

“You don’t know?” said Lito. “It’s not a rival house?”

“They are unaffiliated with any known noble bloodlines.”

“More peasant Delvers?” said Lito.

“It appears so.”

“That means this has been going on for some time. The ability to circumvent the Creation Delve, that is.”

“Yes,” said Umi-Doo. “A proper gold-focused Delver will tackle one Delve a year while skill training in between. A particularly risk-tolerant and ambitious Delver, perhaps two a year.”

“That’s with full access to the existing Delver infrastructure in Hiward,” said Lito. “Trainers, mana-weavers, alchemists, Delve analysts. If you were working outside of that...”

“Perhaps even longer, true. However, given that these individuals hold no titles to which we are aware, they would not suffer the delays caused by the duties of governance. Still, the attempt on Varrin was risky, but not hopeless. As for Xim and Nuralie here, given your own accounts of what transpired and Esquire Arlo’s personal observations, I suspect the level thirty gold Littan was responsible for both of your abductions. She is likely a controller of some sort. As we all know, those abductions *were* successful, albeit temporarily. As for Arlo,” he raised his eyebrows at me. “Well, one would think a five-person team of copper tens would be sufficient to capture a single inexperienced platinum one. Even if copper is the weakest progression, a single copper ten has more stat points than a platinum one, and ten times as much experience to boot.”

“If they all came close to succeeding,” I said, “then why do you say they were poorly executed?”

Umi-Doo scratched at his chin with a small ebony talon which extended from a furry finger.

“Because they failed!” he said. “Had they been successful, I would have cursed their nefarious cunning and begrudgingly praised their expert execution. As it sits, they are talentless curs with nothing to show for their efforts.”

“Oh.”

“I also suspect that the attempt on you, Arlo, was a last-minute consideration. Why send highly advanced Delvers against everyone *but* you? From what we’ve thus far extracted from the survivors of the Artemix group, they were hired only two weeks ago and the job was admittedly rushed. They were required to match their actions to a timeline that predated the mission itself, and that haste was their undoing which also exposed Demarsus, a.k.a. Typhoon. Which I must say, after hearing the particulars of the battle, Typhoon isn’t much of an alias. The man used the spell Gale. Might as well have been wearing a name tag.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” said Myria. We all nodded and mumbled in agreement.

“Why rush after me without much planning?” I asked.

If the Artemix group had been hired a fortnight ago, then they would have been assigned to me practically the day I walked out of the Delve. That would match up with when I started getting the feeling of eyes on my back.

“Probably because nobody knows who the *fuck* you are!” said Umi-Doo. “If you’ll excuse my colorful language. Varrin was clearly the main target, since so much effort was expended to make him vulnerable. I expect Nuralie was also initially targeted, given that her abduction occurred at roughly the same time as the attack on the Ravvenblaq estate. Xim’s attacker was the same as Nuralie’s, so I am assuming the Littan controller was always intended to pull double-duty. Especially given that she was remiss to go beyond the bounds of her agreement and fight when she was discovered. All three of them are known individuals who may have been researched ahead of time.

“You, Arlo, came out of nowhere,” Umi-Doo continued, “which necessitated a different skillset to find and apprehend. Jayko, the one you left without legs, was a scryer. Artemix himself was some sort of social build, so the two of them were good at tracking targets and getting information. The rest of that team focused on lockdown and capture.”

“I’m not following some of this,” I said. “You’re talking like this has been a plot for a long time, but Xim, Varrin and I didn’t know each other before the Creation Delve. That was a little over two weeks ago.”

“You’re also making a lot of wild assumptions,” said Lito.

“Yes, yes,” said Umi-Doo. “Everyone’s a skeptic. I literally have Information Synthesis as an intrinsic skill, you know. Along with Probability. Still, I see where you’re coming from. The reasoning for the abductions is murky, at best. Let me step back and provide some more background.

“So far we have a mysterious mana eruption near Ayama, whisking away the two strongest Ravvenblaq Delves. We have the sudden discovery of a special Delve, pulling in one of Ravvenblaq’s best Delver teams. We have a subsequent attempt at kidnapping Varrin inside the Ravvenblaq estate. And we have a mysterious, now defunct, copper Delve that is to be the meeting place for various individuals involved with the aforementioned kidnappings. A Delve that also happens to be within the Ravvenblaq thundry.

“We also have a mysterious individual, Hognay Haskagander, inside the platinum Delve where Varrin Ravvenblaq found himself during the Creation Delve, systematically murdering his allies. Hognay, unlike many of these ‘unofficial’ Delves, was in our records. He is the third son of a count in the northern Ghashlain Thundry. He disappeared some years ago after the death of four members of his main party inside a silver Delve. The deaths were highly suspicious, and Hognay’s swift disappearance afterward resulted in the widely accepted theory that he was somehow responsible. Perhaps he got greedy over the rewards, perhaps his team had a falling out, or perhaps he just enjoys killing people when he can get away with it.”

“My vote is on that last one,” I said.

“Thankfully,” Umi-Doo said without acknowledging my comment, “the *also* mysterious Esquire Arlo was kind enough to bring us Haskagander’s head, along with a few coded bits of correspondence between Hognay and his taskmaster. I have assigned several potent trackers to attempt to trace the gentleman’s whereabouts over the last few months. Through a combination of magic and more traditional investigative techniques, we identified several locations where he spent some time prior to entering The Toxic Grotto.”

Several pinpricks appeared on the map.

