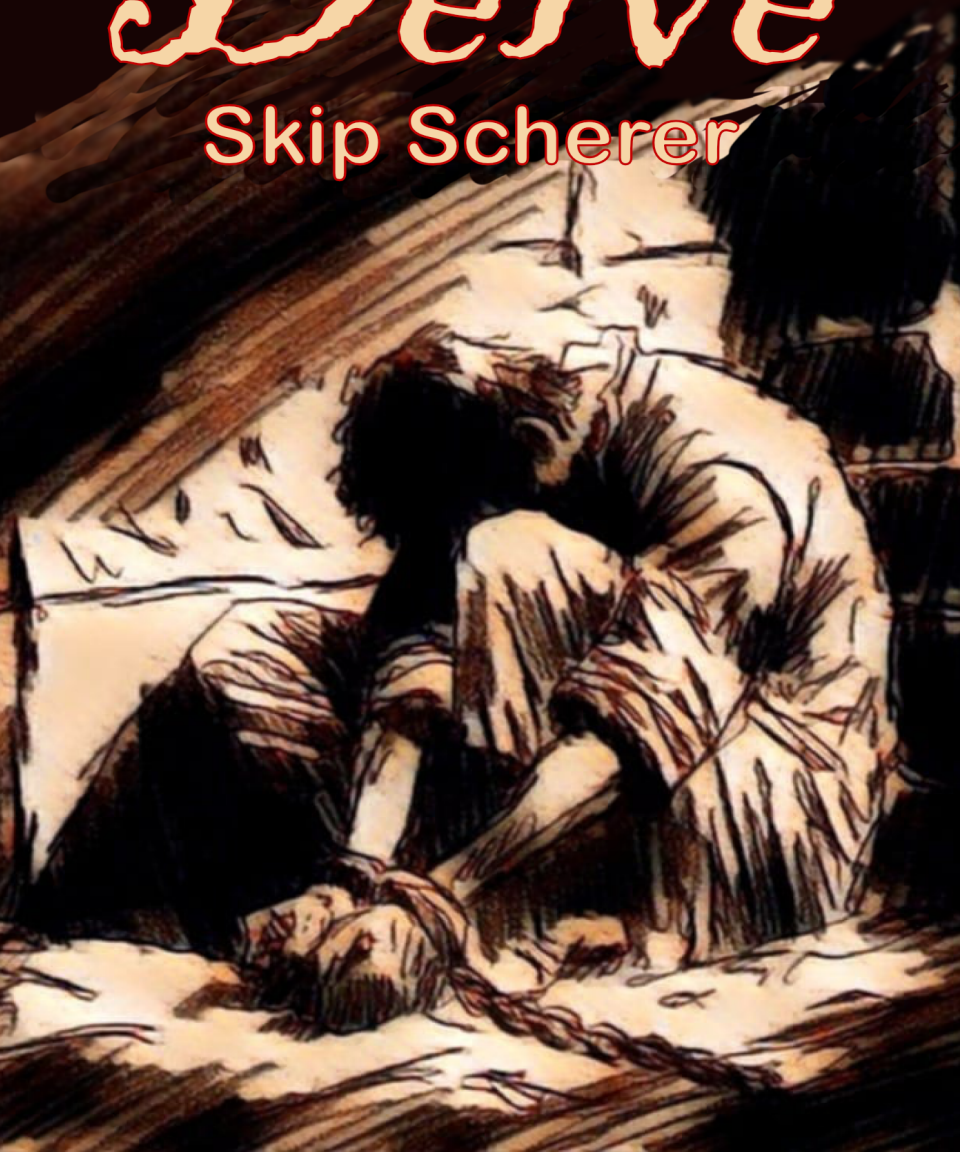


Collected Edition

Delve

Skip Scherer



DELVE

CHAPTERS 1 - 125

SKIP SCHETZEL

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No AI was used in the creation of this work.

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Delve	6
Posts 1 - 125	
Also by	50
Skip Scherer	
2. About the Author	52

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the collected edition of Delve!

This project began as an experiment born on social media (primarily Bluesky). When I started, I knew it would either be a fun, challenging way to tell a story or, at the very least, a valuable learning experience. Personally, I was hoping for a small combination of both. Gathered here are posts one (1) to fifty (50) of the Delve story. I hope this installment provides some reading pleasure!

What is Delve, and how did it start?

Delve is a fantasy story that I am currently crafting and sharing post-by-post online. Each entry is intentionally bite-sized, designed to fit within the strict 300-character limit imposed by Bluesky—actually closer to 296 characters, since I used the tag #SiP (Story in Post) with every update. The idea was for a serialized adventure to unfold before readers' eyes, piece by piece, as it was created. Back then, my aim was to post several times a week, which I've maintained, keeping it enjoyable without becoming overwhelming. (And don't worry, even though it started on social media, I used Word to ensure basic spell-checking and grammar – something I admittedly don't always do for my day-to-day posts, lol). This collection now brings the first posts of the story together for a more seamless reading experience.

The Writing Journey

For those who haven't followed my writing process before, it often works like this: I knew where Delve would start and I have a pretty good idea of where it will eventually

end. But everything in between? That's the part we discovered together along the way, post by post. There is no predetermined limit on the final word count or the total number of posts. The story is an open journey, intended to grow and twist in, hopefully, unexpected ways. For me, that's the real magic of serial fiction. I love serial fiction.

