the metal. The arrowheads took on a sinister green sheen that rippled with a rainbow hue.

I leaned in closer to get a better look and could make out a tiny, laughing face crawling across the surface of each arrow.

Nuralie placed the bundle of arrows on the ground beside her, keeping one for inspection. She held it up in both hands, running her eyes over it. She flipped it up and squinted at the tip. Satisfied, she let out a breath and held the arrow out to Xim, then picked up another to hand to me. As we did our own inspection, Nuralie began packing up her supplies.

Divine Madrin Arrow of Soul Toxicity

Imbued with a spiritual poison crafted from the soul of a cosmic avatar, anything struck by this weapon will be afflicted by the debuff Soul Toxicity.

Soul Toxicity: A target afflicted by this debuff suffers damage over time to their spiritual essence. Soul Toxicity persists until it is cleansed.

This is a spiritual weapon that is capable of affecting incorporeal entities.

Spiritual weapons ignore physical armor.

This is a divine weapon that deals bonus damage to entities scorned by the patron deity. Divine weapons ignore deific damage reduction.

Based on the crafter's skill, this item has been granted 1 Divinity Bonus.

Chosen Divinity Bonus: Fated Target.

Fated Target: This weapon gains a bonus to damage and debuffs when striking a target chosen by the crafter, but cannot harm any other entity.

Chosen Target: Orexis, Avatar of Yearning.

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

“Well, shit,” I said as I read the description. “Talk about having a bullet with a name on it...”

“It's amazing,” said Xim. “I was worried that with Fortune involved, it would end up with some weird Luck-related skill.”

“One of the Divinity Bonuses I could have chosen was called *Divine Misfortune*,” said Nuralie. Pause. “I didn't like it.”

I once again wondered about the speed at which some people managed to read the System notifications. Did it just upload it to their brain? Was I the only one using my eyeballs to look at them?

“Not a fan of relying on Luck?” I asked.

“No,” said Nuralie as we began walking again. Pause. “You saw what happened to Ashe.”

I grimaced and wondered if Nuralie had learned the wrong lesson from that encounter. The lucky tanker triplet had been the only person to even singe Orexis’ rags when we first encountered him inside the entrance to The Calvani Caverns. Regardless, no one in our party was built into the stat, so Nuralie likely made the right call.

Now that we had the “Fuck Orexis In Particular” arrows, we just needed to figure out how the loson was going to *hit* his specter with them.

After all, Nuralie couldn’t see him.

Chapter 66

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.

The rest of the party wasn't any better off when it came to firing arrows, but us non-archers weren't interested in *shooting* Orexis with the soul-killers.

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 demands 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.

{I- 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 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.

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 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, where Anesis hung, suspended in the air.

The avatar was physically similar to Orexis. 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 out of place with their normality. She 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 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 like 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 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. The 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 had to be 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 wobbly. Shog descended more rapidly, passing Grotto by and touching down next to me. We were soon 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.

The specter emerged more fully from behind Anesis, his body no larger than a normal man’s. Although mini-Orexis 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 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. Because Anesis is still asleep, they’re probably a bit... volatile.”

“Alright. Cover your ears, I guess.”

“Very appropriate advice!” said Fortune.

I brought up my hand and 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, though 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 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 dismissive hand at me and something caught in my throat. My question was cut off in a fit of choking. Varrin looked between me and Fortune, 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 the 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*.

Chapter 67

Before Orexis could voice his displeasure, I asked a question that was burning a hole through my mind.

“So, if you’re in here, as a soul fragment,” I said, gesturing at the specter, “does that mean that the *real* Orexis, outside, doesn’t know that Fortune just kidnapped his sister?”

“Tell me where he has taken her,” Orexis demanded. His shadowy form trembled as the words whispered their way across our ears.

Varrin spat on the ground.

“I see no reason to answer the questions of a ghost,” he said.

Orexis studied the warrior, but ignored the comment.

“No, no, no...” Orexis muttered, looking away from us and running a translucent hand along the side of his snout. “Do you even know where Anesis would be? Or has Fortune betrayed you, as well?” He turned back, studying each of us in turn. “Yes. I see. The avatar of mystery has tricked us all.”

“Avatar of... mystery?” I said. I was expecting this conversation to be a lot more hot-blooded than it was.

“I guess the concept of fortune can be mysterious,” Xim said.

“It’s not what I was expecting.”

“You are all fools,” snarled Orexis. “No one *knows* what he is the avatar of. He calls himself Fortune, but what is he really? Fate? Luck? He defies each concept with his actions, eternally contradictory in his motives.”

“Sounds like chaos,” I said.

“That makes sense,” said Xim.

As the three of us conversed, Nuralie disappeared. The room was lit only by the lingering orange glow of the hundreds of obliterated corpses, and the mounds of bodies might be large enough to hide behind.

“He is too organized for chaos,” said Orexis. “His plans interlock in layers. There is reason to them, but they are impossible to foresee.”

“A foe I would call cunning,” offered Shog. Orexis’ eye-holes narrowed at the c’thon.

“It is of no matter,” the specter said. “I wish to hunt all my betrayers, whether in the worlds above or below.” He floated closer to the center of the chamber, glaring down at us. “And I see many betrayers before me.”

“I never *agreed* to work for you,” I said. “Sort of impossible for me to betray you.”

“I need not your consent to deliver unto you my decrees. You have defied me, and I now wish to consume you. To understand *why* you have done so.” He floated down toward us, arms spread like six-armed Jesus descending from the heavens. “Especially you, daughter.”

Orexis reached out toward Etja with all three of his right arms, clutching his heart with the largest of his left.

Etja’s eyes went wide as she listened to Orexis’ words, her body as stiff as when she was made of clay.

“I brought you into this world,” said Orexis.

“Hey, hold on,” I said. “You’re not about to say ‘and by gawd, I can take you back out!’ are you?”

Orexis slowly turned his head toward me.

“I will savor you last,” he said.

“Dude.” I pointed at Orexis, who’d drawn within fifteen feet of us. “You gotta work on your villain speech. It’s a bowl full of *Oops! All Tropes!* right now.”

“And because of your betrayal,” Orexis said, ignoring me, “I will allow the void sphere to collapse this space, and wreak havoc on the outside world. Perhaps the prisoners will find their ways to your family homes as well. Those were the terms of our agreement, and such shall be the payment for your treachery.”

“No, you said that you would take the void sphere back *out* of the dimensional anchor if we helped you release Anesis,” I said, still pointing at Orexis. “The contract didn’t specify what would happen if we *didn’t*.”

“Silence!” Orexis hissed, his ephemeral voice echoing through the spherical chamber. “Your pedantry knows no bounds! There was no *contract!*”

“Ah, so you admit that we weren’t legally bound to help you.”

Orexis rushed me, his form trembling in rage. The fingers of his smaller hands began to glow as his pair of large, upper hands reached toward my throat.

I gulped, but kept pointing at the specter.

A *twang* sounded from just behind me, and I felt the wind of an arrow as it tore past my right ear. Nuralie had been behind me this entire time. I felt fletching brush my armor as an invisible arrow shot through the air.

Orexis did a damn barrel roll.

The specter spun to the side, evading the stealth arrow and closing the distance between us. I tried to bring up Gracorvus, but Orexis was too fast. His oversized hands grabbed me by the throat and lifted me into the air as one of his smaller fingers blazed orange.

“My sister’s favorite spell,” he whispered, then a beam of disintegrating energy erupted from the digit.

It struck me in the chest and bore a hole through my armor. I felt the ice-cold chill of flesh being seared away by intense heat. The sensation overwhelmed me and I wrestled with Orexis’ limbs in panic, forgetting useful things like spells and tactics.

But, while I was stupefied by the white-hot bolt boring into my ribcage, the rest of my party knew *exactly* where Orexis was.

A greatsword flashed by my face, blade wreathed in gray mana that shone in my soul-sight. The force lifting me disappeared as Orexis’ intangible arms were severed from the rest of him at the forearm. Then, a crimson beam crashed down onto the specter, engulfing his form in holy fire.

I staggered back, but managed to keep my feet under me. I brought *Gracorvus* into targe mode, not believing for a second that Varrin and Xim’s one-two combo would be enough. I glanced at my health.

HP: 451 -> 386

Bleeding: 45

Even after being interrupted, it was a hit that would have one-shot either Etja or Nuralie, and taken both Xim and Varrin to half. But, it wasn’t the godly hit I half-expected. It looked like the soul-fragment’s labors within the crucible of the Divine-crushing Delve had softened it up for us.

I snapped my attention back to the fight, ignoring the scorching pain beginning to assert itself in my chest and focusing on the flames before me.

An arrow zipped into the column of fire, but the specter burst away from within before it connected. He was still ignited, the divine inferno sticking to him like napalm, and hope swelled as my allies were able to track his movement. An invisible man is hard to see, but an invisible, *burning* man really stands out.

As flames danced through the air, consuming their unseen fuel, Nuralie loosed another arrow, but the specter continued to dodge. For the first time, I saw the results of Nuralie's miss. The arrow impacted the ground beyond Orexis and between the dismembered bodies, shattering into motes of light.

'May only be used once' really meant *once*. Nuralie had already fired three shots of her seventeen.

I pulled out the pair of my own divine arrows from my inventory and used *Thrown Weapon* on one. I knew it was unlikely to hit, but the more shit Orexis had to dodge, the better the chances that someone else's arrow would connect. I gripped the second arrow, waiting for Orexis' flight to calm, while the first arrow shot toward him at less than half the speed of one fired by Nuralie. A pulse of mana flooded the air around the specter.

Orexis cast a wave of dispelling mana to douse the flames on his person. My thrown arrow made its approach, and the specter's lower set of limbs caught it.

I cast *Shortcut*, appearing behind Orexis in the air, intending to thrust forward with the second arrow while he was distracted with the first. When I appeared, one of his larger hands was *already* reaching around behind him, completely reformed as though Varrin had never cut it away. The specter's shoulder twisted like rubber as the limb moved into an impossible angle, the hand seizing my wrist before I could make contact with the arrow.

In hindsight, the fact that an incorporeal soul monster that was spawned from a god-like being had insane flexibility and range of motion shouldn't have been surprising.

The limb heaved me over Orexis' shoulder, and I lost my grip on the arrow, which sent it tumbling to the ground.

