

I raised my eyebrow at Grotto's claim.

[I thought improving my stats with training was just some divine fuckery.]

[It is. However, I believe that I can distill the fuckery into quantifiable concepts. I have examined your mana-matrix closely, and found a strange interaction between the matrix and your mana-veins.]

[Those are different things?]

[I do not wish for this discussion to devolve into a rudimentary lesson on the physiology of inherently magical creatures, but yes.]

I would quickly discover that Grotto was about to devolve into a rudimentary lesson on the physiology of inherently magical creatures.

[They are different things, though inextricably linked. Your mana-matrix, among other functions, anchors your mana-veins to your soul, while your mana-veins themselves act as a conduit for mana in your body.]

[Is that why my soul-sight is so effective at seeing how powerful someone is? I'm seeing the strength of the mana-matrix?]

[I- Well, yes, I suppose that theory may be sound. Strength is a poor word, however, perhaps robustness. We would need to do some testing... we could- Ack! This is a digression! Pay attention and try not to let your mind wander.]

[I'm just a curious guy, Grotto, but I'll hold my questions.]

[As I was saying, your mana-matrix anchors your mana-veins to your soul, while the mana-veins direct the flow of mana through the body. For a magical creature to increase its capacity it must improve both systems. However, the mana-matrix grows reactively to improvements in the mana-veins. The mana-veins themselves improve via exposure to elevated levels of mana.]

[Sure. Makes sense.]

[Most creatures exist with a certain level of homeostasis to the ambient mana around them. This is why a normal magical creature or mana-monster will typically mature to an adult state and no longer grow in strength or size without intervention. Their veins and matrix grow acclimatized to the ambient mana and reach an ideal form, after which they will no longer advance.]

[What if you dropped them into a denser mana concentration?]

Grotto gave me a glare.

[Each species acquires a natural end-point for their development based on the circumstances in which that type of monster has developed over generations. A typical mana-monster will reach maturity and that's where it will remain.]

That sounded a lot like magical evolution to me. I wondered if there'd been some sort of wizard-Darwin in Arzia, or if I could make that 'discovery' and take the credit.

[A mana-fiend, on the other hand, does not suffer this limitation. Its mana-matrix and veins are capable of adapting to any level of ambient mana. Because of this, they are driven to seek out ever-denser regions of mana, often finding the source of the enhanced mana and latching onto it.]

[Like the c'thon and the obelisk.]

[Which is precisely why that creature was so dangerous. It is likely the case that there are mana-fiends in other Delves, though one of a Delve Core's duties is to guard against such an event. A duty that I failed, regrettably.]

[It's alright bud, you did your best.]

Grotto spun to me and somehow managed to raise an octo-eyebrow.

[When a Delve remakes a Delver's body, it reorganizes the matrix and veins to accommodate a higher flow of mana and to respond to mana in a more dynamic way, similar to mana-fiend's.]

[Whoa, now. Aren't we getting into some of that forbidden knowledge you weren't willing to give up previously?]

[I have... decided to adjust your permissions in accordance with your role as co-arbiter of the Pocket Delve. But you shall not speak of this to anyone else!]

[Uh-huh. Thanks.]

That sounded like code for "I changed my mind, shut-up," but whatever helped the little core sleep at night. Or, shut down at night? Go into low-power mode? Did Grotto even rest at all?

[The normal operation of this new mana-organization is interlinked to the System and the Delve process. A Delver can only receive so much benefit at once, or their veins are

at risk of over-expansion, and their matrix will be unable to accommodate the new load. A Delve will inject mana into the Delver, who then decides in what areas to apply the mana to improve their veins and matrix prior to the injection dissipating.]

[Which is why there's a time limit for spending stat points,] I concluded.

[Indeed. Thus, via normal means a Delver cannot improve their stats without engaging in a Delve. They do not have access to the System's managed mana injections outside of the Delves, and what ambient mana they are able to draw in goes toward fine-tuning other mana-consuming systems, such as intrinsic and passive skills. Growth in those skills is analogous to the normal growth a magical creature might undergo during development, but the natural endpoint for such growth is set to a very high level in Delvers.