Why 'Delve,' and Why Fantasy?

If you're more familiar with my sci-fi novels, prepare for something different! Delve is set firmly in a world of magic, monsters, and gods. Choosing fantasy helped keep this new world distinct from my established sci-fi universe (don't worry—Jax and her adventures are still my main focus, and Delve doesn't interfere with that writing). Plus, switching genres offered a refreshing change of pace. The name "Delve" itself holds several layers of meaning, both personally and within the story's context, which unfolded as the narrative progressed.

The Original Mechanics

As mentioned, each original post carried the tag #SiP (Story in Post). Sacrificing a few precious characters for a con-

sistent tag seemed worthwhile for discoverability on a busy platform. Since unique tags are hard to come by, I chose a simple one. A small graphic showing its number in the sequence accompanies each post (thankfully, images didn't count towards the character limit!). It all originally lived in a pinned thread on Bluesky and then cross-posted to Threads and Mastodon.

***Note:** As of post #39, I dropped the #SiP tag. It wasn't helping as I intended, and I can always use the extra characters.*

The project launched with 'Post 0' (the foundation for this introduction) and 'Post 1', both of which I pre-wrote with extra care to ensure a strong start. While 'Post 2' followed closely, everything after that initial prepared batch is completely on the fly—pure seat-of-the-pants creativity unfolding in real time.

The Presentation of this Collection

I've done my best to preserve the posts in this collection as they were originally written. However, based on feedback from the first collection of posts 1 to 25, I've made some light edits for this edition: removal of the #SiP tag from

posts, and adjusting spelling, punctuation, and line spacing where truly necessary. The goal is to create a pleasant reading experience while staying true to the original form. Once the story is complete, I plan to have it professionally edited and released as a polished version. If you prefer the originals, they are, at the time of this collection, still available on my social media accounts.

Now, I invite you to dive into the world of Delve.

I hope you enjoy.

Thank you for reading!

DELVE

POSTS 1 - 125

1

Kru, son of Apto, stumbled as guards shoved him down the last step, ankle cuffs clinking against cold stones. Life had brought him here, to the lowest cells from which none returned. Guards laughed, talking to themselves, lit by a small lantern. Yet, Kru smiled; everything he wanted was here.

2

“Hate coming down here,” the 1st guard said. “Place reeks.”

“At least we just drop ‘em off. Tam comes here every day to feed these wastes,” the 2nd guard replied, pushing Kru again.

Past several cells, they stopped in front of a heavy metal door. Scrawled beside it was a number 8. Kru panicked.

3

“That one,” Kru said, pointing across the hall. “I need to be in that one.”

“That one’s flooded, you fool. You’re going to be miserable enough, why add to your pain?”

“It is my lifetime to spend. What care you for my pain?”

The guards stared blankly at each other and then broke into laughter.

4

“You’ll be dead in a year. We don’t care,” the 1st guard said, pushing Kru across the hall.

The 2nd guard fiddled with the keys. Finding the correct one, he shoved it in the lock with a loud clunk. With a heave, it swung free, scraping and squealing.

At door 9, the guards removed his chains.

5

Kru launched away from the guards. “Stop!” They explained, but calmed when they saw he wasn’t escaping. He was in the cell.

“This one’s crazy,” Guard 1 said.

“Yeah, let’s be done with it,” Guard 2 said. They closed the door with a loud thunk. Darkness surrounded Kru, and joy filled his heart.

6

He waited for his eyes to adjust—nothing. With the lantern’s glow gone, darkness engulfed him. This would complicate his mission, but the cells were small. Hands outstretched, he felt the walls. Single step, cold stone. A couple more steps, and his feet were submerged. The cold biting his toes.

7

He touched the far wall. His shoes, cloth and tatty hide, were drenched, but the water stopped at his ankles. Moving right, the floor sloped, and he found a dry area near the next wall. A minor cut out in the stone served as a pallet. Back to the entrance, no other exit, yet it must be here.

8

Years of research led him here. No one believed him. The king and his advisors wouldn't let him search. Kru wouldn't stop; this was too important. The world would change. So, he found another way, a monstrous way. In the darkness, his body shook—was it from the cold or the horrors he had done?

9

The men dying, the women screaming, the children—the poor children. He wasn't evil, but to be here, he needed to do evil things. History would show he did the right thing. Yes—yes, he focused on that. They would see how he sacrificed so they could benefit. Kru knew he was a good man.

10

How to start? The darkness weighed on him. The cold seeped into his bones. Tired from his journey, the walk down the stairs had taken its toll. He will rest first and then begin tomorrow. Yes, that was the idea. He lay on the shelf and pulled his thin garments tight. Rest would bring clarity.

11

A clang from the door startled Kru awake. His head hit the stone above. "Ouch," he muttered, the words echoing softly. A small pat reached his ears. "Is someone there?" No response. He crawled from the bed, careful to avoid the water, and searched the door. His hands grasped something soft.

12

He brought it to his face, straining to identify the object. The smell of sour, musty bread filled his nostrils. His stomach grumbled. When was his last meal? How long had he slept? He took hearty bites. Bits of vegetables and meat crossed his tongue. It was gone too quickly.

