

“I don’t *have* to chant to cast *Explosion!*” I said to Etja through a mouthful of stew-soaked brown bread. It was warm and buttery and presently fulfilling all of my lifelong dreams and fantasies. “I started doing it half as a joke, and half because it was a great way to let every aberrant hound within a one mile radius know who just turned their pack leader into a blast crater.” I swallowed the bread and drained an entire mug of fruit juice, slamming it down on the table with more enthusiasm than I’d meant to. The handle snapped off. “It’s taunt, intimidation, and flex all rolled up into one.”

A waitress dedicated to our table swung by to grab my mug and I smiled sheepishly at her as I handed her a silver note.

“Sorry,” I whispered. She looked down at me from beneath raised eyebrows as she tucked the cash into her apron, but I could tell she was used to this sort of thing. We were in a tavern that catered to traveling Delvers, after all.

“But there’s more to it than that,” I continued, “and through experimentation and analysis, I’ve distilled my theory down to a single concept: ‘restrictions’.”

“Arlo,” said Varrin, “we talked about this.” He was leaning over the table, head hanging low as he gripped a horn of ale as long as my forearm in both hands. It looked like he was getting ready to give himself a shower with it.

“We didn’t talk about anything,” I said. “*You* talked *at* me, and I chose to ignore your advice.”

He let out an elongated grunt, like a frustrated, dying animal. I turned back to Etja, who was, of course, enraptured by my commentary. She had the second of two assorted cheese plates offered by the establishment in front of her, and she dutifully nibbled on a piece of brie. She’d already eaten her way through the first.

“I don’t have to chant,” I said. “I can silent cast *Explosion!* if I want, as incongruent as that might sound. But I do chant. I chant every time I cast the spell in combat, because when I *don’t* chant, the spell is less powerful.”

“Whaaaat?” said Etja. “That’s not in the description!”

“I know! There’s nothing in the System’s description of the spell that discusses a vocal component to the ability. But, I’ve already realized that the System’s text is incomplete. It doesn’t account for the total sum of any given spell’s effects and interactions, because one, that’d be way too much text, and two, ninety percent of Delvers don’t give a crap.”

“I give a crap!” Etja said.

“You’re one of the good ones, Etja.” She smiled at the praise. “So, the System’s description is an abstraction of the true magic that’s occurring-”

“Allegedly,” Xim interrupted. She was slouched back in her chair, hand wrapped loosely around a goblet of wine that rested on the table. There were five empties scattered around it.

“Allegedly,” I agreed. “The System truncates the dissertation’s worth of theoretical context for the spell. That’s frustrating, and it’s terrible design if the System’s descriptions are intended to be a magical manual.”

“They aren’t?” Etja asked, leaning forward. “Then what are they?”

I shook a finger in the air, smiling at her.

“That’s the golden question,” I said. “I no longer believe that the System’s spell descriptions were ever intended to serve as a Magic 101 textbook. They’re a glossary of technical reference material for people *who are already experts*.”

“Does anyone think that?” asked Nuralie. “That it’s meant for beginners?” Pause. “Everyone studies magic before going into the Creation Delve. Before they have access to the System.”

“*Almost* everybody,” said Xim, grinning at me.

“All of the theory taught in Hiwardian magic academies is based on information acquired from the System,” I said.

“Been to many Hiwardian magic academies?” Xim retorted.

“Two,” I said.

“What?” she said. “When?”

“When you did that month of cloistering.”

“Hells,” said the Cleric. “I missed a lot when I did that.”

“While visiting said academies, I skimmed most of their core books on technique. It’s just lists of spells and practical considerations when using them!”

“No, it isn’t,” said Varrin. He sat back up and took a deep pull of his beer. His chair creaked out a threat under his weight.

“Most of the other stuff,” I said, “is just theoretical texts on the nature of the five schools of magic and their relationships.”

“*Just?*” said Xim.

I held up a hand.

“Stay with me for a second. There’s *some* hand holding from the System, and *some* theory developed by the academies. For the most part, however, Delvers have to figure it out for themselves. Now, back to *Explosion!* and my chanting.

“Grotto suggested that I was mana-shaping *Explosion!* when I chanted.” I pointed at Etja. “That’s another handy trick not listed anywhere in the System text. However, when I chant, the spell doesn’t cost any more mana. When I *don’t* chant, it doesn’t cost any *less*, either. This is distinct from my experience mana-shaping all of my other abilities. Mana-shaping has a cost, and that cost is more mana. Since I’m not spending mana, I don’t think I’m mana-shaping.”

“Then what are you doing?” Etja asked.

“I’m paying a *different* cost. Something other than mana or stamina.”

“Oooooohhh,” Etja hummed in excitement.

“When I presented my mana-shaping findings to Grotto, the old Delve Core got shady. He told me to figure it out for myself. Pretty sure he always knew that it wasn’t mana-shaping, but for whatever reason he’s been trying to hide the truth from me.”

“Grotto’s an asshooooole!” Xim cheered to the tavern, one arm raised to the sky. It drew a few curious looks. She went to take another sip from her goblet, but it was empty, and the waitress had her a fresh drink in less than ten seconds.

“Accurate,” I said. “Anyway, that’s when I remembered a conversation that I had with the core back in Arsenal, when I was considering my level ten Strength evolutions. Grotto told me that a specific evolution can allow for my mana matrix to output a higher level of magical force in regard to a specific task, because the magic is bound to a restriction.”

