

The last chamber of the Pygmy Maze made even Estal's usual complaints fall short in stunned silence. It was a large sunken chamber, likely the deepest the second floor ever went with a large dome like ceiling and pillars covered in those glowing mushrooms akin to floating stars. A central path made of cobblestones led to the back of the room where stairs rose to an altar, but between the entrance and those stairs were rows of flowers growing out of unique pots and jars; every flower swaying as gentle music seemed to flow down from the ceiling; a piece that made the group feel like they were in some sacred place; a church or temple.

"W-what is this place?" Estal finally asked, her voice feeling like an intrusion to the room.

"The final resting place of our people," came an old tone from behind them. Spinning, Hazhur reached for his weapon, but paused as they saw the Pygmy Village Elder being escorted by the three 'special' beings of their race.

The Priest, The Fungalmancer, and the Tinker.

"Dungeon monsters don't die," Silver said, more a reaction than a statement to the words.

"We do," the elder said before looking at his escorts, "well, most of us," he chuckled. The Priest looked up at the group with a gentle serenity.

"Pygmies were given the gift of life, to create more of ourselves due to the gift of this floor. But with life... we accepted death too. Only those chosen to become bastions of the race become true monsters of the Dungeon; timeless," it explained.

"Then these... are memorials," Karn said simply, eyeing the rows of pots and flowers.

"We are unlike the great Mother's other monsters; perhaps... closer to that of the Moon than the Sun. We are more feral... more cunning than most of the societies that she will create, but in return, we have an evolving culture, a community, and understanding that few others will," The Fungalmancer proclaimed.

"We must develop and evolve our tools... using tricks and traps rather than open warfare since we do not respawn in the same manner. We willingly pass our lives onto our spores; our children," the Tinker finished and the Elder held up a hand to stall them.

"And those who pass, we lay to rest for their final vigil," he nodded before chuckling.

"However, perhaps we are too casual to you who do not truly know what lies beyond life? We can see the mana leaving our old and entering our new. A cycle... So please... don't step on the flowers. You have passed the final test so claim the key and depart our tunnels with the mark of bravery, cunning, and wisdom etched into your soul," the elder wheezed, clearly struggling to keep all of his words in a dialect they could understand.

"Dungeon monsters... die," Silver repeated, getting a worried look from Hazhur and Estal as the cloaked figure looked out over the rows of memorials.

"Don't mean to be rude, but I heard your lot kind of formed because your Dungeon... er... died?" Karn asked awkwardly, getting a wide-eyed look from Estal who made slicing motions across her throat in panic.

"Our fate was not death, but a ripping of our life. Without our core, we turned from silver art to gray granite ash, locked in last gasping moments of agony. But we did not die," Silver said, voice so low it was almost bestial.

"Only when one half of me wandered into the Tomb of Tarnished Silver, did my trapped essence latch on... to someone compatible," Silver said finally and pulled his cloak tighter around himself.

"Question," came a familiar annoying voice and they looked up to see Mharia the 'guide'.

"What?" Estal asked, clearly not liking the fairy was ruining such a gentle atmosphere.

"Do you know why your core went corrupt?" Mharia asked so casually it was almost rude beyond belief. Silver twitched and for a moment, a lump appeared on their right shoulder, bulging as if Silver was struggling to contain something before he calmed himself.

"A conflict between duty and heart," Silver finally said and said no more.

Mharia pondered that, vanishing a moment later. Hazhur cleared his throat and led the group down the path, being very careful not to tread on any flowers, the pots becoming older and more cracked as they neared the altar.

The stairs looked weathered and well-worn, but at the top an intricate bird bath sat in a shaft of light, the key laid in the empty basin and Hazhur slowly took it, expecting something to happen, but they all breathed a sigh of relief when it seemed their trial truly was over.

They turned as a group and all the Pygmies were just... gone, as if they had never been there. To the side of the room; a passageway blocked off by large mushroom caps and roots began to pull back revealing a narrow spiraling stone staircase back to the surface.

The solemn air tensed as if they had worn out their welcome.

"Let's go," Hazhur insisted and followed a secondary path along the wall to the potential exit. As they climbed the stairs, there came the sound of shifting earth before Karns spoke up.

"The stairs are collapsing behind us," he said ever so casually.

