

“Grotto?” I said, looking over the small dude.

He was three feet tall, although his robes dangled down to cover his feet, so he may have been shorter. He was bald and bare-faced, looking like some kind of religious monk with beliefs that ran antithetical to hair growth, with deeply tanned skin. He held his hands behind his back, chest puffed up proudly and he managed to look down upon us all from where he hovered.

“Yes?” he said.

“You’re not a mini-c’thon.”

Grotto raised an eyebrow and floated closer to me, peering at my face.

“And the three nose hairs that grow to excessive length out of your left nostril are no longer present, either. It would seem that this layer allows one to assert their own self-image upon their chassis.”

“This is how you see yourself?” I said, rubbing at my nose. I’d have to check on that when we got back. “Your ‘self-image’ is a diminutive bald guy in robes?”

“My personality matrix was forged from my predecessor, as you may recall. From my perspective, I lived my entire life as the man you see before you prior to being assigned a Delve. I have had no need for mirrors within my facilities, so there has been nothing to amend that perception.”

As Grotto spoke, he brought a hand around to gesticulate, and a feathered c’thonic feeler sprouted from beneath the loose sleeve. I pointed at it and he followed my gesture, then paused.

“I suppose that since adopting the form of Ihbriobrixilas, these limbs have been in my field of vision quite often.”

He brought his other arm around, which was also a wagging tentacle, then looked down as several more sprouted from the hem of his robes.

“You look like you’re about to be summoned to form some dark pact with unwitting primates,” I said, “dooming them to an eternity of mishap because you misinterpreted their simple wishes.”

“I have not done that in some time,” he said, then spun in the air, feelers flailing. I couldn’t tell if he was joking. *“This is unsatisfactory. If I am to be a man, I require arms. If I am to be a c’thon, then these ribs will be an impediment.”*

I watched in awe as his body began to twist and reshape itself. For a moment he became the rune-covered orb that was normally hidden beneath his c'thon disguise, which made me suspicious of his claim of having no mirrors. Then, the limbs and feathers sprouted anew and he was back to being a downy little octo.

He looked over his appendages, then stared at them intently. They began to elongate and the gray robes reappeared to cover him from just below his big black eyes. Two tentacles sprouted from the sleeves and small hands formed at the ends of two of them. Once finished, he looked like a dark wizard who had been the victim of a tragic polymorph backfire and was somehow even cuter than he had been before. Except for the hands. The hands were creepy as shit.

[That should suffice,] he thought to us. [There are many advantages to phalanges. I shall make use of them while I am here.]

“You can’t magic yourself some fingers in the First Layer?”

[I have no desire to modify my usual form into a horrid amalgamation such as Shog has done. I also doubt that many would be fooled by my disguise if I were to take such liberties.]

“Fair enough,” I said, trying to avoid looking at the child-like hands he now possessed. I turned to the trio of Third Layer residents. “Is this... normal?”

“Nothing’s normal with Grotto,” said Xim.

“It is impressive,” Drel said, looking at Grotto. “You have already learned to amend the belief in your concept. It is a skill that might take years to learn, and never be mastered.”

[Thank you for your kind words, Patriarch Drel’gethed.] I was briefly taken aback by the gratitude. *[You will find that I am equally superior in many other areas. The bounds of my talents are as wide as the cosmos, and likewise ever expanding.]* Ok, that sounded more like Grotto.

Xorna tittered at the Delve Core’s comments.

“His sense of identity is surprisingly malleable,” she said. “I think he’ll fit in well.”

“Can anyone do this?” I said. “Is that how...” I gestured at Drel’s shade-like body. Xim’s father looked down at himself, then back to me.

“To what do you refer?” he said.

“I, uh, never mind.”

Xim gave her father a playful shove.

“Dad’s messing with you,” she said, and I spotted a small grin on Drel’s speckled face.

