

“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 also had no real battle plan or any idea what we *should* be doing in the first place.

On top of that, 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 332. 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 under an hour.

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, causing me to hiss through my teeth at the sharp pain. “Well, Orexis is busy with the Dukgriens. That was their name, right? Dukgrien?” I turned to Varrin, who 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 don’t feel 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.

“Fine,” 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.]*

“/s that unusual?” I said. “I thought most Delves had level requirements.”

*[They do, but most Delve portals will 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 one of the walls, 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, they 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.

"Sounds good," he 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.

“Well, 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 spat out 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?” said Nuralie.

“Hmm?”

“In your old world. Were there alchemists?”

“Maybe 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 did study pre-med for a while when I went back to undergrad 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. Something about growth vats and a type of corn liquor was involved... 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 that?” 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 her eyes 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 of 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 spirit-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.

The world rumbled as the text appeared.

**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: Evolution Specialization**

**Xim Xor’Drel: Evolution Specialization**

**Varrin Ravvenblaq: Evolution Specialization**

**Nuralie of Vyxmeldo’a: Evolution Specialization**

**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.

{Heyyyyyy guys. Sorry about trying to kill you on the way in and all.}

{Not that I didn't have a good reason to stop a cosmic spirit from piggybacking its way in with you and destroying everything I've worked for during my entire VERY LONG existence, but-}

{Nnnnnnow that that's water under the bridge, maybe I can get your help with something?}