

“Let me repeat that back to you,” said Ealdric, “and you can tell me if I’ve understood you correctly.”

He clasped his hands together before him, pointer fingers held together close to his mouth.

“The System gave you a mysterious item, called the Get Out of Cage Free Card, which hinted at the existence of something called System phases. While searching for information about these phases, you hunted down and defeated a powerful entity known as The Mimic, who rewarded you with the location of several special-grade Delves that must be conquered to advance to the next phase. You then sought out and spoke with the goddess of the Third Layer, who told you that the System’s second phase will allow more Delves to be made each year and will provide existing Delves with greater access to power and resources.”

“Yep!” said Xim.

Ealdric took a deep breath, then pondered the information for a full minute. We waited in silence as he did so.

“Fascinating,” he finally said. “Who have you told about this?”

“Arlo and I told Varrin,” said Xim. “No idea who *he* told.”

Ealdric’s eyebrows went up and he turned his head slowly to the big guy, who had gone completely still.

“I reported the matter to Mother,” said Varrin.

“As is appropriate,” said Ealdric Sr. “She is the sole reigning Thundralke since my grandson perished.”

“She advised me to inform Grandfather,” said Varrin. “I did so and he instructed me to stay silent while he reported the matter to Umi-Doo at Central.”

“My son has been keeping secrets from me,” said Ealdric Sr. “I’ll have to have a word with him about that.”

I experienced the strangest mental image of a 90 year old man getting spanked by his centenarian father.

“If I may,” said Varrin, “I believe Grandfather wanted to validate the claims before troubling you with it.”

“The information *is* somewhat suspect,” said the patriarch. “I do not doubt the word of your party, Varrin, but this intelligence was gathered from item descriptions, mana monsters, and divinities with unknown agendas. Unreliable sources, in other words.”

Xim frowned as Ealdric indirectly insulted her goddess, but she kept silent over the matter.

“Still,” Ealdric continued, “the chance that it could be true makes it valuable enough to be worth my time. I would like to hear Umi-Doo’s thoughts.”

The patriarch then strode away from us in the direction of the Dark Iron Palace. I looked around at the group, but Varrin simply turned and began following after Ealdric Senior without missing a beat. He gestured for us to follow.

“Okay,” I said, “guess we’re going to see Umi-Doo.”

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We entered the Dark Iron Palace through the front, uncontested. Guards parted and servants swept doors open as the patriarch made a beeline for the west wing. We kept close at Ealdric Senior’s heels, earning no more than a careful glance from any of the security.

We came to a large, spiraling staircase that ascended to the palace’s highest tower. I leaned back, peering up at the endless rows of circling stairs. There were enough flights to give Nuralie’s hat a run for its money. Ealdric paused and looked back at us.

“Let us take the quick way,” he said, and we received a notification.

**Ealdric Ravvenblaq Sr. has invited you to join his party.**

**Accept? Y/N**

We accepted the invite, the patriarch looked up again, and the world became a blur. No more than a second passed before we’d ascended to the highest landing. The

movement was as quick as Xim's dream step, but we didn't cheat our way through reality by believing we were somewhere else, we just moved at ludicrous speed.

Once we reached the top, the patriarch unceremoniously dismissed us from his party then marched to a set of high-arched doors and pushed them open. Beyond was Umi-Doo's office and library.

Ealdric entered like he owned the place, eyes scanning for the mini-yeti who was his target. The Director of Central was nowhere in sight and while Ealdric continued his search for Umi-Doo I took in the furry guy's choice of aesthetic.

The room, like the tower, was massive and cylindrical. Bookshelves lined the walls from the floor to the 200-foot-high ceiling, lacking any sort of ladders or walkways to allow one to browse their contents. Amidst the books, countless trinkets and baubles were scattered, many of which looked magical in nature.

There was a set of thirteen gears that continuously assembled themselves into different configurations, turning for several seconds before finding a new arrangement that suited them. One shelf held dozens of vibrant crystals which I suspected were different types of essences, emitting puffs of colorful vapor. They were outrageously expensive crafting materials and Umi-Doo displayed them like nick-nacks.