13

His stomach growled for more, but it didn't matter. Only the Jur Portal. It was hidden here, it had to be. He couldn't let minor things distract him. He prayed for light, knowing the gods wouldn't answer. They never did, damn them. No tools, just his mind, and for Kru, that was enough.

14

He memorized every touch, constructing the cell in his mind. His fingers numbed, cold biting to the bone. Hunger gnawed at his belly. Search, eat, sleep—repeat. How many days now? He couldn't waste energy remembering; the search was his only path to life. He found no mark, no way to his goal.

15

A clang signaled his next meal. Bread dropped through the slot. In his mind, he marked his place, then crawled to the door. Hands searching, there was nothing. "Where is it?" his voice gravelly. "Where's my bread!" His arms frantically pushed across the floor, splashing water. Still no bread.

16

He needed food to continue his work. On his knees, soaked, cold, biting his skin, he pushed into the water. It must have rolled here. He had avoided the water; he didn't know his way. Where else could it be? "Please. So hungry." His desperation echoed.

"I can help." A whisper came in the dark.

17

“Who’s there? Where are you?” Kru strained his eyes, but the darkness denied him.

“I have bread, if you are hungry,” a voice answered from the water-filled corner. Whoever it was, they must be there. Kru lurched towards the voice. Water splashed, and his hands slapped an empty wall.

18

Giggling echoed, “I’ve got bread, Your bread!”

“Please!” Kru screamed, “I need food for my work.”

“Work? What work can you do here?” The voice’s octave dropped, tone sharp and flat. “You’re here to die like the rest.” Laughter filled the cell. Kru chased it, but it was like catching the wind.

19

“I will not!” Kru yelled. “I will save us, Jur... Jur is the problem. Please, I need food.”

He slumped on the floor, his head falling back against the bed shelf. His body quivered from the cold. He shoved his hands into his pits, his legs pulled to his chest, muscles straining from the exertion.

20

The whisper returned. He turned his head in the dark, seeking, but it was all around him. It said, "What know you of Jur? Jur the Maker. Jur the Builder. Jur the God. What could one such as you know about one such as him?"

"Jur the-mad," Kru whispered back. "His machines will destroy us all."

21

Laughter filled the cell, echoing, raising in volume. Kru held his ears and pressed hard. Curled on the ground, yelling back, it was a battle of sounds that he lost. His throat raw, he stopped and the silence hit him like a blow. His hands slip, with faint words coming to him: "I'll be back."

22

A splash sounded in his ear. Kru crawled to the edge; the water, icy and relentless, he feared it. He was soaked. He longed for warmth before searching, but there was nowhere else. No other place. He would control his mind, conquer the cold, find the portal, and the whisper. He pushed in.

23

Each inch, he crawled through the numbing cold. It wasn't like searching the walls, where he could construct an image in his mind. Here, details were lost, leaving vague images. His hands hit a rock, then a crack, and then a hole. Pulling his hands free, he flexed his fingers. Could this be it?

24

A way out? He grinned, he laughed, it was right here; hidden by the water. Plunging his hands back into the water, he examined the hole. Feeling its edges, pulling them, pushing deeper, this had to be it! His heart sank. His smile turned to weeping. It was too small, the size of his hands. No.

25

Kru cried, falling into the water. His body was too numb to feel it, his mind too lost. The cursed gods had done this. He sank, head felling back, he screamed, "If only I had light! Damn you all!" He lay there, wishing for it. Praying for it.

The gods, who never answered prayers, finally did.

26

The light pierced his eyes. He recoiled and rolled out of the water. Hands pressed tight, he cried, “Forgive me! Jur have mercy!”

He squinted through his fingers, longing to see. The light was too intense, god’s wrath upon him. The ground thrummed, heavy steps closing in. His screams answered.

27

“Smashing hell. Still alive.” The gruff voice said. Kru craned his neck, trying to place it. One hand reaching out, searching. Clothbound his head, his throat cut off. He clawed at the rope, tugged at the bag. Rough hands lifted him. He spasmed, trying to resist, but it was feeble—child-like.

28

Tam trudged up the castle steps, wondering why he always got the crap jobs. The prisoner on his shoulder squirmed, shaking his step. Tam banged his head into a wall—hopefully that would stop him. Yep, crap jobs and endless steps. Lucky him. Top wasn’t even close. Damn. Don’t think about it.

29

At the tower's peak, the last door. Huffing and puffing, Tam cursed the climb, the height, the steps. In the cells, work was simple—no thinking, just doing, he was boss. Here, he had no power. He knocked, waited. He hated waiting. Damn. The door opened, but no one held it. His flesh prickled.

30

His vision blurred before snapping into focus. He stumbled but caught himself, shaking off the sensation. Blank-faced, he stared at the vast room—four-story vaulted ceiling, towering stairs, scattered tables, books of all kinds, stained glass filtering light. His head ached just taking it in.

31

He stepped gently, but his boots still gonged against the polished tile floor. His eyes darted, sweat forming on his brow. Tam didn't think much, but he did think he didn't want to be here. A few more steps — he froze as a voice like thunder shook the air around him.

“What curiosity is this?”

32

Tam's skin prickled as he searched for the voice. "I—I brought what you asked for," he stammered.

"I don't recall asking for a body—an unconscious one at that."

"No. You wanted what was in cell 9. Whatever I could find. I found him."

