

“It’s the corpse in the middle,” I whispered. “Gotta’ be.”

Our journey deeper into the Delve had gone mostly unimpeded. As was typical, our course took us down. The maze of rooms cluttered with art and relics eventually revealed an arched entryway to a wide stairwell. We descended, our nerves still frayed from the prior day’s endless hit-and-run assaults, and any slight movement, real or not, got a callout. There was more than one false alarm.

It was strange how the shadows moved and the eyes of the sculptures seemed to follow us while we remained hypervigilant. This had been building into a ‘boy who cried wolf situation’, and our diligent lookout for mutating tapestries and transmogrifying murals began to flag. Nuralie, however, never faltered, and the rest of us only barely caught a glimpse of what she pointed out.

One of the wide stone tiles of the hallway floor walked away and around a corner on eight tiny feet. Around that corner, was a tomb.

“Should I blast it?” asked Xim.

“Not yet,” I said.

“Why the corpse in the middle?” asked Varrin, looking over the series of desiccated corpses lining the walls, little more than dust and bones. “It could still be a piece of floor.”

The bodies were tucked into alcoves, and each one held a metallic rod over its chest, like a warrior buried with their sword. What they were holding was too round for a blade, however, and too short for a staff, even accounting for age and deterioration. It was closer in size and shape to the handle of a broom or mop.

At the center of the room was a body better preserved than the others, laying on a burial slab angled up so that the cadaver could be viewed from the entryway, where we stood. Its skin was thin and dry like paper mache and tufts of wispy white hair hung from its arms and legs—much longer than any of the humanoid races I’d seen in Arzia, aside from Umi-Doo. This wasn’t a two-and-a-half-foot tall yeti munchkin, however. The head was bald and the face bare, but a jeweled chain adorned its skull, with a shimmering ruby gemstone as its centerpiece upon the person’s brow.

“That’s what the mimic would expect us to think,” I said. “We saw it as a piece of floor, so it knows we’d be looking at the ground.”

Xim ran a crimson flame along her knuckles, a habit I'd noticed her picking up when agitated. It was a bad tick for stealth, but we weren't trying to stay hidden.

"How do you know it saw us see it?" she asked, looking at everything in the room except for the prominent carcass.

"The mimics have never taken the same form twice," I said.

Varrin grunted.

"There may not be more than one," he said. "We never got a kill notification for the others we cut down yesterday."

"Yeah," I said, "they've been playing possum. Or, *it* has been."

"Is that a game?" asked Etja.

"No, a possum is a marsupial that pretends to be dead to avoid predators," I said. "Back on Earth. Sometimes my idioms come across and other times they don't. What gives?"

"I got it," said Xim.

"So did I," said Nuralie.

"What do you think I'm talking about when I say possum?"

"I think of..." Xim began, "a marsupial that pretends to be dead to avoid predators."

"How do you know what a possum is?"

"They're not rare," she answered.

"So there are possums in Arzia?"

"Of course."

"What do they look like?"

"Spines," said Nuralie. "Teeth and spines."

"Spines, as in quills?" I said. "Like pointy defensive growths on their back?"

"No," said Nuralie. "They have multiple spines." Pause. "And torsos."

"That doesn't sound like a possum," I said.

“What does it sound like?” asked Xim.

“A fucking nightmare.”

“I’ve never heard of a possum,” said Etja.

“Guess that solves the mystery,” I said. “None of those ancient memories have possums in them?”

“No,” she said. “Not that I’ve gotten to most of them. It’s all still vague, like I had too much wine when it happened.”

“She didn’t know what ducks were, either,” said Xim, the flame along her knuckles flaring.

“I don’t recognize most of the wildlife,” said Etja. “I remember lots of animals, but they don’t match what’s around here.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“The Mirtasian I was modeled after had a pet yabberish.”

“Never heard of it.” The others shook their heads as well. “Pets aside, if we’ve been fighting one mimic this whole time, it’s a tough sonofabitch. More health than *me*.”

“Or we aren’t doing it much harm,” said Varrin. “Our damage diversity is normally good, but we’ve leaned toward physical with the monster. It may not be effective.”

“Fair,” I said. “My gut instinct when a gossamer gown tries to eat me is to hit it.”

“We’ll continue to break those types of bad habits,” said Varrin, and I flinched. He and I had been having a lot of one-on-one time together. A lot of very *painful* one-on-one time learning me some genuine combat techniques. I needed the extra practice since I was, in his words, ‘the most incompetent fighter among us’.

“Then we avoid physical,” I said. “I’ll stick to *Oblivion Orb*, try and send some of that mimic goo to another plane of existence.”

“I’ll use my spiritual attacks,” said Varrin. “If it lacks a soul, there’s at least a mana matrix to cut into pieces.”

“Nuralie can use her new bow’s ability,” I said, and the loson nodded.

“And I’ll smite the fucker,” said Xim. “Just... show me *what* to smite.”

I scratched at my head, frustration starting to nudge its way into my mood. The mimic had been giving me some performance issues.

“I’ll try it again,” I said, looking around the room. I focused on my soul-sight, pushing up its sensitivity and scanning everything inside for a glimmer of the shiny liquid that marked an entity’s spiritual essence. The gift had proven its value countless times, especially now that I’d had the chance to develop it further. It helped me find hidden enemies, and gauge relative strength, it could even give me limited insight into emotional states like whether a creature was more likely to fight or to flee.

With the mimic so far, I’d gotten squat, and this room was the same. Either the mimic didn’t have a soul, like Varrin suggested, or it could hide it completely.