This time, I cast *Oblivion Orb* on Orexis' wrist. Normally, this would have been really effective at getting an enemy made of meat and bone to let me go. Sadly, all it did was put a hole in the soul-stuff the specter's wrist was made of. The grip held firm, since there was no tendon or muscle that enabled the hand's movement. The specter's body had no biological logic to it, other than the limits of form that he'd chosen to take. I wasn't even convinced he had to stick to the form he was in. For all I knew, he could transform into a walrus. A *violent* walrus.

A violent walrus *with six arms*.

Before a fresh glowing finger could start uncovering the secrets of my heart, however, a wave of blue mana pulsed around us, making Orexis' spell fizzle.

Orexis turned to look down at Etja, whose fingers glowed in mirror to his own, though with fewer colors. I used the distraction to land another *Oblivion Orb*, severing his wrist. I tried to twist free, but the second hand held me firm as the one I'd *just* amputated reformed. I tried to cast another *Shortcut* to escape, but Orexis hit me with a debuff that kept me from casting the spell.

Silent Commandment: You cannot cast spells for the next thirty seconds. All beneficial spells affecting you have been dispelled.

Orexis began to squeeze, and he quickly rotated so that he held me directly between himself and my allies. I felt a gentle thunk in my back, and assumed another arrow had gone to waste. Orexis slid his glowing hands past my waist, pointing them at my allies. My vision began to darken as the blood flow to my brain was restricted.

Body of Theseus has negated the debuff Unconscious.

Body of Theseus has negated the debuff Unconscious.

[Grotto! Can you broadcast what I'm seeing to the rest of the party? Give them a better target?]

[I cannot perceive what you see with your soul-sight, lest you've forgotten.]

My mind ran all the way back to my conversation with Grotto inside the baths after the Creation Delve. He got impressions of what I was seeing, but the soul-sight didn't make it to the live feed.

[Fuck.]

[Yes, this is a very unpleasant experience for me as well.]

Why couldn't Grotto see it? What was it about the ability that didn't translate across our connection? Was it because soul-sight was divine in origin? Was it because the ability had come from the damn Traveler's Amulet initially? I'd made the ability my own like the amulet told me to do. I didn't need the amulet, I had the Eye's gift! Why couldn't Grotto see it, still?

Body of Theseus has failed to negate the debuff Unconscious!

In the moments before darkness engulfed me, I had a brief thought.

If only I could *show* Grotto what I see... If only I could *show* all of them...

Then, there were feathers.

I didn't know how long I was out, but I came back to consciousness in a storm of downy tentacles.

Shog'tuatha raged in the air before me, his feelers ripping through the specter, but the soul fragment was unphased. A pair of Shog's tentacles were wrapped around my waist, the c'thon jerking my body enough for Orexis' grip on my neck to loosen and Shog had worked a feeler between the specter's palm and my throat. Not a great way to break someone's chokehold, but it worked. Sort of. My neck hurt like shit.

HP: 386 -> 328

Orexis grappled Shog's feelers in his upper and lower hands, but the c'thon had yet more, which he used to whip the space in front of me. Shog'tuatha may not have been able to see Orexis, but his attacks didn't require much finesse, and my summon began weaving claw strikes and kicks into the mix.

Where Shog struck, his blows dispersed Orexis' form like smoke, but the specter's essence quickly reformed. I had no idea if the attacks were even dealing damage, but either way, Orexis was tired of the c'thon's antics.

The specter raised a finger, the color of rotted eggplant, and drove a wave of mana into the c'thon.

Shog ignored the spell, continuing to strike at his invisible foe, and I watched in horror as the c'thon's exposed flesh began to blacken. His feathers fell from his body in droves, exposing necrotizing flesh beneath.

"It is especially effective against summons," Orexis commented, as Shog's body decayed before my eyes. "I know not why."

Violet blood began seeping from Shog's large, black eyes, and the c'thon took a breather from his melee. He reached up with his long, taloned hands to wipe the blood from his face, body trembling.

Then, he bellowed, but his voice was not the one I'd come to know.

"*I WILL EAT YOU!*" Shog roared in a demonic screech.

His tentacles flew open, revealing the mouth that lay behind his 'beard'. It was a vicious beak, with six sharp edges that snapped open, revealing rows and rows of dripping, dark blue teeth. His tongue was spiked and covered in sharp bristles, and it shot through the air like a harpoon. To the surprise of both myself *and* Orexis, it connected.

Then, a pulse of dark light ran down Shog's tongue, transferring into the shade-like body of Orexis. Shog's tuatha jerked back and the tongue retracted, pulling the specter to his horrible mouth, where the beak's razor edges bit down and *chewed*.

Whatever Shog was doing, it was working. Chunks of the half-god's soul broke away, and I could see the visceral impact his gnashing teeth had on Orexis' body—fleshy resistance giving way beneath the relentless pressure of Shog's piercing teeth. It was one of the most fascinating things I'd ever witnessed; an extra-dimensional mana fiend gorging itself on the magical essence of a divine soul fragment, and I was literally seeing it from arm's length, still held in Orexis' grasp.

The damage done by Orexis' spell began to reverse. Blood flow stymied, dark veins cleared, rotting flesh began to regrow. I even saw a few fresh tufts of feathers sprout from Shog's bare chicken skin.

But, Orexis was smiling.

It was a ghastly thing, the avatar of Yearning's non-mouth. It was little more than a spiraling pit to whatever hell his atomized victims fell into, but it stretched broad across his snout like a feral dog.

"I am reminded of my place, sometimes," said Orexis, reaching up and stroking one of Shog's tentacles as the c'thon took another bite. "To all the beasts that prowl the land, using tooth and claw to sate their hunger, *I am your god.*"

Orexis' mouth opened wide, the pit to endless nothing on full display. A single word echoed through reality, and the revolting *desire* of Orexis' soul pressed down upon me.

"Consume."

And Shog went from the eater, to the eaten.

Shog'tuatha's flesh first began to crumble, then shatter, into thousands of pieces that were sucked into Orexis' endless maw. It began with Shog's tentacles, and the dark c'thonic bone beneath was quickly revealed. Then, the phenomenon moved toward the c'thon's center.

This was going to kill him.

I hit my mental emergency release button and dismissed the summon. A portal opened, sucking Shog into it and away from Orexis. It snapped closed, leaving the specter vacuuming up the last few c'thon flakes drifting through the air.

Orexis turned to me and wiped the side of his mouth with the back of a hand. It was a superfluous gesture, but his empty eyes stared into me as he did so. I was surprised he wasn't licking his fucking fingers.

The pressure on my neck redoubled, Shog's limb no longer present to prevent my strangulation.

I glanced down toward my allies, eyes feeling like they were about to pop out of my skull. My party members maneuvered from place to place, trying to get a good angle on the unseen force attacking me, but it was no use.

Nuralie had her bow drawn, but Orexis kept my body between himself and her attack. Varrin circled, looking like he was prepared to leap up and strike at Orexis, but he had no way to plan his trajectory. Etja's hands glowed, but she couldn't, or wouldn't, risk an indiscriminate death ray. Grotto hovered at a safe distance, but his tentacles writhed in the communal anguish of my impending demise, our *Shared Fate* ability displaying its hazards.

Xim, however, was praying.

HP: 328 -> 284

The sight of Xim praying made something click in my mind.

Body of Theseus has negated the debuff Unconscious.

I was the only one who could see Orexis, because of my soul-sight.

HP: 284 -> 240

I no longer needed the *Traveler's Amulet* to use the ability, because I had learned to see souls through the Eye's gift.

Body of Theseus has negated the debuff Unconscious.

Seeing was the Eye's first blessing.

HP: 240 -> 196

Revealing was the Eye's second.

Chapter 68

The Eye's second gift 'lets you *reveal* what you see to others.' Xim had explained it to me back on the riverboat to Arsenal. An ability that I'd tapped into later, during our Third Layer walk. I'd become connected to the other eleven people in our Layer-hopping crew, able to show them the way that I saw the Layer. Not a desolate horror-scape, but a strange, yet beautiful place.

Back then, I'd been in Sam'lia's domain, and her Eye had helped guide me in how to use the gift. Now, Sam'lia wasn't inside the Delve with me, and I was *not* in the Third Layer. But, something *else* was the same. The mental connection, that first contact with the group psyche, had begun with the other members of the Xor'Drel tribe.

As Xim prayed, I could feel her. Not just through the vague awareness of my healing aura, but through something deeper, more profound, more intimate. The connection I'd forged in the Third Layer lingered. A subtle opening into her mind and soul that I could knock upon like the front door of an inviting cottage.

It was Xim, so it was more like a cottage in the middle of a forest that drank your nightmares, but it *was* warm and 'friendly' and everything poisonous in the front garden was clearly marked. Regardless, the door was already unlocked and Xim was there, holding it open for me.

I walked through, my presence a revelation for us both.

Reveal went much deeper than sharing visual perception. It brought with it emotional nuance, cognitive bias, mental shortcuts—all the baggage and insight the human mind slathered the world in. Xim wasn't looking through a camera lens with an Arlo filter on it, she was dual-booting reality using Arlo.exe.

As I realized the connection, my mind went into overdrive. I blasted the signal out to everything around me, hunting for the doorways to my other party members. Varrin and Nuralie were easy to find, the connection was already made within the Third Layer. Grotto was even easier, our connection being the oldest among them. Etja was unfamiliar, but she did nothing to hide herself. She had no mental walls built up, only vague suggestions like a child in a pillow fort.

Touching the inner world of each party member, in turn, made me realize that the Eye's gift was not a series of discrete abilities. It was a single, cohesive whole that I accessed one bit at a time. *Seeing* allowed me to see the souls of those around me while *Revealing* allowed me to touch upon them; to take their hand and guide them through the universe as it existed within me. I was familiar with the souls of my party, having watched them for days or weeks, and their presence called to me.

Something else called to me as well.

The pit. The screaming void that throttled me. Orexis was even more noxious to behold with this new sense than he was through my soul-sight. It was the difference between feeling the urge to jump from a precipice and active freefall. His existence was a gravity well that swallowed light and life without malice, a hunger being sated by all those within his orbit being pulled in. It was his nature, and he demanded that it be known.

But, this was not the *real* Orexis. This was not a cosmic whirlpool, but a spiraling eddy, doomed to wash away amidst the sea. The soul-fragment strutted like a god but was little more than an altar boy.

And he was wounded.

It was difficult to see damage on the specter. It was raw soul. There were no bleeding cuts or fractured bones, but I could *feel* the damage and, once I knew that it was there, I could see it as well.