“Run, you buffoons!” Estal screeched, holding up her staff to light the way. With the sound of metal shifting and fabrics moving, they began to run up the stairs. Hazhur was doing his best to overtake Estal, but in his haste, his head wrappings came loose, snagged by a stray root, exposing his ram horns.

Estal looked over with wide-eyes and her foot missed the next step she was aiming for.

Karn reached down, sticking his head through Estal’s legs like a robust horse, carrying her with sheer force and neck muscles.

“Horns!” Estal screamed.

“GET YOUR HEAD OUT OF MY COUSIN’S LEGS!”

“No time!” Karn said back.

Behind them, Silver just stared in awe at his ‘friends’ antics. Light ahead showed the exit was near...

The Trial of the Pygmies was finally over... but their trouble had just begun.

Delta sat up, eyes blinking away sleep that couldn’t be real, but she rubbed her eyes all the same. She had been awoken by something she could only describe as a ‘toothache’. As if some piece of food had been wedged into her teeth and now the ache was spreading up the side of her face.

‘Awake, are you?’ Nu greeted as he appeared before her but upon seeing her grimace, he paused.

‘So... you do feel it.’ Nu seemed to muse.

“Nu? Feel what? The stabbing pain in my head? Yeah... I feel *that* and the guests! Good, I didn’t dream them up,” she stood up, wincing and Nu moved around her as if assessing her state. Delta leaned on her core for support as she tried to get her bearings once more. The orange orb now striped with thin blue veins glowed warmly at her touch.

“What is that?” she asked, herself mostly, but she was surprised when Nu answered all the same.

‘Invasion.’ Nu announced.

Delta stiffened at the word because she could feel Nu didn't mean the guests just coming into the Dungeon but something deeper... more subconscious to the Dungeon itself. She spread her awareness over the entire Dungeon and instantly knew the source of her discomfort.

One of the people in her Dungeon carried a part of something... not human. A piece of something that drove her Dungeon parts into a frenzy of feeling like it was intruding. Then came a slight urge to send her monsters to attack, to remove it, but Delta easily clamped down on those urges with practiced ease.

She focused on the person, switching her vision to Dungeon Sight, watching the walls, people, monsters, and the Dungeon itself break down into connected atoms of mana and bonds.

Delta let out a slight gasp of horror at the sight.

The person had their body mingled with a Dungeon being, slowly allowing the Dungeon Mana to become 'real'. A reverse contract of sorts, a possession, but also... it seemed willing on the human's part.

What was worse was that her mana could not breach the person and the seed within fastened itself to both the person and the Dungeon aspect, using both to shield itself from her attempts to drain it away.

Delta slowly watched the person talk with his group, biting her lip as the jaw ache she was experiencing began to dull in intensity.

"That might be trouble, but how have they been progressing? I see they have two keys out of three," Delta asked, trying to change the subject to something she could control for now.

'They're worse than the last group and I'm enjoying every moment of their suffering. You missed the secret fish level.' Nu announced and Delta snapped her fingers with clear disappointment.

"Ah well, next time," she smiled, not bothering to admonish Nu's bloodthirsty words. He was mostly joking at this point.

Still... that meant only one key was in circulation.

She watched as Rale appeared before the group once more, offering to guide them to their last destination before the boss room.

"And where's this fabulous place?" the girl asked sarcastically as she smoothed down her robes and glared at the jungle floor for being dirt and soil.

Delta spoke at the same time as Rale, their words echoing slightly.

"The Circus of the Damned".

Kemy watched as Smalls evaluated the cloud dress as her group browsed the shelves of his other 'interesting' items.

"It was really light and it never got dirty," she blurted out awkwardly, feeling the need to praise the dress for service as if it was a new friend she wanted to get a promotion from her boss. Mr Smalls smiled.

"I would hope so, it was made from taking essence of a sentient cloud and having to weave together with blessed thread. If it had been heavy, I'd be appalled," he announced simply as her group leader, Delem, picked out what looked to be a provocative leather piece that was covered in spikes and parts of the back of the pants seemed to be missing...

Kemy guessed it wasn't finished.