"Alive? Impossible. Show me." A mist formed before Tam.

33

The mist spun, shifting from murky white to dull brown. Tendrils coalesced, forming a tabletop. Tam's nose twitched as the smell of burning wood crossed it.

"Place him there," the voice boomed.

Tam pressed the table to test its solidity, then lowered the body, shaking his head. He hated magic.

34

"Move." A low, resonant command slammed into Tam. His muscles obeyed instantly, shoving him back. His mind thrashed, a trapped bird wild to escape, yet his body was a puppet dancing to the voice's tune. A bald figure in white, devoid of even eyebrows, now occupied the space he'd just vacated.

35

“Why’s he out?” the man asked.

“Went crazy. Hit his head.”

“I see. Before today, when’d you last see him?”

Tam shrugged.

“Don’t know?”

“Don’t go there. King closed deep cells.”

“When was that?”

Tam frowned, thinking ached. “When he became King.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Six years ago.”

36

“No one fed him?”

Tam shrugged.

“Who is this man?”

Another helpless shrug.

The bald man’s eyes narrowed on Tam. Though towering over him, Tam flinched. The man’s sleeves rustled, a prelude to violence Tam well knew. Instead, a sharp point. “Down one floor. Find Kry. Get cell 9 prison records.”

37

Tam lumbered out, his limbs moving beyond his control. Still, leaving this place made him happy. Happy was good. He kept it simple.

The bald man pushed his sleeves to his elbows, then pressed a finger to Kru's head. "Let us wake you." he murmured. "What might be gleaned from your existence?"

38

Kru shot up, air rushing into his lungs. A brutal flood. Every muscle screamed with fire. His head fell back, hitting the table. Each breath a desperate fight. Eyes wild, yet he was still. His body locked in place. A bald man in white observed him. He yearned to speak, but his jaw was a vise.

39

"Speak. I am Zim, Thaumaturgist of Troth. For this conversation, speak freely. Who are you?"

He could feel his jaw start to move, but not by his will. He clenched it tight, snarling. Kru knew this magic, it was denied him, but his mind was his. He forced the bile from his throat and sent it flying.

40

“That was uncalled for,” Zim said, flicking the spittle from his robes. “I did not expect such resistance from the likes of you. If you refuse to speak, then we probe deeper.”

He waved his hands, and a blazing spear shot forth, piercing Kru’s eyes. Zim cried out as his own hand burst into flames.

41

The pain tore through Zim’s arm. Gritting his teeth, he willed an ice spell to douse it away. The flames resisted at first and then slowly gave way to the cold. Zim’s heart raced and the pain, the biting pain, lingered. Cradling his arm, he stepped away from the man on the table. “What...are you?”

42

Kru laughed. Weak and unmoving, yet his eyes burned bright as he turned his head to Zim. “My secrets are my own. Only I am worthy to save us all. Remove my blocks, and I will teach you things. You are but a child, too blind to see.”

Zim sank back into a chair, staring as the wild man laughed on.

43

Zim watched as the crazy man's laugh became a chuckle and slowly died on his lips. The man slept, Zim still watched. His mind ablaze with what his probing had found, he searched corridors of his memory for a solution, an understanding. In a window above the sun set, and Zim watched and wondered.

44

"Excuse me, my liege." The timid voice broke Zim's trance. He turned to Archivarius Aza, her light blue robes hanging neatly. Hair bound back, a satchel over her right shoulder that burst with scrolls and loose papers, more still in her hands. Waiting patiently at the door as if afraid to enter.

45

"Aza, come in. Your records may give me the insight I need." Zim rose and waved. Mists formed a round, sturdy table smelling of old oak. He tilted his head, crossed his arms, and waited.

"It took a while," she said, as the contents of her arms spilled on the table, "but what I found is horrifying."

46

“How so?” Zim asked.

“Records show the last man in cell 9 was meant for cell 8, but a vague fuss put him here,” Aza said, sliding papers across the table.

“To the point Aza. Who do you believe this man to be?”

“This is Kru. Kru the Red, taker of flesh, the bane of Troth,” she whispered, eyeing Kru.

47

Kru’s eyes bolted open. That voice! He sought it, afraid to move. Foolish Zim and a girl were talking. Zim was arrogant, his very stance offensive. She was soft, demure, head tilted regarding Zim. He looked away, and her eyes turned to Kru. A red flash, a burning, tore through him. Kru shrieked!

48

“What’s wrong with him?” Zim said. Waving his hands, mist formed, binding Kru in straps. He floated back onto the table.

“I know not my lord.” Ava replied, her voice low.

Kru’s eyes shot wide. He thrashed against his bonds, to no avail.

“Kru the Red is evil. Bound, I caution even you my lord.”

49

“Your warning is well deserved, Ava,” Zim said. He walked to a shelf, pulling tomes. Each floated before him with a flick of a finger. He continued, “I recall a tale before Kru the Red. Kru the Sovran Thaumaturgist. Last to achieve such rank. If memory serves, he was obsessed with the study of Jur.”

50

“Like you, my lord?” Ava asked.

“My interests are a side study. Jur built wonders and hid them. If I found them, I would use them.”

Kru convulsed on the table, back arching. “Mine! The legacy is mine! You cannot fathom the depths you pry at! My power, my knowledge or Jur will destroy us! Return me!”