The edges of the specter's form fluttered. I'd assumed it was from rage, but it was the soul losing cohesion. Without a body to anchor to, it was bleeding off into the ether, as Cage had said it would. The pressure from the Delve's wards accelerated it, but more importantly, our attacks had also made an impact.

Orexis had regrown his arms after Varrin's strike, but subtle fractures remained in his Orexis-shaped soul costume. He'd doused Xim's flames, but the patches of his body that were burned vented trace amounts of his essence. He'd shrugged off Shog's attempted devouring, but I swore he was fucking smaller than he'd been two minutes before.

He was a fake, and he was so convinced of his invulnerability that he wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was hurt. No, he hadn't even *realized* he was hurt, and I chose to *reveal* the specter's truth to itself.

I didn't 'knock' on the door to Orexis' soul. I kicked it in. I made the specter see himself as *I* saw him.

The soul fragment flinched, and its grip on my neck loosened. I reached up and wrenched his shadowy fingers away from my throat. It wasn't enough to escape, but it was enough to rasp a few words.

"You're not a god," I croaked. "You're a fucking *minion*, abandoned to a suicide mission."

Upon hearing the words, the specter snapped his hand tighter around my neck, and I saw stars. Just as quick, the specter's eyes went wide and it jerked its arm back, then shoved me away like I'd given it a jumpscare.

A wet *oof* pushed past my lips as Orexis' thrust knocked the wind out of me, and I was once again caught in gravity's loving embrace. An embrace that gravity then used to suplex my body onto a mound of dismembered divine spawn, ensuring that every molecule of air had vacated my lungs.

As I struggled to convince my diaphragm to un-collapse, I saw the results of my unfiltered blast of the *Reveal* gift.

Kim had her hands out in front of her as she sat on her knees like she was trying to steady herself after a night of heavy drinking. She was taking deep breaths and furtively glancing around the room, sweat dripping down her face.

When our eyes met, she looked desperately confused, but blinked a few times, then gave me a single, firm nod.

Nuralie was frozen in an unending pause, while Etja rubbed at her eyes and looked between everyone present with wonder. Grotto floated down to me, no longer unstable in his flight or writhing in pain.

[Did it work?] I thought to him. [What's it like?]

Grotto hovered within six inches of my face, c'thonic eyes rolling over my features.

[*It is not so different from our connection thus far, but it is very... direct.*] He reached out with a tentacle and brushed my cheek, then pulled back like I was hot to the touch. [*It is also confusing. Am I looking at myself looking at you, or are you me and*

I'm looking at you look at yourself?] He ran a tendril over his bulbous octo-head. [*Are we individual entities, or is identity a theurgic farce?]*

Ok, not the best sign for our group's combat readiness.

Varrin, however, was looking directly at the specter.

Better sign for our group's *Orexis* readiness.

I scrambled to my feet, sucking in a few big breaths to make sure that my chest cavity was no longer in revolt. Everything seemed in order, aside from the large, open wound leaking blood all over the place. I dashed toward Varrin, keeping an eye on *Orexis* as I did so. The specter was staring at his hands, their forms undulating and changing from solid, to wispy shadows.

I needed another divine arrow to stab that fucker while he was still reeling.

"Varrin," I said when I got close, "sorry if you're having an identity crisis right now, but I need one of the arrows."

Varrin didn't reply, and I reached out to grab his shoulder but pulled up short when I got a good look at his face within his helm. He was weeping. It took me off guard to see the massive man letting loose with the waterworks.

"You don't hate him," he said, half-whispering.

"What?" I said, looking back up at *Orexis*. The specter was running his deforming hands over his face, which was also beginning to twist and change. "No? He's awful, and needs to be destroyed, but I don't *hate* him."

I looked back to Varrin, and the giant of a man nodded.

"I-" he began, twisting his hands on the hilt of his greatsword. "I don't know how I feel. I hate him, but also, I don't. It's a relief for the hate to leave because that means there is no wound for me to hate him for. It's like my father never died. Then I

remember, and I hate him again, and I'm... I'm angry that the hate was ever gone." He turned to me, his reddened eyes pleading. "Why am I telling you this?"

"It's... a very confusing situation. Varrin, I need an arrow."

"I dropped mine," he said. "No, you dropped yours. *We* dropped the arrows."

I started to take some mental notes. Perception-bombing the room: Plus column—I was no longer being strangled by a divine soul-shard and everyone was alive. Minus column—everyone else was fucked. Also putting that one in the plus column since it included Orexis.

"You!" the specter shrieked, and I looked up to find him glaring down at me.

Alright, firmly back in the minus column.

The soul fragment flew at me, his form morphing into a shadowy dart, then reforming into the Orexis simulacrum a few feet away. He hesitated, drawing back an inch, then rallied and pressed forward.

"How have you done this?" he hissed, advancing as I began to backpedal. I pulled out my hammer Arbitros and held Gracorvus between us. "What madness befalls me?"

"Just showing you my truth," I said, readying myself for a swing, but the specter stopped.

"Truth?" it said, voice going up a pitch. "No, no, no... you show me lies, but you believe them? No!" it barked. "I know that not! He has embedded his thoughts into me. I am not this thing, this lowly creature. It is all deception, but it has layers to it. This is beyond me. No, beyond *him*. Beyond... *you!*" It pointed a taloned finger at me, the smaller hands beginning to glow again.

"What exactly are you referring to?" I asked, looking for the best opportunity to hit him with an *Oblivion Orb* hammer strike. "Not making much sense, bud."

“If you are but a man, you cannot fool a god,” said the specter. “And I *am* a god. But, if I am a god, then you cannot fool me because you are a man. Unless... you speak the truth. No!” The specter reared back, its torso elongating and growing in height. Its body widened, dominating my vision. “I am no shade! No ghost of the almighty!” it roared. “I am Orexis, God of Yearning! Dispel your illusions and bow to me!”

An arrow hit the specter in the chest, dead center.

Orexis looked down at the arrow in confusion, and the Divine Arrow of Soul Toxicity pulsed with golden light. Fractures spread out across Orexis’ form, and the pitch-black of the specter’s body became marred by sickly green luminescence.

Orexis ripped out the arrow and watched as it evaporated into mana-fused mist. Two more landed before the specter realized he needed to move, dodging the fourth.

Orexis blasted away from us, zig-zagging through the air and letting out a baleful scream. I looked for Nuralie, finding her steady and composed, bow drawn and following the specter’s path.

“Good shot,” I yelled to her.

She snuck a look at me, then went back to watching for her next snipe.

“Big target,” she said.

“You feeling ok?”

“No.” Pause. “But there’s work to do.”

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder, and I turned back to Varrin.

“Lost myself for a second,” he said. He looked like he wanted to say more, but he set his jaw and hefted his blade, then watched Orexis spiraling through the air. “I need a flight ability.”

“I could give you a lift,” I said, detaching Gracorvus and sending it to his feet. He looked down at it, cocked his head to one side, then shrugged. He stepped onto the shield, and I willed it up toward the deranged specter.

The specter was moving faster than my shield, but maintaining a consistent elevation. I brought Varrin up, and kept him drifting in the area, the warrior adjusting his position to account for Orexis’ erratic path. He looked a little silly since he had to keep his feet so close together on the small shield. Still, he was ready to launch himself when the opportunity presented itself, and Etja gave him that opportunity.

A disintegrating beam of orange light illuminated the room, cutting across Orexis’ amorphous body. The specter shrieked and fled from the attack, taking him back toward the levitating Varrin, who kicked off from the shield to meet Orexis’ path. The specter spun and reformed into the imitation Orexis, catching Varrin’s blade with his large hands.

But Varrin’s blade was wreathed in gray mana as the warrior used *Soul Strike*. The blade cleaved down through the hands and dug deep into the specter’s shoulder. Orexis reached up with his lowest set of arms and spun, tossing Varrin like a Judo fighter, using the warrior’s momentum to send him sailing away and down toward the surface of the sphere at a ninety-degree angle from me.

My shield wasn’t fast enough to keep up with Varrin’s descent, but the big guy managed a tuck and roll, dropping his greatsword to allow for the maneuver on impact. He shot a contemptuous glance up at Orexis, then rushed to reclaim his blade.

Orexis dodged another arrow, but the arc brought him into a fresh beam attack from Etja. The golem’s mana was beginning to run low, and I worried that despite our counterattack we might not have the resources to take the specter down.

Kim hadn't been full on mana when we started the fight and her smite attack wasn't cheap. Nuralie had gone through eight arrows, nearly half of her reserve. After my Shog upkeep, *Explosion!*, *Shortcuts*, and *Oblivion Orbs*, I was down below half mana and my health was even worse off, having been chest melted and strangled down to 152.

Etja let out another beam, and I glanced at her blue bar, worrying that it was about to run dry. To my surprise, the level had barely changed. Then I noticed the trail of shadowy dust being sucked into one of her outstretched palms.

Etja was *consuming* Orexis.

"It's a whole ass food chain in here," I muttered, turning my attention back to the dark form darting around the room. I needed to find a way to contribute, but Orexis was moving so fast that I doubted I could aim a proper *Shortcut*. It seemed like a good time to empty my inventory.

I began hurling one-handed weapons using *Homing Weapon*, pulling them out one after another. I chucked a steel spiked mace, the Madrin flanged mace I'd purchased from Seinnador, a longsword, a shortsword, a rapier, a cutlass, a bludgeon, and a pick. I tried to throw a flail, but it didn't work. Guess there were *some* limitations.

I refrained from adding *Oblivion Orb* to the attacks. These weren't meant to harm Orexis, only give him more shit to deal with while my allies slammed him with the attacks that counted. Even if the attacks were ultimately useless, the specter didn't know that. So far, we'd consistently hit it with skills and abilities that *could* hurt it. Weaving in some feints was just good strategy.

Orexis, however, was beginning to regain his composure. He dodged my throws and avoided the beam attack and divine arrow follow-ups. I sent my shield to Varrin to transport him back to the ascended battlefield, but the specter gave the levitating

warrior a wide berth. After a feverish minute of combat, there was a lull. My party didn't want to waste resources on attacks that would miss, and the specter was taking the soul-shard equivalent of a breather. Which is to say, it began making new demands.

"Take me outside of this Delve," said the specter. "I will remove the void sphere. I will allow you to live." Its wraithlike body shifted and morphed, the emulation Orexis transitioning between solid and ephemeral.

"I'm not inclined to trust a sociopath," I said. "Also, you're just a shade. The real Orexis could decide not to uphold your promise."