[Your personal mana veins and matrix are no different from a typical Delver's. I believe you experienced an injection prior to arriving in the Creation Delve from your divine benefactor, which explains your bonus starting stats. Since it was not managed by the System, you were still marked as a level zero Delver. However, in order for you to acquire further stats from training, there must be a source of the additional mana injections that you are receiving in order to generate the growth.]

[Wouldn't that also be my divine benefactor?]

[Yes, but no. It is more elegant than a godly being thrusting its essence into you from time-to-time. Beyond that, you do not cultivate the type of celestial connection that Divine casters and fighters do in order to gain access to such a benefit.]

[What's a celest-]

[Go and ask one of your religious allies if you want to know more about divinity and its relationship to magic. I'll not let you derail me again.]

I held up my hands in surrender.

[Please continue.]

[It appears that your mana veins have been coated with a crystallized form of mana that is diffusing itself into your veins in dense packets, with a release mechanism somehow governed by your activities. The mana is then automatically applied to the specific regions of your veins and matrix that have been primed to receive them through the training you've undergone. The growth is encouraged along both systems simultaneously.]

I made a series of thoughtful noises as Grotto continued to speak in increasingly technical terms. I was uncertain how I should be reacting to his revelations. My response was honestly a bit muted, but I think I understood what he was saying.

I needed Delve go-juice to get big-strong.

I didn't have Delve go-juice without Delve.

Something put Delve go-juice inside me to drip-drop over time.

Now I have Delve go-juice without Delve.

Arlo best hero, strongest hero.

[Not to rain on your parade, but does this help us... accomplish something?]

Grotto threw up his feelers.

[Do you not understand? This manner of encouraging Delver growth is unprecedented! It is a discovery for the ages! This could fundamentally alter one of the primary functions of Delves!]

[Oh. Uh, hooray?]

[No! Not hooray! This capability is insidious and must be forbidden from ever seeing the light of day!]

[That feels like a pretty quick one-eighty from what you were just saying. Aren't new and innovative ways of doing shit a good thing?]

I immediately realized that sounded like something Vlad the Impaler might have said while developing novel ways of driving his enemies before him and hearing the lamentations of their women. *Trust me, fellow Wallachians! This new and innovative method of shoving pikes up people's asses is a good thing! No one will ever fuck with us again!*

I mean, innovation was usually a good thing, I guess. But innovations discovered and pioneered by Grotto? Maybe not.

I snapped out of my daydream and realized Grotto had been waiting for me to refocus.

[Only if your single wish is to give as many unruly humans the might of demi-gods in as short a time-frame as possible.]

A world of super-Vlads!

[I suppose I can see the downside to that.]

[*Yes. You are unruly, violent, deceptive, base creatures driven by lust, greed, and pride.*]

[You forgot sloth, envy, wrath, and gluttony.]

Might as well give Grotto the entire list of choice sins while he went full fire and brimstone.

[*If I listed all seven then it would violate the law of threes and reduce the dramatic impact of my statement.*]

[I don't... why do you know that?]

[*The law of threes, or the seven deadly sins?*]

[Both? Never mind, I *know* why you know that.]

[*Yes, your own flamboyant mind has been arrayed against you. I will use this power to greater ends than you ever would. The world will come to fear my comprehensive grasp of linguistic technique!*]

Maybe more than just my emotions were bleeding over to Grotto through our connection.

[If this is unholy knowledge,] I thought to him, [then why tell me?]

[*What do you mean? So we can use it to our advantage, of course.*]

[But you just said-]

[*This knowledge should be hidden from other entities. We should absolutely **abuse** it towards our own **superiority** and **dominance**.*]

[Mm-hmm.]

I mean, Grotto was moving back into the endearing megalomania I'd come to expect from him, but hey, if it helped me kick a few booties, then why not let him fool around with technology that might upset the global balance of power?

As soon as that thought concluded I changed my mind. I absolutely did NOT want Grotto to be in possession of world-altering innovation for use in his diabolical pursuit of globe-spanning domination.

[You haven't figured out a way to make use of this newfound enlightenment, have you?]

[Perhaps...]

But then again, if I was the one who was acquiring unlimited powaaa, then it *could* be ok.