51

“You found something? Jur designed the castle’s base, where the cells lie. 9 was his number of power. Thought it silly, but had the brute look. There’s more. What do you know?”

Kru thrashed. He’d given too much. Only he should know. What did he know? He’d found nothing; knew nothing more. Or did he?

52

All Kru knew was the cell. Gone there seeking Jur, but no mark was to be found. Each detail known: A door, ledge for a bed, sloping floor, a hole, the shape of water. In his mind, each one became like a line on a piece of paper. For the first time he saw it all, he saw Jur, and he started to cry.

53

It was right there. It was there. He was right. He needed to go back.

He turned his head, a tear rolling down his cheek. They were his only hope, this fool Zim and the—other. He would play them, work their feeble minds, control them. He needed one more thing—one thing to make it all work. Magic.

54

"Send me back!" Kru whimpered. "When I'm there, my mind clears, and I see the horrors I've done. I deserve my penance! It's just—so incredibly dark. Give me a spark, a single spark, to see by! Then leave me be."

Ava's hand found Zim's shoulder, her eyes pleading. "Can we not show mercy my lord?"

55

Who was this man, this wretch, to make such requests of Zim? Zim would do as he pleased. The idea rattled in his head, but his outrage calmed, replaced with—caring? He nodded and looked at Ava. "Perhaps you are right. This man, a beast now, has no answers. Perhaps we can show him a shred of mercy."

"Your magic cannot be returned. However, I grant you this." Zim touched Kru's hand; hand and a symbol appeared on the back.

Kru's eyes went wide, warmth rushing over him—that tingling, that sensation of power running through his veins. Oh, how he missed it.

"A simple reading light rune. May it serve."

"Ava, call the brute. Return this thing to its proper place. I'm done."

"Yes, my lord." Ava murmured, slipping out.

Kru had done it! He held still, the knowledge, the new power, threatening to burst free! No one else could know, no one else was worthy. Jur's portal summoned him; he would answer.

58

Tam entered the room. The place was too large, unsettling; it made his neck hair prickle. He didn't recall leaving, so why was he here?

"Take this one back to the cells. Care for him. Report his condition. I would know how he survives." Zim said.

Tam nodded, lifted the man, and made for the door.

59

As the brute left, Kru slung over his shoulder, Ava stood in the door. She nodded, mouthing a silent "thank you," and then vanished.

Zim's eyes glazed over, mind hazy. He shook his head as Kry entered, breaking his trance.

The old, plump woman had a small, crumpled scroll clutched in her hands.

60

"What do you need, Kry?" Zim asked.

"I brought the files, my lord. Tam said you needed them. Sorry it took so long, they were buried deep."

"I asked for no files."

"He said from deep cell 9?"

Zim waved her off. "The brute makes many mistakes. Begone." He vanished in a wave of smoke and light.

61

Tam walked down the stairs, liking down more than up. Less work. Good. The guy on his shoulder squirmed, giggled. He was annoying, and Tam didn't like that. Tam stopped, looked around—nobody. He pivoted. The guy's head cracked off the wall, body went limp. That was better. Simple. Tam liked simple.

62

Kru's eyes opened, goosebumps pricking his skin. Rough stone floor ripping at his clothes. He rolled to his knees, smiling, awash with joy. A pat on his hand and the light rune filled the room like a candle.

His heart pounded. A chill ran down his spine. Eyes widened, darting around. Kru screamed!

63

Punching the door, his knuckles ripping and tearing. Grabbing the small barred window. Across the hall was cell 9. He shoved his arm through, reaching, screaming for the guards. It was no use.

Kru fell to the ground, exhausted. The light rune faded. Alone in the darkness, a whisper began to laugh.

64

"Ava?" Kru begged, but darkness offered no reply. He touched the rune. Light glowed, showing a rotting pallet, a waste hole, a trickling tube. All a prisoner could need, unless that prisoner was Kru. With a thump on his head, bread fell between his legs. Standing, seeking the window, again—nothing.

65

He measured time by bread drops, yet knew not how long they were. Hunger was the enemy that bound his mind. He fought it, studying his new cell. A box. Nothing to challenge his thoughts, nothing to get him closer to Jur. Anger would crush him if not for hunger. He languished in his eternal solitude.

66

He lost count. Was this day 24 or 224? Mind — foggy. Thoughts strained. Day's light came and left, but no sun pierced this vile cell. Yet he was Kru, his will was power! He could escape. Master his mind! Head ached, pounded, throbbed. "Ava! Help me!" he cried.

"Who is Ava?" replied a small voice.

67

“You are Ava.” His voice burned, raw. “I heard... saw you in the tower.”

“I do not know this tower.” Her voice cold.

“Lies. Show yourself, why play games?” Winds swirled across the cell. Kru pushed to a corner, fear rippling his skin.

“I do not lie.” Softer this time.

“Tell me! Tell the truth!”

68

“Are you Jur? Reborn!” Kru crawled, eyes raised as if he could see the sky, searching — pleading! Thunder cracked, and the room quaked, raining down rocks. Laughter exploded, echoing, rising! Kru fell clutching his ears, curling up.

A cold silence. A whisper, “You know so little and see even less.”

69

“Mock me! I know the secrets of Jur. I can stop his deadly machines. Only me. No. You are not Jur, I see now... you are—” The answer was there, yet the more he grasped, the further away it got, a butterfly floating beyond his fingers. “—show me how you get out.”