"I *am* Orexis," the specter hissed, though his voice trembled. "Nothing... nothing will change when I rejoin my body."

"You aren't leaving," said Varrin. He'd ended up on the other side of the sphere, looking up at us as we looked up at him. I'd been forced to bring Gracorvus back to home position, no longer able to handle the mana expenditure of ferrying Varrin around.

"Would Orexis even accept you back?" I asked. "You let Fortune elope with his sister."

The specter shuddered but didn't take the bait. We all stood there, staring at one another. The imitation Orexis grasped its head, and its mouth moved like it was speaking under its breath, but I was too far away to hear. Then, its finger glowed the familiar color of rotted eggplant.

A wave of mana shot forth in a massive cone toward me, Xim, and Nuralie. Etja tried to intercept with *Nullify*, but was too late. I was also caught off guard, failing to use *Dispel* in time, my inexperience rearing its ugly head.

The attack landed, and we were all hit with a pair of afflictions.

Bleeding: 45 -> 99

Toxicity: 44

It was a debuff that meant little to me, but became life or death for Nuralie, and to a lesser extent Xim. 88 damage an hour took Nuralie from full to dead in around thirty minutes, despite my healing aura. It killed Xim in a little over two hours. Even if we dealt with the specter, now we had a ticking time bomb to handle as well.

Fortunately, Xim had *Cleanse*.

Then, Orexis cast it again.

And again.

And again.

Chapter 69

After missing her first counterspell, Etja was ready for the follow-up. A wave of blue mana washed across me, Xim, and Nuralie as Orexis' second cloud of putrescence bombarded us, creating a swirling fog of mutual magic annihilation.

I checked on Etja's mana, seeing that the golem was nearly empty, no longer sucking up magic-laden specter dust. I focused on timing my *Dispel* for the next round. When I saw the pestilent glow of the specter's finger, I cast, and the spell blinked out of existence while it was still a wispy vapor.

Orexis' AOE debuff cost me fifteen mana to disrupt, dropping my reserves down to twelve, then he hit us with a fourth and fifth cast of the spell, neither me nor Etja having the mana to stop it, and the debuffs tripled.

Bleeding: 177

Toxicity: 132

Toxicity reduced by Exposure Therapy–Poison.

Toxicity: 132 -> 99

Even with the reduction from my Creation Delve achievement, my afflictions exceeded my health regen by forty-three. My life was now on a timer along with that of Nuralie and Xim, but they were much worse off.

I did the math in my head, and after subtracting health regen, Nuralie had nine minutes to live.

As my thoughts accelerated through the numerical implications the debuff had for our party, my body began to remind me that this wasn't a game of math.

My vision went red, blood seeping from my eyes and clouding my sight. The color mixed with the orange gloom of the chamber to bathe the world in a bloody sunset. My guts twisted, and I doubled over, my empty belly purging stomach acid and bile.

As I wretched, I caught sight of my hands. Blackened splotches were forming on my skin. My joints screamed, my head pounded, and a tuft of my beard fell out onto the ground.

If I wasn't pissed off before, I was now.

[*I am attenuating your pain response,*] came Grotto's strained voice in my mind. [*Increasing adrenaline and norepinephrine. Endorphins as well.*]

The pain and nausea began to subside as my heart rate spiked, and I felt an icy calm overtake my mind. It was the endless serenity of rage in its purest form. The boiling anger that casts aside all self-doubt, all mundane worry, all considerations except one. My world became a singular point of focus: The specter.

It had to die *now*.

I brought the full weight of that belief down on the specter using *Reveal*. The false god had clawed back his sense of self after my earlier assault, but he hadn't completely severed the connection. Still, pushing through the specter's doorway now was like moving through a wall of mud. I could press into it and leave handprints, but couldn't pass through.

Orexis' chained spell attack was interrupted, but we were locked into a stalemate. It wasn't long before the soul fragment's ghostly hands reacquired their lethal glow.

[Grotto, dump everything you have on the specter!] I thought to my bonded Delve Core. [Full brain-melt!]

[There is no brain to melt, but I understand your inartful request. I have not been idly watching during this conflict. The specter's mental defenses are significant, and my spells are brushed aside.]

I continued my spiritual battle with the specter, feeling a profound exhaustion overtaking me. It went deeper than the gruesome state of my body; *Reveal* had a cost that went beyond mana or stamina.

[Grotto, have you forgotten the first lesson you taught me? I don't want you to make a psychic attack the *archetypal* way.] I felt my will begin to slip, and the specter unleashed a disintegrating beam. I clenched my already grinding teeth harder, preparing to take the hit, but it went wide when the specter ducked to dodge an arrow. A few hundred stacks of Bleeding and Toxicity didn't keep Nuralie from taking shots.

[You want me to mana shape a mental spell attack?]

[Can you do it?]

[Shape it in what way? Do you wish for me to fire a drill-shaped thought at this entity?]

[The exact form and nature of a mana-shaped spell are personal to the caster,] I thought to Grotto, quoting the Delve Core's own words from when he coached me in the Creation Delve. [I can't tell you what shape to apply to the spell, only guide you. Just fucking pick something that screams "Grotto"!]

[I- I'll need more resources.]

[Then get ready to absorb some mana.]

I left Xim and Nuralie behind to take care of one another, using the last of my mana to float Gracorvus in front of me as I put distance between myself and my afflicted allies. Nuralie had antidotes, Xim had *Cleanse*. I couldn't help with their debuffs beyond what my aura was doing to mitigate the damage. I wasn't spec'd for that. My build was focused on having more mana for spells, and more health so that my body could take abuse. I made a calculated, build-conscious decision: I'd abuse my body to recover mana.

I pulled a ruby chip from my inventory and ate it.

My mouth exploded, the razor shards of the chip hitting the sides of my cheeks and throat like shrapnel. The fragments dissolved and the chip's power coursed through my veins. It was a familiar agony that culminated in white-blue light exploding into my vision. This time, however, it was not blinding. Through the light, I could still see the specter as it dodged another arrow from Nuralie. No more shots came after, and I hoped that it was because Nuralie ran out of arrows, and not something worse.

The specter turned back to me and cast a spell that crushed me into the ground. My body grew more than ten times in weight. I collapsed, body twisting painfully as my legs buckled and I hit hard. My shoulder let out a sickening pop, my distressed ribs cracked, and my vision blurred as my skull bounced off the hard surface of the sphere.

HP: 152 -> 104

I was immobilized, but fresh mana flooded me, and Grotto drank of it through our connection.

Mana Overload: Your mana veins have been damaged. You are unable to regenerate mana for the next 24 hours. Any attempt at recovering mana will result in loss of health.

I hoped it would be enough and that Grotto would survive to use his spell once the next stone-melting death ray finally pierced my heart. I was prone, immobilized, bleeding, poisoned, suffering from mana sickness, with destroyed tongue and tonsils, and less than a quarter of my health remaining.

Still, my spells were back, so I cast *Shortcut* as Orexis aimed a finger at me, appearing fifty feet away, but still on my ass.

The specter rotated, quickly locking onto me again. I prepared to recast the spell, ready to drain my replenished mana pool to the last point if it kept Orexis distracted, but there was no need. Someone else distracted the fiend.

A seven-foot-tall beast hurtled through the air and collided with the specter. It was covered in light red fur, with a single onyx horn splitting its forehead, and was clad in a dark bodysuit with a shifting, eldritch crest upon its breast.

Ascended Xim had made a fresh appearance and brought with her a brand new feature. The crimson light of Sam'lia's holy fire wreathed her claws and horn, and she drove the black spike atop her head through the specter's body, skewering Orexis and driving both of them down to the surface of the sphere a quarter turn from where I laid.

The specter was stunned, and Xim cut into it with her claws, shredding its gaseous form with her purifying flame. The specter wailed as tendrils of soul were shorn away, divorced into the ether and forever lost to the knockoff Orexis. Its surprise lasted only a moment, and its large hands caught Xim's descending talons.

The specter balled its lowest set of hands into fists and began slugging Xim in the ribs. She roared, her cry rolling across the chamber like a thunderstorm, then gored the specter's face with her horn. Orexis carved a hole through her gut with an orange beam, then hooked a leg around the back of her knee and rolled her, putting the specter on top.

I summoned every ounce of resolve I had, casting *Shortcut* and appearing in my signature position, just *above* my target. I cast *Oblivion Orb* into the specter's back as I landed, my body moving through the intangible creature's form until it hit me with an elbow, breaking my nose and making me wonder again at Seinnador's wisdom in leaving my face exposed. I blew blood from my nostrils and took away another chunk of the specter with a second *Oblivion Orb*, interrupting Orexis' attempt to drive his largest thumbs into Xim's eyes.

One of the specter's lower hands reached out and grabbed my wrist, wrenching my arm to the side, nearly giving me a second dislocated shoulder. I spun with the move, which sent me back to the ground. We were both pinned, but I saw Varrin sprinting across the surface of the sphere opposite us, closing the distance between us. I willed *Gracovus* to fly to him, hoping to bring him to us faster.

Then, Grotto's voice dominated our minds.

[*Stop,*] Grotto commanded, interrupting our melee. All three of us turned to the Delve Core, his command tugging at our desires. It seemed the mini-c'thon was no longer limiting his spell to just Orexis.

"Do not order me, ghost," said Orexis. It was a rich comment coming from the shadowy soul-fragment. "You are the *least* of those present. Lesser even than these betrayers." Xim shook her body, trying to break Orexis' grip, but the specter held firm, his non-eyes remaining fixed on Grotto. "You are an echo of the past, rooting in matters

beyond you. A poorly made simulation, encompassing but a speck of the one who came before you.”

“Look who’s talking,” I slurred through the cuts and blood in my mouth. Another one of the specter’s hands reached out and muzzled me, pressing my face into the ground.

Grotto floated higher into the air, near the center of the room. Although his c’thonic form was no bigger than a beach ball, his mental presence felt a hundred times larger.

[Your beliefs are as vapid as they are misplaced, cretin.] Grotto splayed his feelers into the air, each ball python-sized limb snaking out to dominate the sky like Jörmungandr, an octoploid Shiva gracing us with his words. *[Unlike you, I am more than grotesque scum dislodged from the throat of a divine mistake. You compare me to these meatbags, and speak as though I should be insulted that I am not my progenitor, whose feeble shell has long since left this world. I am not limited by the flesh and blood of the Old One’s form, nor the form that conveniences this chassis. Neither am I beholden to the metal and magic that lay beneath this alien tissue.]*

Grotto continued to swell, his body simultaneously a tiny blob high above us and a titanic face peering down from between nonexistent clouds. The space of the room continued to distort in my vision, expanding beyond reason as Grotto continued.