There were orbs that showed what appeared to be live feeds from different locations around Foundation when you peered into them. One shelf had a series of hand mirrors that reflected what I would look like if I were a geulon, a Chovali, a Littan, or any number of other races present on Arzia. I spent several seconds admiring myself as a Timan, the deer-like race that my favorite shopkeep, Seinnador, was a part of. The beard didn't quite work, but it gave me the look of a deerman who was both distinguished and willing to challenge conventional fashion trends.

The collection that most drew my eye, however, was one that lined a shelf that ran the length of the entire room, right at the level of my hip. I squatted down and examined the contents, finding it stuffed full of figurines. Some of the sculptures were of different goddesses representing a dozen pantheons and religions. Others were representations of important historical figures hailing from each nation on the continent.

Yet more were of specific Delvers, each of which had the Delver's name engraved on the base of the little statue. Varrin's mother, Thundralke Nola Ravvenblaq, was among them, along with Matriarch Dukgrien, several matriarchs from the other houses—Bluewren, Heronwyte, Thrushmahagony—and even God-King Ayamari, who I'd only ever heard descriptions of, but never seen a representation.

The most powerful Delver on the planet looked similar to a Timan, though her antlers were far grander than anything I'd seen on a typical member of the people. Her body proportions were also closer to a Hiwardian's, while her face was *less* human than a typical Timan's and *more* deer-like. Her eyes were also... strange. Any amount of the detail could have been the liberties taken by the sculptor, so I didn't pay them much heed.

Despite the disparate subjects, all of the statuettes had three things in common. They were all women. They were all wearing clothes or armor that I would describe as 'nonfunctional'. They were all portrayed in a moment of 'compromised' positioning.

There were *hundreds* of them.

I couldn't decide if the collection was entertaining or disturbing. Had any of these women agreed to become the subjects of said miniaturization, or was Umi-Doo more of an 'ask forgiveness, not permission' type? Did Hiward have any laws regarding the commercialization of a celebrity's likeness? I could probably make a case for misappropriation, assuming that—

"Umi-Doo!" Ealdric bellowed. "Where are you?"

Several books fell from a high perch and the white-furred face of Umi-Doo sprouted from the shelf behind them. The mage had literally been buried in the books.

"Ealdric?" said Umi-Doo. "What are you doing in my office?"

"I'd like to have a meeting," Ealdric Sr. called up to him.

"I see," said Umi-Doo, extricating himself from the shelf and hovering in the air a hundred feet above us. He began floating down. "The patriarch of Ravvenblaq comes to my office and asks for a meeting, so I suppose that I am now having a meeting with the Ravvenblaq patriarch."

Umi-Doo landed before Ealdric, craning back to look up at the silver-haired man, who towered over him by three feet or more.

"What do you know about the System phases?" asked Ealdric, and Umi-Doo let out a purring snort in reply.

"What do I know about System phases?" he said. "Fucking nothing! If you'll excuse my colorful language."

"Nothing?" said Ealdric, his tone skeptical.

Umi-Doo threw his arms up in frustration.

“*Almost* nothing!” he said.

He then spun on his heel and glided through the air to a large marble desk at the center of the chamber. We all followed and when we drew close, I noticed that there was yet another figurine on the desk, half-painted, with an extensive set of fine brushes and pigments laid out beside it.

It looked like my friend Myria landing in one of her cat-like poses after leaping off something unreasonably tall. However, the figurine was wearing a mini-skirt that was distinctly not designed to be worn while performing acrobatics, resulting in certain undergarments being exposed that should have otherwise remained unseen. Knowing Myria, there was a good chance she *had* approved this model.

Umi-Doo waved a hand as we got close and the figurine and paint set disappeared, replaced by a mountain of dusty tomes that plopped onto the desk in rapid succession, landing with heavy thuds. Umi-Doo waved again and the cloud of ancient soot that now filled the space was sucked away into a small, ruby bottle along a shelf to our right.

“No mention of System phases among the ancient culture of Hursrabargdraf,” said Umi-Doo, gesturing at one of the piles. He gestured at the next. “No mention among the theological texts of the dead religion of VONT. No mention among speculative fiction which pre-dates the founding of the Littan Empire concerning the existence of the demon spirit, Juntin. No mention among witness interviews after the fall of Mudong-Dal. No mention—”

Ealdric held up a hand.

“These are all very *specific* sources,” he said. “Why would they mention System phases in the first place? Most of these were written before the Creation Delve was discovered.”