“You already know.” The voice faded.

70

A mad refrain in his mind. “You already know.”

Walls grew frigid. Drips froze the pipe. Cold biting his skin, he focused on what he knew. Magic. Shaking hands waved the light rune on and off. Magic required power, and the only power was him. A prick in his block—it was a—whisper. He needed a roar.

71

He pushed at his bonds again, straining, pouring power into the light. It grew brighter until his will gave out. He broke focus, waving the rune off, but the searing pain remained. As he blinked, the room flashed before him, darkness and light battling back and forth. With no victor, Kru battled on.

72

The light scorched his vision and into his soul. He fell back, splayed out on the ground, staring at the ceiling. His eyes, locked open by searing pain, couldn't close. Spots danced in his vision, colors swirling. Fading, as always, but this time, for the first time, Kru smiled. For Kru beheld Jur.

73

It ignited on the walls, light dancing across the stone. The rune had brought him a script he knew. Cherished. The words of Jur. They etched the cell, top to bottom. No space spared. Reading this gift would cost him, burning his vision. He cared not. He had the time, and with it the will to endure.

74

His eyes bled, he read on, draining power from the rune to feed his desire. Letters became words, then sentences, and meaning took hold. He'd once prided himself on his knowledge, but now saw it as a mere drop in the ocean. This was not the portal, but a machine of Jur, and now, it belonged to him!

75

The words shimmered, morphing into gears of light. Turning cogs hummed, clicked and whirled sacredly, echoing from the walls. The room spiraled, radiant, transcendent. Kru spun at the heart, rapt in awe, arms outstretched. A flash. A breath of divinity. Then the machine of Jur swallowed him whole.

76

The aroma of lavender and orange was the first thing to reach him, rousing him from sleep. He sat up in bed and instantly he knew this room. Yet something was... off. The walls were too bright, and if you peered hard, translucent. Gears grinding away. Still, there was no mistaking it. Kru was home.

77

Cold nipped at his bare feet. He paced the room, noting all in its place. The dresser, desk, murals, they were there, impeccable in detail. Yet, it was all touched by Jur. The gears were faintly turning. He faced a mirror. Sunken eyes, straggly hair, pale, blotchy skin. He was not touched by Jur.

78

He was in the machine, but for what purpose? His studies of Jur paled before this. He found clothes; dressed and headed for the door. A cold wind struck, and he winced, for woven into it he heard a whisper. Not the cold, echoing one from the cell, but that was warm and tugged at his heart. His wife.

79

She was the sunlight of a new day. She was the wisdom of the stars. In her heart beat the love of ages.

Kru's wife entered the room. His heart sank. He seized her chin and twisted her head. Gears whirled, barely seen, under luminescent skin. "What torture is this?" he spat. "You're an abomination."

80

"Oh, spare me the theatre," she sighed, batting his hand away. "It's just the presentation stressing you, Kru. Your big discovery. I can hardly wait."

Kru's mind went cold. A knot of ice formed in his stomach. "Presentation? What day is this?"

"Have you forgotten?" her voice sharp with disbelief.

81

"Tonight," she laughed, "the King's High Festival, and the world awaits! Unveil the wondrous device of Jur—take center stage!" She spun and danced, but Kru sat still, his mind reeling. He remembered no festival, only his pleas before the King and his advisors. The moment before he killed them all.

82

He fished in his pocket, an old habit easily resumed. Surprise welled up in him as his fingers brushed cold iron. These new clothes, this world within Jur's machine—yet still, it was here. He used his thumb to feel its edges, to trace it, to know it. The first relic of Jur unearthed in ages. A coin.

83

It was all wrong. His head throbbed with the thought. The machine was doing it, warping his memories, remaking his reality. Why? Was this some kind of test? He tried to hold on to the thought, but it was like water through his hands. His wife smiled and beckoned him, and they were off to the fair.

84

The crowd was a curse. Loud, sweating, pressing. Kru hated it. Despised it. Yet, there she was. His wife danced through the vendors. Taking in the sights.

Impossible.

She was his echo, his equal in desires; working in tandem, a single entity. This vibrant glee, this mask, was a lie. What was this?

85

They watched the games; the archery, the wrestling, the jousting and through it all a sense of warmth fell over Kru. He was happy here in ways he had never felt before; it all felt so completely right. The sun was setting, and the fires were lit, and all the crowd gathered around the center stage.

86

Dancers pranced across the stage. Jugglers tumbled to the crowd's delight. Then came singers and acrobats, comedians and bards — the night stretched long. Yet not a soul strayed. They dared not miss what was coming. Waiting, breath held and eyes wide, for the main event: Kru and the Machine of Jur!

87

"Silence!" The compère tipped his hat, twirled his mustache, skipping on the stage. "The time's come! Gather close! Kru, Sovran Thaumaturgist, will reveal his discovery! A relic from Jur! Jur the maker, Jur the wonderful! Such a thing has not been seen for an age! Prepare your eyes! Cheer! Rejoice!"

88

With a light heart, he strode on stage. This was the peak of joy; he would reveal the wonders of Jur the world only dreamed of! Then, he stumbled. His mind kicked and bucked. A flash of fear, then dread, took him. His wife stood by, lifting him up. His mind instantly calmed, and all worries receded.