[I am the mind and the will. I am the beating heart of hearts. I am the arbiter of what shall be and what shall not. I am the hand of the System, and the System’s dominion is wherever it so chooses. Wherever it so chooses, the System’s dominion is absolute.]

The Delve shuddered.

[You are not a god. The System decides who is a god. You are a feeble plaything, like all the others trapped within these walls. A pittance of magic and a hundred thousand weaves reduce you to an insect, trapped in the System's web and sucked dry of your aberrant lifeforce. You are not a god, you are a source of mana accumulation.

[The System is god here, and I am the System. No one will bow to you, for they already supplicate themselves before me. Now, parasite, you will bow to me as well. You will bow, and you will despair.]

As Grotto's final statement rang through our minds, I pressed hard on my connection to the specter, forcing him to confront the fact that he was a spiritual clone. That he was ephemeral and doomed to perish within the Delve's confines. That if anyone in here was a god, it was Grotto.

I shook my head, trying to clear that last belief from my mind. I kept pushing on the connection regardless, doing my damndest not to make it an act of worship toward the vainglorious Delve Core. I had enough gods in my life, I didn't need to be bonded to one as well.

The specter didn't howl or wail or scream. It didn't throw insults or curses or spells. It stared up at Grotto, motionless. I felt its grip on my face and arm slacken, and broke its hold, rolling away and getting back on my feet. It only took me two tries to stand without falling back over.

Xim also pulled her arms free from the specter, swiping a claw at the soul fragment. When the crimson flame delivered a touch of Sam'lia's judgment to the specter's soul, it brought Orexis back online.

The specter dashed back, its form beginning to break down completely. It was barely humanoid anymore, looking closer to the shadow of an evil tree with six wispy branches.

It hung in the air, a pair of empty, dark pits the only resemblance left to Orexis Prime. It watched us with its hollow eyes, like a confused animal, and I began to wonder if it had gone catatonic.

“No, no, no, no,” the echoing, hissing voice of the specter whispered in our ears. “I am not this thing...” It spoke the words quietly, with no strength or energy behind them—like a weary old man muttering about the regrets of his past. “I am... I am... Orexis... I *wish* to be Orexis. I do not *want* to be... a phantom...”

The dark pits on its vague face shuddered, then narrowed. The smaller hands re-solidified and began to glow. It pointed ten mana-charged fingers at us.

But a man fell from the sky and cleaved the specter in half, his blade anointed with gray mana.

Varrin landed in a deep squat, c’thonic bone blade buried an inch into the ground at the specter’s feet. The false Orexis was split down the center, from head to groin, the light of its fingertips extinguished. Its two halves floated apart, then dissipated into the air like windswept smoke.

Gracorvus hovered back to me and I sent it into home position along my armguard. Xim, Varrin, and I watched the air where Orexis had been a moment before, waiting for the gotcha, but none came.

I took a deep, rasping breath, wet with blood and maybe some decayed lung matter.

“Is flying on the shield fun?” I asked, eyes watering from resisting the urge to cough. I didn’t want to see what would come out if I did. Varrin frowned at me.

“It’s awkward,” he said. “My feet are too close together for a balanced stance.”

“Maybe Papa Junior can make it bigger,” I said.

Varrin looked down at the pitted and scored slabs on my armguard.

“By this point,” he said, “grandfather may need to forge it anew.”

Then, I puked blood, and we began figuring out how to not die. Again.

Chapter 70

I was making Nuralie MVP of this Delve, and I would hear no argument about it.

We had problems. The loson had chemical solutions. Nuralie and Xim had both popped one of Nuralie's antidotes while I went on crusade with Grotto, and I eagerly accepted one for myself now that the immediate threat had ended. It knocked sixty stacks of toxicity off my debuff, which got me back into the black with my health regen.

Xim had also emptied the rest of her mana using *Cleanse* to purge the remainder of Nuralie's toxicity, and most of her bleeding. Unfortunately, this left Xim with nothing to remedy the rest of her own afflictions, but Nuralie had two health potions left. They took one each, which got Nuralie comfortably regenerating health. It still wasn't enough to offset all of Xim's ticking damage.

After Orexis' laser to Xim's gut, she'd gone down to sixty-eight health and was currently taking a net value of twenty-eight damage an hour from the specter's afflictions. The bonus to her regen from the health potion would wear off in an hour, at which point she'd jump up to losing 172 HP an hour. Xim would get enough mana back for a *Cleanse* or two by that point, but it wasn't enough to deal with the problem.

The cleric had less than ninety minutes to live.

"Can you take another mana potion?" I asked. Xim had returned to her normal, humanoid form and held a hand pressed to her gut. Blood dribbled from the hole punched through it.

"I'm out," said Nuralie, as Xim shook her head. "It would cause mana toxicity as well."

"What about a chip?" I asked.

“Chips are the core ingredient in mana potions,” said Nuralie. “She would suffer mana toxicity from another potion *or* chip.” Pause. “The chip would be far worse.”

[She also does not have a bonded Delve Core to offset the mana overload. Her mana structures could be irreparably damaged. Even your own may have suffered harm despite my efforts. I'll need to examine you. Although...]

“Fine,” I said after Grotto trailed off. “No potions, no chips. Does anyone have any healing or cleansing abilities I’m not aware of?” There was a round of shaking heads and muttered no’s.

I considered the spells I had seen in the past, bringing up the list to review. I couldn’t copy Xim’s healing—it was Divine-type and my Dimensional attunement didn’t give me access. I *did* have access to physical magic, however, which was the school that Cole’s healing had used.

“What about the spell *Surgeon*?” I asked. “I could put it into one of my open skill slots.”

“It requires competent medical knowledge,” said Varrin. “Is that something you possess?”

“No,” I said. “Other than basic stuff. Not to the level of surgery.”

“The spell augments your capabilities,” said Varrin. “It won’t make up for lack of knowledge.”

“Then we haul ass out of here,” I said. “If Orexis Prime was chased off by the Dukgriens, there’s bound to be someone that can help in the area outside the Delve.”

“What about Cage?” said Nuralie.

{Me?} Cage's voice came into our minds. {I'm just an administrator. You all are the god-slayers. Also, I appreciate your crisis, and thanks for dealing with the specter, but there's still an outstanding problem to address!}

"What?" I asked, somewhat testily. I was distracted by Xim's condition, still running potential solutions through my head.

I was also still bleeding and poisoned, just healing faster than the damage. Blood dripped from my eyes and nose. Dark splotches emerged on my skin then sloughed off, replaced by fresh tissue. My shoulder was dislocated, as well, and the hole in my chest continued screaming for my attention.

The Delve shuddered again.

{The void sphere in the reality anchor!} Cage thought to us, his psychic voice tinged with creeping hysteria.

"Dammit!" I said, pushing my hood back and grabbing a fistful of my hair. "Ok. The anchor is outside, so we have to get out of here to deal with either problem. Most direct route to the exit, Cage?"

{I'll do better than that! I'll open a portal directly to the anchor. It's back in Hiward, so you can just walk out of the Delve once you're done.}

"Why didn't you open a portal for us to get in *here* then?" I asked. "Instead of making us do all the lock bullshit?"

{One, it was locked. Now it isn't! There are five other good reasons. Do you want to hear them?}

"No, never mind," I said.

"But, I want to hear about it," said Xim with a bloody grin. "Don't hurry for my sake."

“Uh-huh,” I said. “We’ll come back once you aren’t in mortal peril. Can ask Cage all about it then.”

{Um, no you won’t! As soon as you are gone and the void sphere is taken care of, I’m closing the hidden access point inside Calvani Caverns. Since, you know, it isn’t *hidden* anymore. And if *anyone* comes knocking on either of the other two entrances, I’m collapsing the portal on their way in!}

“Do what you gotta do,” I said. “Let’s get that exit portal now, please.”

{As you command, Godsbane!}

“Godsbane?” I said as a swirling blue hole appeared before me. “That’s a pretty good name.”

“Spectersbane is more accurate,” said Nuralie. She touched the portal and disappeared.

“Avatarsbane is also more accurate,” said Varrin, reaching for the portal while supporting Xim. “And it sets out our ambitions.”

“Ambitions?” I said. “Wait, why are we ambitioning to be the bane of godly avatars?” Varrin was gone before he could hear my question.

“I want to contribute,” said Etja, “but I don’t know what we’re naming!” She went through the portal as well.

[*With how you are developing your divine gifts, Bane of Souls is the most fitting. It also has the greatest chance of inspiring fear in the hearts of those who would resist our conquest.*]

I scowled at Grotto, then slapped the portal myself.

Your party has slain the Specter of Orexis: Divine Soul Fragment, Grade Unknown. Your party receives the following rewards:

- 1) 10 Diamond Chips
- 2) 1 Lesser Divine Soul Essence
- 3) 1 Get Out of Cage Free Card

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to Even Distribution.

You receive: 2 diamond chips.

Party Leader has set loot distribution to Master Looter. Party Leader receives all other loot.

The notifications hit just as I exited the other side of the portal. On my feet, this time.

Your party has completed 1 of 2 objectives for The Cage: Neutralize the specter of Orexis.

Remaining Objective: Prevent Delve collapse.

Time Remaining: Unknown. Delve eruption imminent.

I brushed the notifications aside to inspect the room we were in. It was tall and ovoid, with long rib-like protrusions running up and down the dark surface of the walls. At its center were *two* obelisks. One hung down from the ceiling like a stalactite directly over the other, which rose from the floor like a stalagmite.

The fact that I remembered the difference between those two geological structures was a point of pride.

There was a space of about six feet between the tapering points of each obelisk, where the anchor hung suspended, incomprehensible to behold.

When I looked into the anchor, I was bombarded with innumerable viewpoints within a massive structure. The architecture flooded past, rooms displayed a thousand ways. Angles so wide that I saw omnidirectionally. Perspectives so close I could taste the ground. Vision that moved and changed in real-time.

It was The Cage. It was The Cage all at once.

It was too much information to absorb, much less process. I looked into it for a second, and it offered me a lifetime's worth of experience. More than that. Reeling from the exposure, I politely declined the offer. I'd had my fill of the place. Instead, I focused on the black jewel in its center.

The void sphere was obvious. The black, marble-sized jewel was a concrete, identifiable object amidst a sea of mind-warping panoramas. It was the only thing that I could perceive normally within the anchor, but it was so deeply wrong, so profoundly out of place.