“Yes, well I’ve already read everything written about the Delves,” said Umi-Doo.

“Everything published, that is. Probably half of what is *unpublished*. It goes without saying that nothing about System phases is mentioned in those.”

“Does it, though?” I asked, and Umi-Doo turned to look at me. I was pretty sure he’d only just noticed my existence.

“Esquire Arlo,” he said.

“That’s me.”

“Why the fuck are you in my office?”

I waited for his usual request to forgive his language, but none came.

“He’s with me,” said Ealdric. “You’re saying that no other Delver has encountered this concept?”

“People have ‘theorized’,” said Umi-Doo, using finger quotes around the word *theorized*. “It’s all preposterous, poorly considered, and, for the most part, made up. Most of the time the term ‘phases’ isn’t even used. It’s something vague like ‘the growth’ or ‘the awakening.’ One text written by the famously mad Mir DeTartes called it a series of ‘bug-fixes’. The list goes on, but none of the ideas have any evidence to back them up. That last one didn’t even attempt to explain what insects had to do with anything.”

“It’s shorthand for a machine error,” I said. Umi-Doo gave me another surprised glance. Had he forgotten I was there already? “It’s when an automated system does something unexpected and unwanted.”

“What does that have to do with bugs?” he asked.

“No idea,” I said. “Maybe an actual bug was the cause of the first machine bug, so they just called them bugs from thereon out.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Lots of names for things are.”

“Why are you here again?”

“Because,” said Ealdric, “Fortune’s Folly discovered the System phases. At least, according to what you’re telling me.”

“I don’t see why that requires the physical presence of the party members.”

“Did I offend you somehow, Umi-Doo?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Umi-Doo. “You never came to visit.”

“I never came to visit? I didn’t know I had an open invitation.”

“You don’t,” said Umi-Doo. “You could have requested a meeting.”

“Was there something you wanted to discuss?”

“I wanted to know what you thought of the book I gave you.”

“Which one? You gave me four.”

He waggled his eyebrows.

“You know which one,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “The illustrations were well-made and the articles were... informative.” I snapped a finger, thinking of something. “I might have an entry for you on Third Layer denizens.”

“Really now?” said Umi-Doo, leaning closer.

“Arlo,” said Xim, “I enjoyed Umi-Doo’s book as much as you did, but this conversation is moving into degenerate territory.”

“It’s for science,” I said.

“For posterity,” said Umi-Doo. “Literally *and* figuratively.”

My brain crawled over how many entendres that statement held. Ealdric placed a hand on Umi-Doo’s desk and gave the mini-yeti a penetrating glare.

“Stay on task,” said the patriarch. “You said that you knew *almost* nothing. What *do* you know?”

Umi-Doo’s eyebrows twitched, then he summoned a map of Arzia made of mana and light. Three dots appeared.

“The three Delves—the ones that Mimic entity provided you the locations for—exist,” he said. “The two lower-level Delves, Saekongr’s Crevice and Deijin’s Descent, have been noted for the curiosities of their entry permissions. Most Delvers, even those who meet the level requirements, are denied access. The precious few who have been allowed through the portal never return. These were all parties of exceptionally talented young Delvers.”

He zoomed in on the third dot, which was in the country-sized forest on the eastern side of Arzia.

“The level 30 and up Delve, The Hierophant’s Valley, exhibits the same portal behavior, but to my knowledge *no* Delver has been granted entry. However, after receiving this new information I sent a team to investigate the portal.” He turned back to us, crossing his stubby arms. “First, finding a team willing to breach the inner sanctum of the Less-Than-Habitable Forest is extremely difficult, I’ll have you know. Second, the portal

is closed. In its place there is only a large guidestone with text written in Celestial carved into its face.”

“Celestial?” said Ealdric. “Did you send someone who could read it?”

“My usual team loadout of suicidally driven Delvers does not demand the presence of a member with such niche capabilities,” said Umi-Doo.

“I’m assuming what you meant to say just now was ‘no’,” said Ealdric. “Do you *have* someone who can read it?”

“I do,” said Umi-Doo. “They are currently engaged in other matters, but will be en route as soon as possible.”

“I can read Celestial,” said Etja, and I turned to her, surprised.

“When did that happen?” I asked.

“When I was born,” she said. “It’s one of the things I *inherited* from my father.”

