

“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.

“Jesus, I didn’t know he was gonna take it in that direction.”

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, as though he were 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.”

“People?” said Nuralie, raising an eyebrow at Grotto.

{But that’s my name...}

“Sentient entities,” I corrected myself. “We can come up with something better. Maybe a nickname, like Nate? Kind of sounds like ‘98.”

{Hey! Listen!}

“Oh, no. You don’t want me to call you Navi.”

{What? Nevermind. Why are you naming me yourselves? It’s *my* name!}

“Most people don’t name themselves,” I said. “Their parents do.”

{I don’t have any parents.}

“That’s very sad.”

“Just call him Cage,” said Varrin. “It’s what you did with Grotto. Just name it after the Delve.”

“Wow, 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. Wwwwwhatevver, guys. Call me Cage, I don’t care. Look, I’ve added it to my USER DESIGNATION. Happy?}

{We don’t have time to fffffffool around, you insipid lunatics!}

I wasn’t sure if Cage realized he was still broadcasting what sounded like his side-thoughts. They were quieter and a lot faster than his normal speech, and definitely didn’t do him any favors in the ‘winning us over’ department. Like the mental equivalent of muttering under his breath, except unlike the ears of your asshole boss who might be in another room when you shit-talk about them, our brains were point blank to Cage’s mental communication.

[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 thousand nine hundred and six years ago, I was born. 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. The mini-c’thon hadn’t done it in a while, which made me think his connection to my brain had grown more harmonious. Even when Grotto had done it, 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.]

"Ohhhh," I said. "Did you just execute a mafia hit for the System, Grotto? Like, if Nasro was right and the System has gone bananas, it makes sense that it might want you to kill him."

[What kind of question is that, Arlo? He was working with an ancient evil deity to unleash its twin sister to wreak havoc upon the world.]

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "I'm sure this portends nothing of events to come."

{Well, uh, 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 like 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?"

{Well, 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 godsdamn 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 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."

{Rrrrrright,} 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 asked.

{Don't ask. Now, here's the real problem-}

“That’s not the real problem?” I said, feeling my head begin 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, rrrrobust mana-capacity, but the Delve is devoting sizeable resources to managing the mana flow and venting the excess.}

“So 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 bullshit. 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 one. 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?” I said.

{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 a little 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 mana-monsters, right?"

{Unlike other Delves, The Cage was not designed with prospective Delvers in mind. We do not normally allow the growth of mana-monsters.}

"That's good," I said.

{However,} Cage continued, thwarting my cheer at the news, {because the restrictions are failing, a small amount of the guests' divinity is leaking out. 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 dim 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 the longer she was with us the more human her appearance became.

Her earthen skin texture had morphed to become indistinguishable from human by this point. Her skin tone was a reddish-brown which seemed to be an average of the rest of our group. I also 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 it had started to get a bit weird with her walking around like an undressed Barbie doll. Fortunately, Nuralie took the initiative on getting her dressed before anyone said anything about it.

“You have a platinum level, Etja,” I said. “Do you know how to do anything with that? 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 nearly 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, well things may get pretty dangerous. Don’t try to be a hero or anything. 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?” I said.

“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.}