"I hate this," said Nuralie, holding up a hand to shield her eyes from the anchor.

"What do we do?" asked Xim, leaning against Varrin. The big man stared into the anchor, eyes wide and transfixed. I hoped he wasn't trying to incorporate what he saw.

[*You must remove it,*] Grotto thought to us.

"We know," I said. "How?"

[*Reach in with your crude extremities and seize it!*]

"You want me to put my hand in *that*?" I said, chancing another look at the anchor and focusing on the void sphere. The endless sights encompassing the jewel faded into a penumbra between the eternal and the fleeting. The penumbra roiled and

shook, and I could see the void sphere beginning to crack, gouts of mana surging out and piercing the anchor.

[You can use Shortcut to appear with your hand grasping the void sphere, then use it again to extricate yourself. That should minimize any catastrophic internal injuries you might suffer. Beyond that, Shortcut is dimensional magic. It should have the least volatile interaction with the anchor, which is also dimensional.]

“Why don’t you do it?” I said. “Those feelers aren’t part of your real body. If they get vaporized, you can make new ones!”

[I am certain there are ways to regrow your hands if they are lost, Arlo.]

“I don’t *wanna* regrow my hands, Grotto!” I looked to the group for support.

“I’ll do it,” said Varrin. “This is my homeland, my thundry that is threatened. If a sacrifice is needed, it should be my own.”

“Uh,” said Etja, taking a tentative step forward. “I could just use *Siphon*.”

“*Siphon*?” I said, bringing up the list of spells I’d seen using my Magical Thinker evolution. The Cage had been a non-stop sprint, and I’d sort of ignored the ability while inside.

“My gravity magic,” she said. “I’ve got a little mana back. I can cast it on something that small.”

“Oh, yeah. I see it.”

Grotto’s tentacles undulated, and he swiveled from Etja toward the anchor.

[There is no way that spell works.]

“Why not?” I said. “It’s a dimensional spell, too.”

[The gravitational array required to anchor a dimensional membrane of this complexity is so intricate that there is no conceivable way the engineers did not shield it against gravitational manipulation.]

“Hmm? How did Orexis get it in there?” I said. “Think he used his crude extremities?”

[The methods of divine avatars are many.]

“Just let her try,” I said. “Actually, why am I petitioning you over this? Etja, go ahead and give it a try.”

The golem nodded, then brought up her lower pair of arms and focused on the void sphere. There was a light glow along her fingertips, and the black jewel floated right out to her.

“It worked!” she said as the void sphere landed in her palm.

Then, she screamed.

Etja’s fingers snapped shut over the jewel and her back arched as though she’d grabbed onto an electrified pole. I dashed to her and pried her fingers back, forcing her to dump the jewel onto the ground. Her grip was tight, and so I wasn’t gentle. Her fingers made a few sounds they weren’t supposed to.

When the void sphere left her hand, Etja collapsed, and I checked her status in my HUD.

Mana Overload: This party member has had their mana veins damaged. They cannot regenerate mana for 24 hours. Any further attempt to regenerate mana will result in loss of health.

Her HP had ticked down ten. It didn't look like she was in any more danger, but if she'd held that gem for too long...

"What happened?" I asked, kneeling next to Etja to check on her. She was unconscious.

[The housing of the void sphere continues to degrade. It is releasing vast quantities of mana.]

As if to accentuate his words, we got a new notification.

Warning! The area you are in has a very high mana density. Continual exposure to excess mana levels may result in negative status effects or loss of health.

"I vote we leave," I said, inspecting Etja's hand. Definitely dislocated a finger. "We got the thing out of the anchor. That was our job. We can let someone higher level come to deal with this."

[If the housing breaks down completely, the void sphere will release a mana cloud on a scale similar to a Delve eruption.]

"Of course it will," I said. "Thus rendering a large part of Ravvenblaq uninhabitable. Suggestions?"

[We'll need to mitigate the mana output or slow the process somehow.]

"Hey, Grotto," I said, "you're always looking for sources of mana for the obelisk." I gestured at the void sphere like a gameshow host.

The mini-c'thon's feelers froze, then he shot over to me.

[Open the Closet!]

I began focusing on the ability, relieved to find that it was no longer being blocked. Whether that was due to being in the Hiwardian section of the Delve, something else, I didn't know. I mana shaped the ability and forced the closet open in a few seconds.

“Arlo,” said Varrin as the door-shaped portal opened. “What obelisk?”

The big guy had an eyebrow raised, and I was receiving similar looks from Nuralie and Xim.

“Shit,” I said. “I never told you guys about the Pocket Delve.”

Chapter 71

“Do you know what you’ve done?” Varrin said as he stood before the dark pillar that was the Pocket Delve’s obelisk.

“Grotto wouldn’t stop bugging me about it,” I said, poking my head back out of the entrance to check on the void sphere. “He needed a passion project. The little guy had just lost his home.”

The dark jewel lay on the ground, showing no sign of the terrible power it was ready to release upon Hiward, save for a few small cracks on its surface. It was like a radioactive marble—mundane at first glance, and by the time you realized the danger, it was too late.

“No Delver controls a Delve,” said Varrin. “There are laws forbidding it.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “Delves that are accessed through portals in Hiward are owned by the crown. They have no lord or lady, to prevent the temptation to exploit them.”

“Interesting fact, Varrin,” I said as I sized up the jewel, trying to decide how to get it *into* the Pocket Closet. “Grotto, if I touch this, I’ll get the same treatment as Etja, right?”

[It will be worse since you are already suffering from mana overload.]

“Good to know. What if I covered it in something?”

[The closer you are to the void sphere, the stronger its effects, but avoiding direct contact will dampen the mana conductivity.]

Varrin strode back out to me.

“The matter of who owns this Delve merits additional discussion,” he said, peering down with me at the deadly gem. “It will set a precedent. If the crown allows you

to keep it, others may rush to bond with Delve Cores so they might acquire one for themselves.”

[Most cores will destroy their Delve, rather than letting it be captured by miscreants. And I am beholden to no king of yours. This is my Delve, and I choose its administrator.]

“Makes sense,” said Xim. She sat with her back against the obelisk, Nuralie squatting beside her and offering what limited care the alchemist could. A blood-soaked bandage covered the cleric’s belly. “Delves discovered in the wild usually go inert after they’re looted.”

“Which is why they are protected by law,” Varrin added. “They’re a natural resource, and there are only so many.”

“Turns out they’re renewable,” I said. “Can I borrow another towel?”

“I have more health than you,” said Varrin, “For once. I’m also not suffering from mana toxicity. I’ll use my gauntlet.” He looked to Grotto.

[It should be as effective as anything else.]

Varrin gave a curt nod, then knelt to grab the jewel. I moved out of his way, giving him a clear path back inside the Pocket Closet.

He snatched it, and his armor lit up like a Christmas tree.

Runework on Varrin’s armor burst to life, the sigils having been concealed within the ornate engravings along its surface. They vented vaporous mana as they flared, and then exploded. Varrin shouted and dropped the gem. He tore his gauntlet off and threw it to the ground, the glove scorched and blackened.

[Curious,] Grotto thought to us. *[The weaves in your armor had a catastrophic reaction to the overwhelming mana output.]*

Varrin's armor smoked, making him look like a cartoon character that just accidentally detonated their dynamite.

"You ok?" I asked, but his health hadn't dropped and he didn't have any debuffs.

"This armor was an heirloom," Varrin said, looking himself over. "The same set men in my family have worn at low levels for three generations." He clenched his naked fist, glaring at the gem, fury pouring from his eyes. "Must this day take yet more from me?"

I grimaced, but let that minefield lay undisturbed.

"I have an idea," I said, beginning to take off my c'thonic leather vest. It was tough since I wore it over my armor. After a bit of squirming and Varrin's assistance, I got the vest off and held it out to the big man.

"What is this for?" he asked.

"It's immutable," I said. "It won't stop the mana, but it won't explode either." I smiled at him. "I don't think."

[*C'thon flesh is also a good mana insulator,*] Grotta added.

Varrin took the vest and squatted down, then tossed the leather over the jewel. There was no reaction. He held his hands wide, then brought them together, bunching the vest up with the jewel in the center, as though he were trying to catch a big bug.

Varrin's body stiffened, and he grunted, but he quickly turned and dashed into the Pocket Closet.

Grotto had exposed a bowling-ball-sized recess within the obelisk by sliding a panel aside, its purpose to absorb the mana from, or condense mana into, chips. The void sphere was essentially the biggest, baddest form of a chip, so the slot *should* work

with it inside. Varrin ran to the obelisk and shoved in the entire wad, vest and all. Grotto flicked a tentacle, and the panel slid closed.

Then, numbers went up.

Pocket Delve has absorbed 99,999 mana from VOID SPHERE. Mana held in reserve 123,999.

Pocket Delve has absorbed 99,999 mana from VOID SPHERE. Mana held in reserve 223,998.

Pocket Delve has absorbed 99,999 mana from VOID SPHERE. Mana held in reserve 323,997.

“Holy shit,” I said.

[*Spend it!*] Grotto thought to me. [*The obelisk’s capacity is limited. It lacks the storage for this level of accumulation!*]

I closed my eyes and focused on the Closet, beginning to expand it outward. First, I targeted the room we were in, the obelisk chamber. The size of the chamber limited the size and capacity of the obelisk that could be constructed, so I went big. *Really* big.

After several minutes of focused effort, the room was massive. Not central cage massive, but it sprawled a thousand feet in every direction. After that, I forewent any structure or organization, simply thrusting the boundaries of the Closet outward.

There was a limit to how fast I could do this. A limit that was both relative to the total size of the space and also my mental capacity to guide the expansion. Despite my efforts, I wasn’t spending the mana fast enough.

Pocket Delve has absorbed 99,999 mana from VOID SPHERE. Mana held in reserve 21,619,950.

Pocket Delve has absorbed 99,999 mana from VOID SPHERE. Mana held in reserve 21,709,860.

“How much fucking mana is in this thing?” I said, eyes clamped shut as I continued to focus.

[This is only a fraction. We need additional ways to spend it.]

I tried pushing the boundaries in different ways, looking for the most efficient growth. As the total size increased, the amount I could spend at once went up proportionally, but the scaling was too slow. Given enough time, I could catch up to the speed of absorption, but we didn't have the luxury.

[The obelisk is already beyond its capacity. It is undergoing stress.]