89

He looked across the sea of wide-eyed people, all locked on him in awe. Kru felt a need, a desire, to give them what they wanted. The glorious! The never-seen! The remarkable! His mouth opened, his hand reached into his pocket; touching the coin. Rage, blood, and flashes of death scored his mind.

90

He spoke, and the world listened. The words flowed like silk and all praised Jur. The crowd gasped, their eyes alight with ardor and hope. Inside, his mind was screaming! This was false. These were not his words, not the tale he told the king—this world, this construct was ripping through his mind.

91

Kru roared! The crowd recoiled, falling silent. Tearing at his head, the rhythmic pounding fueling his agony. "I am master of my mind!" he shrieked into the night. A cool breeze; his hands dropped, and a calmness settled on his mind. He felt the soothing and with a last burst of will — rejected it.

92

He wrenched the coin from his pocket. Flames shooting out of his hand. The heat scorching his face. Gears connected and clawed their way across his palm. The more he fought, the more the coin sought to lull him into submission. Pain was his resistance, and he pushed into the pain. The crowd cheered!

93

As the light flew from Kru's hand, little gears drifted, swirling, connecting, breaking apart, flying off, bursting into pops of color. The crowd called for more! The gale of applause was an assault on Kru's senses while his mind reeled.

"Fools!" He shouted, a futile attempt to extinguish it all.

94

His mind was his own. Kru would tolerate nothing less. Over the cheers of the crowd, the pounding in his head, Kru pushed back. No one saw the danger; no one saw the cataclysmic power. All they saw was the false wonders of Jur. Kru would have to force them to see the horror of their utter ignorance.

95

Kru turned on his wife, grabbing her. "I know not this world you have crafted for me. But like in the halls of the king, I will use it the same. It seems my destiny is to use you, I am sorry."

"No!" She shouted. "You are supposed to embrace the wonders of Jur!"

Kru slammed the coin onto her head.

96

Her skin aglow from the sheen of this world, began to ripple. The coin's dark gears grew as they gnashed and interacted, merging into one cold, unfeeling mass. She screamed as it draped her body. "Stop this now!" she shrieked. "Kru! Give them the wonders, give in to happiness! You must love — obey!"

97

A tear fell from Kru's eye. While this wasn't his wife, his mind knew she was a construct of Jur, still, his heart yearned for her. Jur would destroy them and only he could see that. To change that, he had to change everything, even in this world. What they saw, what they believed... what he loved.

98

The gears covered his hand like a gauntlet as they veiled his wife. Cogs floated on light, dancing between them. As it was on that day before the King, so would it be here. This way he could control the device of Jur, use it. She was now a mere puppet on strings. He embraced her. He shoved her away.

99

His hand ignited in a blaze of flame and spinning gears, his eyes glowing with an eldritch light. He moved his hand; her body followed in a sickening mimicry. She swept her arm wide, and a cloud of burning cogs slashed through the air like shrapnel. Cheers of wonder became a cry of blood and death.

100

Eyes alight, his hands wove a pattern of death; his wife was the reaper, and the people her harvest. Cogs shredded the night air, sparing no one. He hunted them all until the last cry faded into the wind. As the final soul stilled, the fire in Kru's eyes flickered out, leaving only a cold darkness.

101

Kru, son of Apto, forced his eyes open with trembling palms. The darkness was total, a force against his sight. He clutched his skull, nursing a rhythmic, violent throb. He reached out to steady himself, but the world dissolved. His stomach surged into his throat—a sickening heartbeat of freefall.

102

Pain lanced his shoulder, scratches rending his face as he hit the floor, bounced and rolled. He slammed flat on his back, his skull snapping on the ground, that headache now surging front to back. A splash of water, a biting cold in his hand. He desired to move, but the will to do so was gone.

103

His eyes were open, but he could not see. Lying on the ground, one hand tested the water, feeling its cold surface as it gave way to the stony floor. His other hand explored cracks in the earth. Their grit, their jagged bite. He giggled, then he laughed, for he knew this place. Home. Cell number 9.

104

He crawled the cell, checking, he had to be sure. This was the real world, not another construct of Jur. Satisfied, he lay against a wall and smiled, for a thought had slipped his mind. His magic had returned. No longer was he confined; no longer would he endure the darkness. He let his mind bloom.

105

The darkness would not subside. Kru's hands shook, teeth clenched so hard blood seeped from his gums. Eyes darting from hand to hand. Slamming them together, again onto the ground. He pushed violently—but the magic would not ignite. He shrieked into the void, and the darkness answered with laughter.

106

“Ava?” Kru croaked the words. “Is that you?”

“No! Not Ava.” The darkness hissed back.

Kru shook his head, digging his fingers into his brow, trying to focus his mind. Not Ava... but “Aza?”

Laughter boomed through the cell, Kru clutched his ears curling up—the sound shaking his soul.

“Foolish man.”

107

Images flashed like lightning in his mind. Magic with a best friend; a friend turned lifelong love. Then the tower—Ava’s face, no, Aza. A flash to the square: people dying by his hand, no, his wife’s. The same face repeating. His love, his equal, his wife...

“Ana.”

Around him the darkness laughed.

108.

Kru sat up and drank. The water was metallic, bitter. Starving, yet too broken to even search for the bread.

