

“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 in 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.

“Well, 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 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.”

“Well, 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 asked. “You said 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 then we followed it inside.

The room was completely bare, lacking any of the mana-weaves, and lit by the typical glowstones we’d found in the Creation Delve and that I’d seen used around Hiward. 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, well 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 many strings to allow the group’s entry.]*

“That was for Etja and Orexis,” Varrin said.

*[Would you bet your life on it?]*

The Delve rumbled again, the tremors strong enough to force me to bend my knees to keep balance.

{Yeah! You’re all technicians! Hurry up and go inside, please!}

“Did you really check?” I asked. “Or are we just running out of time?”

“Die now or die later,” 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, then 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 engaged with two creatures that looked like little more than clouds of gas, but they each had a pair of three-foot horns that were solid and trying to gore Varrin's stomach. The warrior's greatsword passed through them without causing any visible harm, until he growled and his blade lit up with mana. He made a wide horizontal slash that caused the creatures to puff out of existence, their horns clattering to the ground as they disappeared.

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 what looked like 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 this 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 had to deal 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, and his smile was just a bit too wide to be human. His eyes also existed within the uncanny valley, being a bit too big, even on his large face. Also, his other eyes were a bit too big, even on the left side of his large face. *And* his other other eyes were a bit 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 still had 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 a bit 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?"

"Well, 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, exposing what was an otherwise invisible barrier surrounding him. It peeled up and away, floating into the air in chunks and clouds, then being sucked in by the wards, which began behaving more 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!"