When it had copied Varrin, however, it had also copied his soul appearance to some degree, but like the man’s facial features, something about it was *off*. Almost Varrin, but not quite right. Just enough to give me the willies. At first, I thought the man was having a psychological breakdown, or worse. I only realized that it wasn’t Varrin when he tried to bite me. When I understood that the mimic could mimic souls, that’s when I upgraded it from an annoyance to a threat.

For inanimate objects, there was no need to copy a soul’s appearance, since most objects didn’t have one. *Most* objects. I hadn’t yet seen a distinct presence that I would have called the mimic’s own, but it seemed to do a better job copying the absence of a soul, rather than the presence of one. Once the mimic failed to trick us with knock-offs of ourselves, it had avoided any attempt at an organic form. Unless a walking floor tile was considered organic.

“Still nothing,” I said.

Xim huffed.

“I don’t get it,” she said. “You should be able to *See* lies and deception.”

“That’s never really worked for me.”

“I think you need to pray more.”

“I don’t pray at all.” I gave her an annoyed look. “I don’t *worship* Sam’lia. I don’t worship anything.”

“You worship your beard,” she mumbled, a bit petulantly. I knew that it was half a joke, but I also knew that there was some genuine worry there as well.

Xim really wanted me to rub elbows with her goddess. Not out of some mindless attempt to fill her convert quota, but because she genuinely believed that I was loved by Sam'lia and that my lack of engagement was the same as giving the seven-organed god the cold shoulder. Especially after the blessings I'd received. It was like I'd turned Xim's best friend down when she'd asked me to prom—Xim's best friend who had just bought me a Ferrari. She wasn't mad, she was disappointed.

"Maybe it's not a lie," said Nuralie. "It *is* what it mimics." Pause. "Until it isn't."

"It failed to do that with me," said Varrin.

Nuralie poked at a scale along her jaw while she pondered.

"Maybe what it copies has to be generic," she said. "To mimic perfectly."

"The art in here isn't generic," I said, earning me a couple of pairs of rolled eyes. "What? Some of these are clearly unique works!"

"You never saw the original," said Nuralie. "There could have been defects." Pause. "Ones an expert would have noticed."

"Then it isn't what it is until it isn't," I said. "It wasn't ever what it was until it wasn't, it is what it is until it's not, and *that* is a deception."

"I'm confused," said Etja.

"Yep," said Xim.

"You're *trying* to be opaque, Arlo," said Varrin.

"I said what I said." I sucked at my teeth, then held a finger up in the air. "Alright, I've got a plan."

"Very well," said Varrin. "What is it?"

"I'll go in there," I pointed at the crypt, "and let it attack me. Then," I pointed at Xim, "Xim can cast *Judgment* on me while I grab it."

"Your plan is bad," said Varrin. "Dragging the enemy into a pillar of divine inferno is not a reliable strategy."

Xim looked at me, her face devoid of any expression.

"Have you ever felt the cleansing pain of holy fire?" she asked.

“Uh,” I began to second guess my plan. “No?”

Xim nodded, then looked at Varrin.

“I think it’s a good plan,” she said.

“I don’t like it anymore,” I said.

“Too late,” said Xim. “Go on, then.” She made a shooping motion at me. “Gods know it won’t kill you.” She was already beginning to kneel.

“Don’t charge the spell too much,” I said, then began hesitantly walking into the tomb.

The soft muttering of prayer came from the cleric’s lips, words squirming through the air like shuddering insects looking for an ear to crawl inside.

My boots clicked against the polished stone floor, echoing off the room’s hard walls and mingling with Xim’s disquieting invocation. Her devotions swept the reverberance up and twisted around it, the chamber mute and silent but for the orison that made all other noise subservient.

Was this what it felt like to be targeted by Xim’s spell, or had I never heard it properly before?

I walked to the crypt’s center, where the cardinal body lay in eternal repose. My hand was raised, prepared to send a hunk of the corpse into the endless void. When I was close enough to touch it, I reached out, my fingers moving within an inch of the gemstone chain atop its head.

“Hey, bud,” I whispered. “Is this whole place your burial mound? Interred with all your worldly possessions as grave goods?” The dead man gave no reply. “Why get buried in a Delve? Or, did you build it yourself? Did it get turned into a Delve afterward? I know those Delve Cores like to build their nests wherever it looks good. I’ve got a whole infestation in my closet.”

I tapped the gem with a fingertip. It was warm to the touch. I furrowed my brow and leaned in closer. The gem danced and shimmered. When I held my hand close, I could see points of light play across my palm. The gem had been crafted from a ruby chip, I realized.

“Fancy,” I said, wondering what that said of the man. Had he been a Delver? An ancient one? Hiward had only discovered the Delves a century and change prior. This

gentleman was much, much older than that. If he *had* been a Delver, was he part of the society that created them?

Considering what I knew so far, I doubted it. Cage, the only Delve Core to date himself so far, had said he was several thousand years old. While this body was ancient, I didn't think it was 'pharaohs of Egypt' ancient. But, then again, magic. It could be a million years old with a 'decay-away' manaweave. I doubted carbon dating would work very well here.

I pulled back a bit and pursed my lips. I gave the guy a gentle tap on his empty ribs, and a touch of dust scattered into the air from the ragged cloth that covered the fragile bones.

"You're no mimic," I said.

And he wasn't. The mimic was smarter than that. It was *Arlo* levels of smart. The fucker used my own signature move against me.

It came from above.