“If you are Ana, why do you torture me? Your illusion was guile. I saw through it. That’s not how it happened.” He whispered, knowing that it was a lie.

The darkness answered with silence.

109

His mind was void, and his body followed, wasting away. Hunger had been constant for so long that it dulled into oblivion. The darkness hammered at him—crushing him, shattering his will, unmaking his soul. He wanted only to save his people from the evils they could not comprehend—and he had failed.

110

He would have screamed, but lacked the strength. He longed for the final silent god, willed himself toward them—and failed. Instead, Kru waited, lost in darkness, for misery to consume him.

A clunk at the door and a soft pat; it brushed against his fingers. Forgotten hope returned to Kru as bread.

111

The bread came like clockwork—Kru was sure. The chute clunked. A pat as the loaf hit the floor. Mere pittance to sustain him, but it was a wonder! Dough, a bit of greens, and a ghost of meat. He screamed at the guard; no answer ever returned. He loathed his own weakness. Never again. Never again.

112

He sat, ate, and pondered. This was surely just another of Jur's tests, a puzzle he would master like all the rest.

Unseen shadows stirred in the dark—wrapping, pressing, and driving him forward. Their whispers escaped his ears but reached his soul: "Your time will come." They laughed and laughed.

113

The shadows whispering to his soul surged, expanding, clawing past his sanity to assault his mind.

"Why do you haunt me? Release my bindings. I can still save us. Jur will kill us." Kru shouted, his words rising. "Return my magic!"

"Fool," the dark spat back. "Nothing blocks you. Save yourself."

114

The darkness yielded no secrets. Kru paced, stamping his feet and hammering the walls. He scoured every inch—again. Nothing. "Enough! Help me!"

"Oh, Kru the mighty," whispers stung his ears. "The intellect. The willpower. The fool. For all your might, did you ever think to simply try the door?"

115

He stood there, fingers hovering a hair's breadth from the door. No handle on this side, nothing for him to grab. A push was all it would take. Everything he needed—everything he wanted—was right here. Without his magic, it was nothing. Reclaim it and come back. Simple. Yet his feet remained rooted.

116

He stared at the door in the dark—time lost all meaning. No sound of guards or food dropping. He strained his eyes, hoping to see—it wasn't necessary. He knew every seam and crack, where the grain was smooth and where it was rough. Minutes or days might have passed before Kru finally pushed forward.

117

A deep creak that rattled his ears. A light that started like a flame and then blinded him like the sun grew before him. Tentative steps pushed him forward, hands shielding his face, eyes peeking out between his fingers. The light faded, and shadows formed into shapes. He didn't recognize any of it.

118

He remembered dim halls and cold, dingy stone. The staircase was gone. In its place: marbled floors and white-washed walls, 40 feet wide and 100 feet high. No torches remained, yet the space pulsed with its own pale interior light.

“More illusion,” he mumbled.

“More reality,” a whisper shot back.

119

No doors. No windows. Only the endless, repeating veins of marble.

Kru drifted through the halls like a ghost. He stopped occasionally, glancing back at the path—stark, curveless, and devoid of escape. A never ending void.

Counting steps weighed on his soul. He abandoned the tally. Kru walked on.

120

He walked, pausing to rest before pressing on. Hunger gnawed at his belly, yet no relief appeared. Then, a shift in the distance—a speck, blurry and ill-formed at the edge of his vision. Kru stopped. The change, however slight, was remarkable in this endless void. He nodded and followed the horizon.

121

Step after step, he forged ahead. The vague speck at the horizon remained fixed, unmoving in its resolve. He walked, rested, and pushed on again, measuring time by the ache in his legs rather than the tick of a clock. Gradually, the blur sharpened; its edges coalesced to reveal not a man, but a boy.

122

Kru stopped mere paces away, yet the boy didn't look up. White, loose sleeves and faded brown pants cut at the shin shifted as he moved, a cord at his waist. His focus solely on a coin—snapped into the air, caught, and slapped against his hand. A silent shake of the head, and the cycle began again.

123

Kru cleared his throat, but the boy—perhaps ten years old—remained oblivious to the attempt. Kru called out, his voice coarse from long disuse, “Can you help me?”

The boy caught his coin and stopped. He tilted his head, a shine in his eye, a smile on his lips. “Well, it's about time you got here.”

124

The boy began dancing—tapping his feet, twirling, and laughing throughout. He stopped, arms wide, and gave an immaculate bow.

Kru was transfixed, yet confusion weighed heavily on him. “I don’t understand. Can you help me?”

“I’ve answered that. Try something else.”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, very good!”

125

The boy dove into his dance. Flipping his coin high he spun, catching it while offering a bow. “Surely you remember me. Surely you know. For I linger in your mind and continue to fester and grow. All run from me, but you feed me your soul. Yet you do not know me, for I come after your heart’s goal.”

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-continued next page-

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Skip Scherer lives in Washington State with his lovely wife, daughter, one dog and the memory of a fabulous furry princess.

Before he started writing, Skip got a degree in computer graphics and design. After working as a freelance artist for many years, Skip made a huge life change and opened a martial arts school. That career choice led to a way of life for over two decades. He continues to run that school to this day, writes at night and continues to take on new challenges.

If you want to know when Skip's next book will come out, please visit his website at, where you can sign up to receive an email when he has his next release.

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