No.

Maybe.

[The nature of the crystallized mana is unique. I am familiar with compressing mana into similar forms—that is how mana-chips are created—but the concentration of what surrounds your mana-veins is likely of diamond grade or higher. Two orders of magnitude more concentrated than a ruby chip. The volume would also be several times greater than a typical diamond chip.]

He stroked his tentacles together in a way that was as sinister as it was cute. It was hard to keep a handle on how dangerous Grotto was in his itty-bitty-cephalopoid form.

[Further, the technique is only useful at lower stat values. Once your mana veins are sufficiently advanced, the strength of the injections will no longer prove adequate to encourage stat growth. Anything under ten is trivial to encourage growth in comparison to what is generated by a well-developed Delve obelisk. This technique is also inordinately expensive. It would be a ludicrous expenditure of mana for the benefits being received.]

Well, that was disappointing.

I mean, that's good. He didn't know how to use it. That was good. Yes.

But disappointing.

[Is that the full report?]

[Does this not excite you?]

[You just said yourself that it's useless with higher stat values, so it's not much of an advantage to me. I mean, great job and all, but even if you figured it out you'd need to use it on...someone...else... Damn, am I an asshole? You could use it on Xim and Nuralie.]

[Yes. Varrin as well. He is a capable fighter who is indebted to you and with a powerful family. He would prove an indispensable tool for your cause, and his obligation toward you would only increase with such a powerful gift.]

[Eh, I mean, Varrin? He got a bit better after the Creation Delve, but it's Varrin.]

[You must find it in your heart to forgive his prior actions.]

[The fuck? You're just saying that because you want to use him.]

*[Of course I want to use him! We will become **indomitable!** Unyielding **bulwarks** upon which our enemies shall **shatter** the vessels that are their **dreams!**]*

Grotto's tentacles flailed as he monologued, and I watched him with unease.

[Ok, good talk.] He continued to flail, caught up in his imagined future full of demon-lord level conquest. [If there's nothing else, I'm gonna go check on our ETA to Arsenal.]

Grotto stopped his flailing, then quickly regained his composure.

[I have taken the liberty of banking the mana being generated by the obelisk. If we wish to pursue this endeavor, then we'll need massive reserves. Assuming that I figure out the specific technique for creating the specialized crystal mana... and that I figure out how to apply it to a Delver's mana-veins without killing them. But such challenges are no more than a trivial stumbling block before me!]

[That locks up any expansion to the Closet. How long do you think it will take to store up enough mana?]

[The obelisk is currently producing three-hundred-and-twelve mana per hour after the recent expansions and improvements.]

[Wow, that's a whole lot more than before!]

[Yes, this dimensional realm is a highly fertile source even without any modifications to the environment for generating additional yield. I estimate it will take approximately... eighteen point two nine years.]

I scratched at my beard, studying the indecipherable symbols still crawling by on the wall-slate.

[Yeah, that's way too long to get everyone situated with-]

[Per Delver.]

[Grotto.]

[Yes?]

[Set the obelisk back to expanding the Closet. I need some bedrooms and shit. Maybe a bathroom, or at least a tub.]

The mini-c'thon deflated.

[Perhaps you are right. We must focus on enhancing our gathering rate. It would ultimately reduce the overall timeline.]

[Wasn't that kind of obvious?]

[I am unused to dealing with temporal matters at the truncated scale of biological meatbags that wither and die the moment a single century has passed. I rarely concern myself with such trivial inefficiencies.]

[Sure, brother. That makes sense.]

I just wanted to take a fucking bath whenever I wanted. I could probably make a tub even bigger than the one they had at the Temple of Creation. A heated swimming pool, maybe, or a Japanese style bathhouse. Yeah, that's the one. I'd have to figure out how to portal in a hot spring, though.

Another one for The List.

Overall this discussion had been a bit like a fever dream. I'd learned a lot, but wasn't sure if I should be on board with Grotto's idea or not. It was also a struggle to manage both my own idiosyncrasies and Grotto's tendency toward villainous soliloquy while having a coherent dialogue. I needed a damn referee for these chats.

Then again, would anyone I knew have made the conversation *less* insane?