“My body has many adaptations,” he said. “They come from different sources. Some are from reshaping my identity, as Grotto has done. Others are from Sam’lia’s gifts, like your eyes, Arlo. Yet more have come from the System’s guidance.”

I considered the changes that I had undergone in my brief time as a Delver. I’d made a series of small modifications to my body during Creation, and my black sclera and cosmic-green irises came from The Eye. It had only been a year, so I could imagine that undergoing decades of compounding modifications might result in an appearance that was wholly distinct from where I’d started. Especially if I were to begin trying to ‘reshape’ my identity.

Maybe I could get an extra pair of eyes on my back...

“Don’t get any ideas,” said Xim, watching my gears turn. “Messing around with your sense of self is as dangerous as it is complicated. It’s something that most denizens never attempt.”

“Drel is braver than most,” said Xorna, sidling up next to her husband and taking his hand. “I’d worry that my brain would fall out of my head if I tried to make myself a lady of the shadows.”

“I’ll put that idea on hold, then,” I said.

“Now that we’ve had our hellos,” said Xim, “let’s eat!”

The food took me on an emotional journey, and I don’t mean that in a hyperbolic ‘chef’s kiss’ kind of way. I mean that the cuisine was prepared by a man who’d made it his business to impart specific emotional states into the dishes themselves.

There were loaded mushrooms that evoked comfort and ease, followed by a roast that inspired confidence with a side of saucy vegetables engendering harmony. For dessert, we had a caramelized pudding that reminded me of creme brulee, and which encouraged a sensation of wellness and belonging, as though I were exactly where I was meant to be.

Each of the foods came with a status indicator and I was offered the option of resisting the effects using my Wisdom, but I decided to give the Third Layer spread an honest

first try. Overall, it was the best meal I'd ever had, which had less to do with how tasty it was and more so how I felt afterward.

Despite buying a residence in Foundation, I'd spent most of the year in Ravvenblaq or on the road, falling into the wandering adventurer lifestyle I'd wanted to avoid, at least in part. If anything, the penthouse I'd set up in my Closet was what I considered my primary residence, but it was hard to think of it as stable and stationary. After lunch with the Xor'Drels, I felt my mind and body invite me to relax, settle in, and drop the sense of constant vigilance I'd been keeping up ever since arriving in Arzia.

After eating, I was given a tour of the Irgriana tree, which housed about a third of the tribe's population. A series of spiraling tunnels wrapped around the trunk, their walls knotted and curved, looking as though they'd grown there naturally. The many windows I'd seen from a distance were floor-to-ceiling arches that bathed the tunnels in light from outside. We took our time moving about, foregoing the rapid dream-step travel that Xim had used and allowing me to orient myself and take in the tree's layout.

I absorbed the relative positions of everything rapidly. My level twenty Intelligence evolution was called Coordinated Thinker, which gave me a significant boost in my ability to understand a range of spatial and dimensional concepts. That included spatial relationships, so it was easy for me to memorize where everything was even as the tunnels meandered through elevation and depth within the tree.

I was introduced to everyone we passed, each of whom treated the Xor'Drels with respect, but it was informal. The reigning couple seemed closer to well-loved governors than monarchs or nobles, although I kept their station in mind as we interacted with the people. I saw no other Delvers but was assured that the tribe had a handful more. The Creation slots assigned to the Third Layer rotated between the major tribes, so the Xor'Drels were represented every five to seven years, and when they participated they were allowed to send only a single individual.

Even without many Delvers, the tribe was awash in magic, from constructs like the spires I'd seen on the way in, to the mana-rich plants that grew in plethora around the buildings. The houses along the branches of the Irgriana tree had terraced gardens where a variety of alchemical fruits and herbs were cultivated, illuminated by mana lamps that let off a sparkling vapor.

Despite being called a hell layer, the Xor'Drel region was closer to a botanical garden, albeit one that looked like it could be the backdrop for an operatic metal music video. It was mystic and alive, the colors a vivid contrast between dark roots and bark and vibrant flowers and decor, all set between the crimson planes of the ruby soil below and the ever-watching Eye above.