“What happens if it breaks?” I asked. A beat went by with no response. “Grotto?!”

[I do not know. I have never witnessed such an event. I would imagine it is catastrophic.]

“We gotta' take the void sphere back out!” I said.

[We have not yet mitigated the potential disaster!]

“Then figure out something else!”

[I...] Grotto hesitated, and I cracked an eye to peek at the mini-c'thon. He swiveled around the room, surveying the various stockpiles of materials I'd procured for him that he'd yet to use. [Nuralie, Xim, Varrin, place your hands on the obelisk. One of you hold Etja's onto it as well.]

The party immediately followed Grotto's instruction, again showing the speed of their initiative. When we were in the thick of it, the party didn't argue or ask questions, they just did what needed to be done. I was glad to have allies that displayed that level of trust.

The fact that this trust was being placed so readily in the hands of Grotto, however...

"What are you doing?" I asked as Grotto gathered essence powders and engraving tools from the bundles of materials.

[The crystalline mana coating your mana veins is extraordinarily concentrated, and the process by which it was placed there is a grotesque over-expenditure of resources.] The bonded Delve Core floated to the obelisk, and three of his feelers gripped styluses, beginning to carve new symbols along the pillar's side. *[We presently possess a commensurately grotesque overabundance of said resource.]*

"I thought you hadn't figured out how to make that happen yet!" My concentration began to slip, and I snapped my eyes back shut to continue expanding the Closet.

[Fortune made a curious comment when discussing his modifications to your physical body. He referred to the act as his 'own modified Creation process.'] Grotto poured essence powder into his hastily engraved rune, and it shone with fresh life. *[The Calvani Caverns holds a primordial Creation obelisk within it. Orexis and Nasro used that obelisk to perform the procedures that shaped Etja's mana veins and matrix. Her body is a perfect template for mana flow, designed purely by the System.]*

[Now that I am the administrator of The Calvani Caverns, I have access to its logs, along with the procedures and guidelines for operating the Delve. These include

the rudimentary Creation process they performed. This has given me the insight I needed to answer most of my questions concerning how to create and embed the unique material found coating your mana veins.]

“When did you have time to do that?” I asked.

[I have several subprocesses analyzing data at any given moment. I have been working on this problem constantly.] He flitted to the next side of the obelisk, beginning to carve more symbols. *[The primordial obelisk is inefficient. This inefficiency is to our advantage, however, since it will require an order of magnitude more mana to activate the Creation procedure than it would were we using a proper Creation Delve.]*

“Wait,” said Xim, “you’re going to put us through the Creation process again?”

[In a limited manner. I will reforge your body with superior mana veins. Ones coated in the crystalline mana that allows Arlo the ability to train his stats.]

Grotto paused his engraving. His tentacles rose into the air.

[You shall become the pinnacle of a newly created Delver! A superior specimen of Delve technology, imbued with abilities beyond that which should be possible using your limited organic forms! And I, Grotto, will have achieved a feat unclaimed by any core before me!]

By this point, he’d devolved into full-on flailing.

“Grotto!” I shouted. The core started, then regained his composure. “What about the mana overload?”

[Your facile understanding of the mana structure once again shows, Arlo. If I were thrusting mana into their veins like a buffoon, then I would cause significant damage. I am no imbecile, however. I will be coating their veins in a new substance.]

Beyond that, I am reforging their veins and adapting their matrix to the new configuration. It will repair what damage exists.]

“So, it’s safe. That’s what you’re saying.”

[‘Safe’ is a word with many facets and much nuance.]

“No, it isn’t.”

[It is safer than having the obelisk explode. It is safer for the citizens of these lands than allowing a mana eruption, although it would be contained within this dimensional space. I wonder how effective that would be at disrupting the event. I cannot be certain.]

“I’m in,” said Xim.

“Me as well,” said Varrin. “Ravvenblaq is under threat. If this keeps people safe, it’s what I’m doing.”

“Oh. Nothing so noble for me,” said Xim. “I just think it’s fascinating. It’s new ground and I want to be a part of it!”

Nuralie froze for an instant, then shrugged.

“I have... faith,” she said, though the word was strained.

“What about Etja?” I said. “We’re deciding on her behalf.

[As I said before, her mana structure is purely System designed. There are no irregularities present from adapting a natural body during the Creation process, such as with the rest of you. She is, by far, the safest.]

I shook my head, unable to believe that this was how we were trying to handle things.

“Guess that settles it,” I said. “What about me?”

[*What about you, Arlo? You already possess this advantage. Do you wish for more?*]

“Yeah, Arlo,” said Xim, her tone playfully taunting. “Afraid we’ll leave you in the dust once we’re cheaters too?”

“Honestly? A little,” I said. “But that’s not what I’m asking. How can I help this process?”

[*Just keep doing what you’re doing. It buys us time.*]

I nodded and continued focusing on expanding the Closet. The obelisk had begun to tremble.

Grotto finished the final touches on his new runes, then cast the engraving tools to the ground. He raised his feelers.

[*We will begin.*]

I didn’t see the event well, with my eyes tightly shut to help me concentrate, but I caught glimpses of what began to happen to my allies. Their forms distorted, flesh moving and remolding itself, but it was subtle. It was as though thin worms burrowed under their skin, leaving trails of shimmering mucus just beneath. The obelisk shone bright, the runes flooding the room with light, and the shuddering abated.

Then, after no more than three minutes, and with little fanfare, it was done.

“My mana’s back!” said Xim. The cleric immediately began casting *Cleanse* on herself to purge the remaining Bleeding and Toxicity. “Dark Mother above, that feels good.”

Varrin flexed his hands and looked down at himself.

“I feel no different,” he said. His eyes drifted as he checked his System screen. “I see the ability on my character screen. That’s a Lot of Stats! It’s listed under my... Re-Birth Sign...”

“Mine too,” said Nuralie, and a small smile touched her lips.

Etja was still unconscious.

I was glad for my allies, and glad they were safe, but our problem hadn’t been solved.

“That put a big dent in the mana accumulation, Grotto,” I said, “But it’s still going up!”

[My expert use of the tools before me be damned! If I’d been less competent, perhaps the process would have required more mana. I cannot help but excel at my manipulation of Delve technologies. It is by reflex at this point!]

“Grotto!” I said. “Ideas?”

[We have siphoned enough mana off that the degradation has slowed, but the void sphere will still breach its containment within the hour. Or less. I truly do not know.]

“Fucking fine then,” I said, and stopped concentrating on expanding the Delve.

[What are you doing? Arlo, you must continue spending the mana!]

“No,” I said. “I’m going to deal with this.”

I walked up to the obelisk, noticing that the stone and metal of its surface was beginning to split in places, and slid open the panel containing the void sphere. I yanked out the leather-vest-covered jewel, getting an abrupt notification for my trouble.

Warning! You are experiencing high levels of mana exposure while suffering from Mana Overload! You are now taking damage!

My hand went numb like I'd grabbed a live wire and I felt my body begin to *rip*. A thousand small wounds blossomed within my skin and muscles. My HP began ticking down by ten per second, but I only needed a *couple* of seconds.

I designated the left half of the room as quick-access inventory space and threw the void sphere, still covered by my vest, into a slot. It snapped into place in mid air, and froze.

We all stared at it, holding our breath.

[*Why... did you do that?*] Grotto asked.

"You said that the shit inside the inventory spaces are in some sort of stasis," I said. "I figured, maybe it would... halt the void sphere from breaking down?"

[*Ah.*]

"Could we have just done that from the beginning?" asked Xim.

Grotto rubbed his feelers together, dark eyes darting around the room.

[*Perhaps...*]

I laughed, bent over in pain from the effect laughing had on my many, many wounds, and then collapsed to the ground.

"Xim," I said, "maybe lend me a *Cleanse* or two?"

After my stunt pulling the void sphere from the obelisk, my health was in the 40's, and my stacks of Bleeding had ticked up a few notches. I was still poisoned, with a hole in my chest, a dislocated shoulder, and a thousand fresh microtears in my muscles.

“Sure!” said Xim, looking way too chipper. “Maybe it’ll train my Charisma! Or Wisdom!”

I started to tell her that it took a little longer than that, but let her have the moment. I looked around the party, sighing in relief when Xim began purging my afflictions.

As a group, we looked like shit.

Varrin’s armor was cooked. Along with the various dents and scratches from the countless enemies we’d fought, it was covered in black scorch marks from its destroyed runes. His face was covered in soot and he looked wearier than I’d ever seen.

Kim’s blood covered as much of her body as the super-stretch onesie she wore. I had no idea what had happened to the rest of her armor, but if it were anything like the last time she transformed, it was in shredded pieces back inside The Cage.

Nuralie had dark circles under bloodshot eyes, and I could see several places where her scales had fallen off, leaving pink and scabbing flesh behind. Her black gloves were frayed, especially at the fingertips.

And Etja sat up, looking around blearily.

“That was no fun,” she said. She began to rub her head but yelped and pulled her hand back. Her ring finger was still dislocated.

“Sorry about that,” I said as she gripped her hand by the wrist. She looked up at me, confused, and I decided to tell her the story later. We couldn’t call it quits *quite* yet. “Let’s get outside.”

We gathered the remaining shreds of our willpower, pushing through the dismal, unstoppable wave of fatigue that pressed down upon us. We left the Closet and walked out of the Delve's exit portal.

We all got a notification that we'd completed the objective, and were awarded 'super' evolutions, which, as far as I could tell, were just modifications to one of our existing evolutions. No super for Etja, though. Instead, her *Bound Construct* passive was replaced.

My super was applied to *I Can Do This All Day*, which normally doubled the health and stamina regeneration bonuses I got from Fortitude. The modification was in addition to the existing bonuses from the evolution and I looked over it briefly, uncertain how I felt about it.

We Can Do This All Day: Whenever you take damage, the ally closest to you regains an amount of health or stamina equal to half the damage taken, their choice.

We were happy to get the reward, but we were also too tired to celebrate. We exited the Delve and into a cave, which then deposited us into a valley. Dusk had begun to set, but the creeping darkness was resisted by an inferno that dominated half of the skyline.

"Is that... entire mountain on fire?" I asked, watching the blaze.

"Matriarch Dukgrien," said Varrin, awe entering his voice. "I've never seen her go all out."

"Wonder if they're still fighting Orexis Prime," I said.