“Sssssecrets,” Xim whispered, leaning forward.

“Just tell the whole place,” said Varrin. “What do I care? Tell everyone.” He stood abruptly and swiveled to look around the establishment. The waitress walked up to check on him, and he gave her an off-balance, but outrageously polite bow. Given the

man's station as the son of a Thundralke, showing the mundane waitress that level of deference was nigh on scandalous.

"M'lord?" said the waitress, her face going beet red. She held out her hands as though to catch Varrin if he fell. She'd more likely be crushed.

"Madame," said Varrin, standing stiffly upright. "Would you be so kind as to direct me to the facilities?"

"Of course, m'lord. Right this way."

The waitress turned to walk Varrin to the men's room, but the big guy spun and slammed a hand on the table before following.

"Taking a piss," he said.

"Yeah, brother," I said. "We got that."

He nodded, then turned to follow the woman.

"Nuralie," I said, speaking in Loson'binora. "What the fuck did you put in their drinks?"

"Only what they told me to," said Nuralie. Pause. "Adjusted for body weight."

Magical additives could apparently make mundane alcohol into magical alcohol and thus bypass much of Fortitude's natural resistance to mundane toxins.

In other words, Nuralie had a 'shitfaced' potion.

"Keep going!" said Etja, pulling me back on track.

"Of course," I said. "Where was I? Uh, restrictions make the magic stronger?"

"Yeah!" Etja nodded emphatically.

"Ok. My theory is that restrictions for magic are like a high-velocity nozzle on a garden hose. The Seinnador on my shoulder would tut-tut at me for trying to reduce the idea to such mundane terms, but it works for me, so get lost, shoulder Seinnador." I brushed my left shoulder off.

"It's like a... what?" said Etja, confused.

"Shit," I said, searching for a better analogy. "Ok, so, say you have a fire. It gets the whole room a little warm, right?"

“Right!”

“But if you put that same fire inside an oven, then it gets the inside of the oven *really* hot, but the rest of the room stays the same temperature. Mostly.”

“Ok...” Etja said. I didn’t think I quite nailed it with that one.

“Let’s skip the metaphors for now.” I cleared my throat and added a bit of drama to my voice. “Thus, my theory is born! If the System can use restrictions to engineer powerful magical effects and abilities,” I paused for effect, “then so can I!”

“Really?!”

“Yes! But, it’s fickle. I can’t just slap any requirement onto any spell to make it stronger. Like mana-shaping, it’s something that I have to be deeply familiar with, that resonates with me personally, and that makes sense for the spell or ability that I’m using.”

“Shouting,” said Xim, and we turned to her. She swallowed and sat up a bit straighter, slapping herself on a cheek. “Shouting,” she continued, speaking with very intentional diction, “about your explosive awesomeness and inviting lethal countermeasures from everyone who can hear you is a very ‘Arlo’ thing to do.”

“True,” said Nuralie.

“That’s why my chanting works for *Explosion!* Now, I was very proud of this discovery. My unique skills and talents led me to this breakthrough, benefiting from my extraterrestrial origin as a cross-dimensional invader!” Nuralie’s eyes went a bit wider and she snuck some looks around. No one else in the tavern was paying any attention to what I was saying and, even if they were, our table had already proven to everyone in the square that we were blasted. “My superior Earth-based scientific method and modern-world ingenuity let me figure something out that...” I leaned in, and Etja leaned forward to meet me conspiratorially, “something that everybody who *is* somebody already knows about.”

Varrin returned and sat back down heavily in his chair. Something in the piece of furniture cracked, but it held. I went ahead and earmarked another few silver notes for the damage.

“Then it’s nothing new,” said Nuralie. Etja looked between me and her, frowning.

“Correct. When I presented the idea to Varrin,” the big guy snorted, “he let me know that his family already engages in the practice. They keep it secret, though. For reasons.”

“Our house has many enemies,” Varrin said, droning like it was a memorized sound bite. “Such things are not spoken about publicly, lest our foes seek to use the knowledge against us.”

“It’s like some forbidden ninja techniques or something. I hate it.”

“The same thing is true for mana-shaping,” said Xim. “After you told me about it, I asked around. A lot. A lot a lot. People don’t know about it because the people who *do* know about it keep it to themselves and use it to give themselves an edge.”

“Trade secrets, as I would have called it in my prior career,” I said. “C’est la vie.”

“Why not share the love, Varrin?” asked Xim, narrowing her eyes as she bent toward him. She slipped a bit, nearly tumbling from her chair. She grabbed the edge of the table to keep herself steady, then continued like nothing had happened. “We’re your teammates. We saved Ravvenblaq together! Doesn’t that deserve a lil’ sssssecret knowledge as a reward?”

“My mom says parties are like suitors,” the big guy mumbled. “Don’t tell them everything until you’re planning to be wed.”

“Not sure how I feel about that advice,” I said. “But, I get it. A party is a complex set of social relationships, and it might not work out. Don’t want to start spilling the beans on treasured family methods after one night of passionate world-saving.”

“Can we talk about our builds, now?” said Varrin, throwing his hands up. “What are your Fortitude evolution options, Arlo? They better be good. Level forty.” He belched. “That’s a big one.”

“At the risk of further compounding your present inability to think and talk coherently,” I said, “allow me to blow your minds with the choices that I have been offered.”