It wasn't even hot. It was quite pleasant, in fact. And not a single tortured soul in sight.

By the time we'd finished our tour of the tree, the light of the Eye had dimmed and it was nearing time to retire for the evening. We discussed plans for the next day and it was decided that it would see me commune with Sam'lia at dawn. The Xor'Drels were adamant that Her guidance should lay the groundwork for how I spent my time in the layer, and I tried to hide my reluctance as I agreed. The idea of speaking with the deity made me anxious, not because I was afraid of her—well, that's not true, she was a fucking god, the idea of being smote was always a possibility—but mainly because I was afraid of what she *wanted* from me. What if it was something that I wasn't willing to give?

I bid the others good night and went to sleep on a bed made of the very concept of comfy.

“What's inside?” I asked.

I stood before a squat stone building nestled into the limbs of the Irgriana tree. It was built in the center of the canopy and had required a decent climb to reach, which had been a good way to warm up after the best night of sleep I'd had in a year. Its exterior was plain and unadorned, lacking even the colorful cloth and hanging ornamentation that the rest of the village sported.

“Nothing,” said Xim, speaking with quiet reverence. “It is *known* that there is nothing inside, and so it is empty.”

“Does nothingness have a sacred meaning to Sam'lia?”

“No,” said Xim. “I might say the opposite. The purpose of the building being empty is that when you enter, the only things within will be you, Sam'lia, and whatever you've brought with you.”

“Was I... supposed to bring a gift?”

Xim smirked.

“It wouldn't have been a bad idea, but it's not expected.”

“I could give her some poison essences.”

“That wouldn’t mean much,” she said.

“Why not? They’re worth a heap of notes.”

“It’s less to do with what the item is worth to society, as much as what it’s worth to *you*, or the effort you spent acquiring it for Sam’lia. You’ve still got hundreds of essences, so they’re not that valuable.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “I value them at exactly thirty-two golden notes a piece, as per my contract with Seinnador.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, which meant she wasn’t interested in a debate. “Unless you’ve got something you’ve prepared yourself, it’s probably better not to offer anything.”

“Like a handmade card?”

Xim nodded. “She likes those.”

“Oh. I could make one. We could come back later.”

“Just get inside!” she said, giving me a shooing motion.

“What about Grotto?” I asked. “He said he wanted to come.”

“If Grotto wants to go in, he can go in on his own after you’re done.” She placed a hand on her chin and looked thoughtful. “I wonder if she’d be willing to talk to Grotto.”

I took a deep breath, then walked toward the building. The door was simple, with only a handle. Not even a knob or latch to keep it shut. I pulled it open and peered into the interior. It was dark inside, impenetrable even with my sight.

“Call her Lady Sam’lia!” Xim called after me. “Or Dark Mother! Or say ‘My goddess’! ‘Divine One’ works as well!”

I steeled my nerves and stepped across the threshold, then pulled the door closed behind me.

The room was utterly black for a moment, but a gentle light began to fill the space like someone was slowly pushing up a dimmer switch. When the light rose enough to see again, I found myself in a well-appointed sitting room.

The colors and vibe matched the rest of the village, from the dark and winding roots that served as the body of the chandelier on the ceiling, to the luxuriously polished wood counter on the bar in the corner. There were two overstuffed armchairs of the deepest shade of brown set before a small fireplace, which crackled with a fire that burned blue.

In one of the chairs was a woman in her early forties, looking every bit like your middle-school best friend's mom. She wore a royal blue dress, loose and comfortable, with a few subtle pieces of jewelry that looked like they were made of ivory, or possibly bone. Her eyes and hair were blood red, and she smiled when I caught sight of her.

"Hello, Arlo," she said, cheerfully. "It's wonderful to meet you in the flesh."