We watched the mountains for several minutes, waiting for any sign that the epic battle was ongoing. Eventually, we spotted a dark form flying across the sky. Whoever it was, they were human, lacking the size or extra limbs of a dark god. Xim sent up a gout of her divine fire, which got the person's attention. They turned and flew down toward us, and some part of me, the part that was still on edge, prepared for the worst.

Matriarch Dukgrien landed before us, hair wild and face bloodied. Myria was once more atop the older woman's fur-clad shoulders.

"Arlo!" Myria shouted, jumping down from her human steed. She ran over and wrapped me up in a hug, which I wasn't expecting. When did we get so familiar?

She let me go and stepped back, looking everyone else over.

"Wow!" she said. "Everyone's alive! Plus a bonus person." She leaned in toward Etja. "Who are you?"

"I'm Etja!" said Etja, clasping her four hands together and giving Myria an unfamiliar bow. The dark-skinned Dancer raised an eyebrow but gave a mock curtsy in response.

"And I'm Myria," she said. "What happened to you all?"

"Long story," I said. "The mana eruption is taken care of, so everyone should be safe from that impending disaster. Were y'all able to handle the *ongoing* disaster?"

"Orexis?" asked Myria. I nodded.

"The fiend fled," said the matriarch. "But not before 'e wiped tha' floor with us. We battled for hours until he got ta' shoutin' about 'is soul and 'is sister. Then, he runs off."

"Good," I said. "Problems for another day."

“Good, he says. Me ‘usband lost an arm and I burnt through three irreplaceable relics. But we *did* survive.”

I sucked air through my teeth.

“The patriarch lost his arm?”

“Aye,” said the matriarch. “But we’ll ‘ave it regrown. Painful, though. And tha’ skin won’t match.” Her head tilted to the side like she was listening to something distant. “Myria, mana monsters are breakin’ from the mana vent, now that it’s dispersin’. We’ll need to corral them before they make it out of tha’ mountains.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Myria. She turned back to us. “You all need anything? Heals? Remedies?”

“Therapy,” I said.

“I know a good masseuse,” Myria replied. “I can schedule you an appointment.”

“Not the kind I meant, but yes please.”

Myria gave me a bright grin, then hopped back up onto the matriarch with the grace of an expert equestrian.

“We’ll swing back by when things are settled. Unless you want to walk to Foundation on your own?”

“No,” I said. “We’ll take a breather, and wait for you guys to pick us up.

Myria nodded and gave me a wink. Then, she pointed a finger to the sky.

“Ride on!” she shouted. The matriarch rolled her eyes, but took off without another word.

Once they were out of sight, Xim nudged me with her shoulder.

“You and Myria got something going on?” she asked, giving me a knowing look.

“No,” I said, then heaved a sigh. “You know, I was engaged until about a month ago. Or, several thousand years ago, depending on how you look at it. Either way, not quite ready to move on yet.”

Kim frowned and patted me on the shoulder, then plopped down onto the ground. The rest of us quickly followed suit.

For a time, we watched the blazing horizon, and I found its warmth pleasant. The world was literally on fire, but the parts we were responsible for were dealt with. From hostile delvers, to demi-gods, to divine soul fragments, we’d been through the blender, and come out in one piece. The feeling of relief mingled with my fatigue, making me giddy.

Kim was first to break the silence.

“What do we think about the names?”

“For the party?” I asked.

“Yeah. Godsbane wasn’t bad. Cage was on to something there.”

“Spectersbane,” said Nuralie. The loson was lying on her side, tail swishing back and forth. Her eyes were lidded, and she looked on the verge of falling asleep.

“I still say Avatarsbane is the one,” said Varrin.

“Too many syllables,” said Kim, and Varrin’s head dropped an inch.

[Bane of Souls is the superior choice,] Grotto thought to us. *[Imagine the terror, the fearful whispers in the dark as our enemies lament our coming!]*

“Grotto,” I said, “I don’t think-”

“Soulsbane sounds fun!” said Etja. “Now that I know it’s for the party.” She turned delighted eyes toward us. “Am I in the party?” She held her hands together over her chest like a hopeful schoolgirl.

“Yeah, you’re in the party, Etja,” I said as the others nodded their approval. “We like Soulsbane?”

“It’s the perfect amount of creepy,” said Xim.

“Don’t care anymore,” Nuralie mumbled. “Sleeping now.” She closed her eyes and was out in seconds.

“It’s a bit like,” I began, searching for the right words, “it’s a bit ‘angsty teenager’, isn’t it?”

“Eh,” Xim waved a hand dismissively, “depends on who’s wearing it. I think we’ll make it work. We can always change it later if we don’t like it. Besides, *anything* is better than what Lito’s party is named.”

“What are they called?”

“Jester’s band,” said Xim, overenunciating the words with a smirk.

“Huh? Who’s the jester?”

“I disagree,” said Varrin. “Not about the name of Lito’s party, it’s terrible. But we should commit to a name, make it our own. Rebranding is disruptive.” He took a breath, leaning back on his hands and looking at the sky. A few stars twinkled down between the clouds and smoke. “Soulsbane is fine if it pleases the rest of you.”

“Okay then,” I said. “We’ll name our party Soulsbane, strike terror into the hearts of men, and inspire a generation of brooding adolescents to emulate us.”

I opened the System screen and focused on the party menu. I looked for where to input our edgy new designation.

The name for the party had already been filled in.

“Uh, guys,” I said. “Did any of you *already* name the party?”

“What?” said Varrin. “No. Only the party leader can-” his eyes drifted as he checked on the name himself. “No, this isn’t...” He whipped his head to me. “Can you change it?”

I prodded the text with my mind, but no matter what I did, I was locked out.

I rubbed my temples and stared at the screen, reading the text after my name over and over again. After a while, I sighed and flopped back. This was not something I was prepared to process at the moment.

I decided to let sleep overtake me, surrendering to the demands of my body. But my rest was fitful, and the System text haunted my fleeting dreams.

Esquire Arlo Xor’Drel

Party Leader of “Fortune’s Folly”

End of Mage Tank, Volume I

Epilogue

*** SYSTEM ADDENDUM ADDED BY USER NAME: [ERROR: REDACTED]

ADDENDUM NOTE: "Two years after the events of The Cage" ***

Jakom stared at the floor, waiting for the screaming to subside and the crunching to cease. Holy as they may be, the offerings always invoked a wave of nausea and revulsion Jakom could never fully repress. Hearing it was bad, but seeing it much worse.

Jakom felt a hand upon his shoulder, and turned to see Brae'ach. The towering man was fixing his facemask back into position, blood dripping from underneath to add to the chitinous armor's old and growing red stain. Soft clicking emanated from beneath the holy cloth covering Brae'ach's mouth as he looked down upon Jakom. He began to speak, the air shuddering beneath the deep weight of his voice.

"You know I value your counsel," said Brae'ach. "Tell me what troubles you."

Jakom drew a slow breath. He did not fear Brae'ach, but he never wanted to test his companion's temper lest it be taken out on someone less favored.

"I fear we move too quickly," said Jakom. Brae'ach continued to look upon him with a warm gaze, betraying no reaction. "I mean to say," Jakom continued, "the holy power we have been granted is still . . . untested, in so many ways."

"You are concerned for my safety?" said Brae'ach.

"No. Well, yes," said Jakom. "I am concerned for the safety of our forces."

Brae'ach said nothing, waiting for Jakom to continue.

"We can only land so many troops. A war on foreign soil may prove costly. We only have so many loyal devotees, after all."

Brae'ach looked away, out to the glistening beaches reflecting the red light of dusk. The salt and iron on the wind picked up as a swift ocean breeze played along the shoreline.

“Do you know why Unity picked us?” asked Brae'ach. Jakom raised an eyebrow.

“I had always thought of it rather that we picked Unity,” said Jakom.

“That is true, but not complete,” said Brae'ach. “Unity was lying dormant, unknown, unclaimed for so very long. Why do you think it made itself known only now, and only to us? Why not the Degor clans, or the Unfarin, or even the ancient Bogat? Many of Davah’s tribes have walked these lands for millenia. Any one of them could have claimed Unity for themselves, but didn’t. Why do you think that is?”

“They didn’t know Unity was here,” said Jakom.

“Ah, yes,” said Brae'ach, turning back to face Jakom, a gleeful enthusiasm rupturing the deep voice that oppressed the air between them. The truth of Brae'ach’s words echoed from the sands beneath them, undeniable. “But we know. *We* found it. A simple cavern, revealed by an ordinary earth tremor, holding the greatest strength any Davah clan has ever known. *We* found it, at our most desperate hour, when our clan was all but lost. *We* found it, when it was the only thing in all the tribe lands that could save us.”

Jakom was tense. Brae'ach rarely showed such exuberance. It was uncomfortable, but intoxicating. Jakom had felt the Holy Word before, but it still was unnerving to experience it directly.

“That quake was not coincidence,” said Brae'ach. “Our timing was not coincidence. Unity saw in us the potential for greatness and willed the cavern to reveal itself! We consumed in holy offering and were blessed with these forms not because we

were lucky, but because we were chosen! We were once the smallest clan, the most meager family. Now, the tribes of Davah crumble before us. Now we rule all the coasts and everything between.”

Brae'ach looked once again out to the seas, where so many ships stood ready to sail, flying the flag of Unity.

“Unity allowed us to choose it, because we were worthy,” said Brae'ach. “And our worthiness is proven by our total dominance over all the clans; a feat not seen in two thousand years.”

Jakom felt the resonance of the earth slowly recede, as the echo of the words faded. Jakom looked to Brae'ach and, after a moment of reflection, gently took his arm.

“I know we have been given a tremendous honor,” said Jakom. “I only wish not to squander it.”

Brae'ach knelt so that he was at eye level with Jakom, and placed his volcanic hands gently upon the young man's shoulders.

“I know it is difficult to see, as you have not received the Holy Form,” said Brae'ach. “But there are such greater things beneath our feet than dirt and rock. Our power is fed not only through sacrifice, but by slaying the enemies of Unity. We will use their dead essence to achieve strength far beyond even what we have known 'til now.”

“I thought you, we, could not consume the unwilling?”

“A limitation we can soon overcome,” said Brae'ach. “A great lock has been cut, an ancient door swung open. We must travel to the island of the grave-robbing Delvers. Not for mere conquest, but to acquire a gift long sealed away which Unity can finally reclaim.”

Brae'ach stood, and brought his hand up to his mask. "With it," he said, pulling the cloth away, revealing the long and writhing teeth cascading down his neck, and the myriad tendrils opening from the cavernous maw that expanded across his chest, "we need not hide any longer."