She looked around the store, beginning to wonder when they had exactly come to Durance... it felt like maybe a week at most, but the town also seemed to shift with commerce and new arrivals in such a small time that she wondered if the chaotic mana about the place might be... distorting their sense of time.

Ever since they had left Delta, Kemy having gone twice even, the Scarlet Moons had felt changed. As if some parts of them were different... forever changed. Days passed and for a small time Kemy and her friends just stopped... being people for a time.

As their natural mana slowly absorbed the town and nearby Dungeon mana in the air, they had, for a frightful day or two, become still in a sense their emotions... purpose... had dulled. They got up, they ate breakfast at the inn, they talked about going to the Dungeon or about the rise of monster attacks, had dinner... then went to bed.

It had... terrified Kemy until they woke up one day to find their mana completely saturated and the gray film over their minds and souls lifted.

Aneya, standing striking in her dark leather and arms crossed, knew what had happened.

The Curse of Durance. The effects of living over a dead mana veins of the land, but thankfully the Dungeon's mana seemed almost designed to help people quickly overcome the effects of such a thing.

Delta's mana in the air felt purposeful... and sometimes a little excitable. Kemy idly turned her mushroom staff, ignoring the bemused smile of Mr Smalls at the sight of it.

“Well, I am glad to say the dress won’t require any repairs so you must have handled it beautifully,” the tailor said brightly and Kemy offered him a shy smile as her group shot her grins.

Though he offered no reward at the time, Mr Smalls went under his counter and brought up carefully wrapped parcels, one for each of them.

“I made them with care and attention to the detail,” the man promised as he handed them over to the group. Kemy opened the package to see a bright orange fabric, it looked a little like a shirt, but much tighter with stretchy material at the neck and sleeves. The front showed an animated smiling mushroom cap with large eyes.

It had a little speech bubble coming off it as it winked.

‘I experienced mushrooms in Delta’s Dungeon!’ it proclaimed. Kemy smiled awkwardly, not saying anything that could be conceived as a white lie. Delem’s was the same but with a different line.

‘Delta’s mushrooms are the only mushroom-shaped thing I put in my mouth!’

Kemy heard Aneya swallow back a comment and her ‘shirt’ wasn’t much better.

‘I went inside Delta and all I got was this sweet loot!’

Kemy needed to see what Gonga’s shirt was, the giant of the man holding his extra large shirt aloft. His went on and on, until it nearly went off the shirt entirely.

“That one was a custom job,” Mr Smalls admitted.

‘Cocktails to knock your socks off at Fera’s Bar! Located in Delta’s Dungeon, meals are provided with drinks. No shirt, no sale. No money, no sale. No manners, no sale. Fera’s bar is not legally responsible for any spontaneous splitting of forms, body morphing, hair growth, or surprise employment.’

The back was a large image of a smirking hog with an apple stuck on one of its tusks, the name ‘Swarthy Hog’ underneath it in fancy black writing.

“I’ll swap you,” Aneya and Delem said at the same time and Gongo hugged it close.

“I can wear this outside, I can’t with yours,” he muttered protectively.

Kemy could not blame the man.

“Thank you,” Kemy said, bowing to the man who was far too entertained at their expressions.

“This is a whole new line of business...” Mr Smalls mused.

“Stretchy shirts that said things that would embarrass anyone with shame?” Aneya asked sarcastically as she tucked the free gift away in her bag.

“Clothing that makes people curious! Walking words that draw the eye to Dungeon Delta’s weirdness... clothes that tempt...” Mr Smalls’ eyes lit up.

“Temptation Shirts!” he cried as if the idea struck him like lightning. Kemy smiled at him again, but she really hoped his idea didn’t spread. People walking around with weird jokes written on their clothes would make her want to stop and stare.

“Enjoy your T...shirts,” Delem said with manners and ushered Aneya out of the store quickly. Kemy turned to leave but the owner called out to her and she turned back.

The slightly excitable energy about him had calmed down and he looked serious.

“Your group should move on soon,” he advised and Kemy blinked at the words, at the tone shift.

“I...sorry?” she said and he looked at her with a sort of sadness.

“You’re young things. Lots to live for and a world to see. Don’t stick around Durence too long. It has ways of sinking into you and... well... things are going to get troublesome around here,” he warned and Kemy hesitated before she spoke up.