“It’s a vanishingly rare language and an even rarer skill to read it,” said Umi-Doo, appraising Etja for the first time. He fixated on her extra limbs. “Leave your card and I may hire you in the future.”

“My card?” said Etja.

“Contact information,” I said.

“Ah. You can just come and find our party, Mister Director, sir.”

“Inconvenient,” said Umi-Doo, “but very well. Regardless, the Forest is far too deadly a place for a level 6 Delver, even when escorted.”

“If the portal is closed,” said Ealdric, “someone must have conquered the Delve.”

“That is my working theory,” said Umi-Doo.

“Who? None of the truly powerful Delvers from Hiward have been to this region of the Less-Than-Habitable Forest in years.”

“Your information-gathering apparatus may be flawed,” said Umi-Doo.

“Or,” said Ealdric, eyes narrowing, “it was a Delver from *outside* of Hiward.”



“There are precious few who would meet the criteria,” said Umi-Doo, “assuming these Delves are as dangerous as The Mimic suggested. I’m unaware of anyone taking serious action in the forest, aside from the thrillseekers out in Nohrrin. They never dive this deep, however, and Hiward keeps a close eye on anyone who could.”

“Except for the one who cannot be kept track of,” said Ealdric.

Umi-Doo scratched at his jaw with an ebony-taloned finger.

“You believe Ayamari may be responsible?” he said.

“She would have the means,” said Ealdric. “I did her a favor recently. I believe she would be receptive if I simply asked her about the Delve.”

“The direct approach,” said Umi-Doo. “Always nice when it works.”

“If that Delve has been conquered,” I said, “then the hardest of the three Delves is done. We just have to knock out the other two.”

“I fear you have missed a significant stretch of this conversation,” said Umi-Doo. “Some of the most talented young Delves *in history* have disappeared within the confines of these Delves.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean they’re impossible.”

“Yes, yes,” said Umi-Doo. “‘Everything is impossible until it isn’t.’ Those were The Mimic’s *undying* words to you, correct?” I nodded. “Well, if your party wants to sail to Eschendur, figure out a way to bypass the Littan blockade, convince the notoriously insular Eschens to let you galavant across their nation in search of a Delve that is both unlikely to allow you entrance and, if it does, will most certainly kill you, then be my guest.”

I had no good reply to that.

“Hiwardians frequently cross the blockade,” said Varrin. “I’m certain you can grant us passage.”

Umi-Doo blinked at the big guy, then looked at Ealdric, who nodded.

“I *do* have some arrangements that can be leveraged,” Umi-Doo said. “If a request is made by you, patriarch, then I would be willing to spend some of my diplomatic capital.”

“Then consider the request made,” said Ealdric. Umi-Doo shrugged.

“It’s your influence to waste, I suppose,” he said.

“Once we cross the blockade,” said Nuralie, “I can be our escort.”

“I didn’t know you’d been sanctioned by the church with such capacity,” said Umi-Doo.

“I haven’t.” Pause. “But I can be.”

“Then you have two of your three required miracles,” said Umi-Doo. “Your party moves quickly. Now you just have to survive the Delve.”

“And avoid any difficult Littans,” I mumbled, mulling over the chance of a second encounter with Tavio and Gharifon. The Littan armies weren’t *in* Eschendur, but they sure as hell were *around* it.

“Who would you send for the 20 and under Delve?” asked Varrin. “Saekongr’s Crevice.”

“I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding,” said Umi-Doo. “I, in my role as Director of Central, cannot condone this mission. If we assume the information you have is correct, the nebulous claim that your actions will generate new methods to mint Delvers is unfavorable to Hiward.”

“Here it is,” I said. “The politics and bullshitery.” Umi-Doo tilted his head at me. “If you’ll excuse my colorful language,” I added.

“As such,” he continued, “any assistance I can provide is limited. Even petitioning for your passage into Eschendur puts me in a tricky position.”

“What about brother Ealdric?” Varrin asked, turning to Ealdric Senior. The patriarch shook his head.

“He and his party are only level 12. A level 20 Delve would be suicide. Normally, I would say your own party is reaching too high with a level 10, but the reports I’ve read on your team’s activities are enough to persuade me to allow you to pursue it.”

“Any other Ravvenblaq teams in that range?” I asked.

“The other family teams are too high level,” said Ealdric. “I would have to entreat one of the other houses. It would be a difficult task, especially in light of Hiward’s reaction to the avatars.”

“Yes,” said Umi-Doo. “The Thundralkes are unlikely to allow their best and brightest to chase fairy tales while the king has us readying ourselves to take action against god-like beings in Timagrín.”

“So, someone else?” I said. “One of the non-Hiwardian teams?”

“Hmph,” Umi-Doo purr-grunted. “Timagrín is busy, my native people in Mittak wouldn’t care, Ayama doesn’t play nice with *anyone*, and our present relationship with Litta is poor. Beyond that, the imperials are more concerned with their chokehold on the Eschens.”

“Anyone in Eschendur?” I asked, looking at Nuralie.

“The Eschens have few capable Delvers,” Umi-Doo said before Nuralie could respond. “They are a Revelator culture, ill-equipped to—”

“Sakra Manar,” said Nuralie, and Umi-Doo’s mouth clapped shut. “She could do it.”

“What level is she?” I asked.

“Fifteen.”

“You don’t think that’s too low? Is her party really skilled or something?”

“Eschendur *is* a Revelator culture,” said Nuralie, eyeing Umi-Doo. “Sakra Manar is one of the ruling triarchs of Eschendur, the Zenithar of the Church of Deijin, a sixth-stage Revelator, and the only member of the Triune who is *also* a Delver.” Pause. “She is more than capable.”

Umi-Doo shifted uncomfortably and a heavy book fell from his desk. It made a loud clap as it landed, but the little mage ignored it.

“In that case,” he said, “you would need only to convince one of the most powerful and important people in your nation to pursue a Delve on the opposite side of the continent.”

Nuralie lowered her head and her tail twitched.

“I will convince her that our mission is righteous.” Pause. “And necessary.”

Ealdric watched Nuralie’s expression for a moment, then rapped his knuckles against the desk.

“Sounds like you have a plan,” he said. “Umi-Doo gets you through the blockade, Nuralie guides you through Eschendur and recruits the assistance of the Zenithar, then the five of you conquer a hitherto insurmountable Delve.”

“We’ve had worse,” said Varrin. “There are no half-gods trying to kill us this round.”

“Why?” I said. “Why would you speak that into existence?”

Our group spent another hour hammering out some of the details, then began to make our way out of Umi-Doo’s office. It would take a couple of weeks to get our blockade passes, mainly because Umi-Doo would have to grease some palms to help us get Nuralie through. The Littan blockade had already kept the loson from returning home for nearly two years.

On our way out, Etja stopped and admired some of Umi-Doo’s figurines, picking one up to examine. The model was of Yara—queen of the gods and rightful ruler of the celestials—in upward dog position. Etja turned it over and studied it from all angles, then caught me watching her.

“These are neat!” she said as she set the figure down and picked up another. While she looked over a Dhonvon angel of purity shedding her mortal body—and clothes—to rise into the heavens, Umi-Doo floated over to study it alongside her.

“I take great care to portray them exactly as the scriptures describe,” he said.

“Really?” both Etja and I said at the same time, though with distinctly different tones.

“What about the real people?” I asked, pointing over the section of Delves.

“Also made with high fidelity,” he said. “It’s a point of personal pride, and also why they sell so well.”

“I’m sure that’s the *only* reason,” I said. “So, do these ladies get a cut?”

“Of course,” said Umi-Doo, looking affronted. “Do you take me for a thief?”

“I, uh, no. I thought that, maybe... nevermind.”

He looked at me quizzically, but turned back to Etja.

“I hear you made a name for yourself out on the western coast,” he said.

“You did?” said Etja. “Already?”

“You left quite the impression. You may not be a woman of exceptional renown at the moment, but I can see you one day being known the world over.”

“Aww, that’s sweet of you to say.”

“It’s never too early to think about merchandising,” he continued. “If you like, we could collaborate on a statue for yourself.”

Etja paused her inspection of the figure and looked at Umi-Doo. Umi-Doo looked at Etja, his mini-yeti face expressionless. Etja looked at me. I looked at Etja. We both looked back at Umi-Doo.

Etja sat the model back onto the shelf.

“That’s a really nice offer,” she said. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Proposal’s on the table,” said Umi-Doo. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

We then left the Director of Central’s office behind, so that he could do his highly professional Director-of-Central things alone.