“From the Kingdom? How they regulate Dungeons or Fairplay?” she asked softly and Mr Smalls rubbed a small white scar on one his otherwise pristine fingertips.

“I don’t recall,” he said finally and that was a strange thing to say, but Kemy didn’t sense any lies about his words.

And that scared Kemy more than his warning could.

Hazhur looked up at the massive form sitting before what could have been a crack in the dungeon wall, a tunnel of sorts.

“It’s a monkey,” Karn pointed out and the giant creature bared its teeth in annoyance, shifting slightly to show there was no tail coming off its rear.

"It's in the way... do we scoot around or..." Estal brought up testily and the giant ape thing eyed her before sniffing.

"No need, Wilhelm here is just keeping you outside while those inside do one final preparation," Rale beamed, coming to stand near them and Estal's crabby nature instantly turned soft and she giggled at him.

"Oh that makes sense, Mr Rale," she said and Hazhur coughed at her.

"Shut it, goat," she said, her smile never faltering. Hazhur winced and felt like he took some form of mental damage as he curled inwards... a little like his horns.

"If I'm a goat, you're a damn succubus harpy," he retorted, feeling like he was ten years old and pulling his cousin's hair for ruining his stick fortress. Silver wandered over and the giant creature let Silver stroke his furry hand, more curious of Silver than annoyed.

"What exactly is the circus of the damned," Hazhur asked, to put them back on track.

"Circus of the Damned," Rale said as if correcting him.

"That's what I said? Circus of the damned?" Hazhur blinked at the muscular frogman.

"It has... weight to it. Imagine the words are your last lifeline to the top of a ravine, the last light before night, or the last flickering of a candle before the darkness comes," Rale insisted, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"Circus of the...Damned," Karn said, voice grave and Rale nodded in approval.

"I'll just abbreviate it," Hazhur muttered, not giving into the urge to be dramatic.

"What is...COD? COtD?" he tried it aloud.

"No, come on! Say it right," Estal poked him with a devilish smile. Hazhur met her eyes and narrowed his own eyes to a glare.

"You say it first," he gritted out. Estal's smile turned bright and she put a hand to her head, leaning into Rale with a flutter of her eyes.

"I want to hear about the... Circus of the *Damned*," she whispered and the frog caught her before she could fall flat on her face. The trees around them ached and groaned as if her tone was adding to some effect.

They all turned to Hazhur, even the damn monkey. He inhaled, wondering if he could just leave at this point..

“Circus... of the d..Damned,” Hazhur stuttered, feeling foolish. Estal and Karns eyes went wide and he glared at them.

“I said it? What more do you want?” he asked, annoyed and Estal raised a finger, skin going ashen.

“Behind...you...” she croaked and Hazhur stiffened. He just noticed the bird song had gone quiet, the river nearby seemed to lower in volume, the very life of the jungle had paused for a moment, and Hazhur felt a chill crawling up his spine.

He looked over one shoulder into a face that was a little like a dummy’s with beady eyes and a drawn on little smile, his outfit red with a tophat on his head. The red was vivid... a little too dark to be cheerful and his ruffles looked more like spider web. He held a cane and when he tilted his head, dirty hair flowed down to one side.

“All greet... Circus Master Renny,” Rale said, bowing at the creature.

“He...llo?” Hazhur said, wondering why he was shaking.

The creature tilted his head again and smiled, the entire lower half of his mouth splitting open like an eldritch nightmare that informed the group the painted smile was a trap. Teeth as long as Hazhur’s fingers glinted at him and the black gums seemed to suck in any light.

That was the exact moment that Hazhur’s horns fell off in fright.

“Woo, Renny! First visitors! I am in your corner!” Delta cried, shaking her hips in a circular motion as Renny made her guests pee themselves at first greeting.

“My little ghoul is a man!” she fist pumped the air excitedly, unable to help but enjoy the moment as this would be the first time the Circus of the Damned would put on a show!

Delta even had a ticket!

Sure, she made it, but she still had one!

‘I am going to enjoy this...immensely,’ was Nu’s comment. Renny shot them a cheeky wink as he turned, clapping his hands, which made no sound at all, as the tunnel ahead ignited with ghostly blue fire that seemed to shimmer off different mushrooms.

It was time for the show to begin...