“As you can see, Mr. Haskagander sojourned in the Eschen wastes north of Ayama.”

“Right where the mana eruption occurred,” said Lito.

“And also in western Timagrín.”

“Right where the special Delve was found,” said Lito.

“Prior to that, in the northern mountains of Ravvenblaq.”

“Right where that mystery Delve meeting place is said to be.”

“And a number of other locations across the world, including many hotspots along the border of the Littan Empire and Eschendur. Mr. Haskagander was a bit of a globetrotter.”

“How does a silver ten set off a mana eruption that is severe enough to require three S-tier Delvers to mitigate?” asked Lito.

“It’s doubtful he did,” said Umi-Doo. “I expect he has accomplices, as evidenced by his communications, though there is little there to help identify anyone in particular. Nonetheless, I suspect many of them are significantly more powerful than he was, given the quality of individuals perpetrating these recent crimes.”

“What do I have to do with this?” Nuralie asked, speaking up for the first time.

“I believe your disappearance is meant to further inflame hostilities between Eschendur, the Littan Empire, and Hiward itself.”

Pause.

“I don’t think I’m that important.”

“You represent twenty-five percent of Eschendur’s annual allotment of Creation Delve slots,” said Umi-Doo. “You are extremely valuable to your homeland. Although you have not yet been made privy to the discussions—for reasons of national security—the Eschens have been petitioning fiercely for your return, while the Littans refuse to allow you passage through their blockade ‘without escort’. The Hiwardian government is growing weary of Litta’s position, especially given how crucial trade access to Eschunder is for Hiward’s magical economy. Your disappearance, *especially* if it was at the hands of a Littan Delver, would be a not-insignificant event. This would be further compounded if Hiward suspected Littan military involvement in an abduction carried out on Hiwardian soil.”

Nuralie went still for a very long time. Umi-Doo watched her closely, while Xim and Myria looked at her with concern. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Eventually Lito pulled out a smoke and was lighting it when Umi-Doo snapped his fingers and the cigarette blinked out of existence. Lito huffed before putting his silver cigarette case away.

“I... am *not* that important,” Nuralie said, but it sounded more like a plea than an assertion.

“So your theory is that there’s some sort of international conspiracy going on,” said Lito, “and Varrin is somehow at the middle of it all?”

“I’d say *in* the middle, not *at* the middle. He’s swept up in it, as a single cog in larger machinations. I don’t want to overemphasize his importance, or the importance of our platinum guests here. To whoever is masterminding these events, that is. No offense, you three. I’m sure you’re all very important to *someone*.”

I shrugged, though Umi-Doo’s attempt at being polite somehow only made his words more cutting. *Was* there anyone that I was important to anymore? Nuralie looked relieved, if anything. Xim just smiled and nodded along.

“Whoever is engineering this has more than one goal,” said Umi-Doo. “I don’t want to try and neatly organize this whole mess around a single individual or occurrence. The thrust of my argument is that some group has ensnared and scattered one of Hiward’s most powerful and influential Delver dynasties, the Ravvenblaqs. Perhaps kidnapping Varrin was intended to create more leverage. Simultaneously, they are proceeding to cause disrupting events in our allied nations, while attempting to create some sort of catalyst to ignite the tensions between Litta, Eschendur, and Hiward. Potentially with the hopes of an outright war.”

Umi-Doo gestured at the map and several new areas highlighted across the continent.

“Right now we have the highest level of Delver deployment internationally in history,” he said. “The alleged discovery of several new special delves have drawn in many powerful Delver parties in addition to the Ravvenblaqs. We have several groups monitoring the Littan blockade from the outer islands. We have deployments in south Timagrín responding to frightening intelligence coming out of Reimara concerning activities in Davah. That’s in addition to the normal movements of Delvers in search of whatever personal goals they have globally.”

“But *why* would someone be instigating this?” said Lito. “Most of these absences would be temporary. We may not have an explicit mass-recall procedure for Delvers, but the official groups working for Central can be brought back within a few weeks or less. The rest can be returned by decree of the king.”

“Assuming we had an emergency worth abandoning their respective missions for, yes,” said Umi-Doo. “As for the specific goal, I do not know. However, I have provided all of this scene-setting to impress upon you the seriousness with which I need you all to take the quest I am about to give you.”

“Quest?” said Xim, looking excited.

“Bit of an archaic term,” said Lito.

"I can't *order* anyone here to do it, aside from Myria and Lito. There will also be rewards, and perhaps some violence and intrigue. I believe *quest* is the appropriate word."

"What is it?" said Xim, grinning. I'm not sure she'd sat in on the same meeting the rest of us just had. Then again, none of this involved the Third Layer at large, and only tangentially affected the Xor'Drel tribe.

"You need to figure out what the *fuck* is happening in that cave!" Umi-Doo gave a little hop as he said this. "If you'll excuse my colorful language."

"Oh! I was already planning to do that," said Xim. "I have a *holy* quest for that as well." She hugged my arm. "We both do!"

"Very good, very good."

"Sure," said Lito. "We were going to investigate the cave out in Ravvenblaq either way." Myria nodded. "I was planning to put in the request after this meeting."

"Consider it pre-approved then," said Umi-Doo. Then he turned to Nuralie. "Will you go as well?"

Pause.

"Yes. I am curious. And you gave me this book."

"Great! I'll authorize the requisitions. Full access, whatever you all need."

"Can we take the dreadnought?" asked Myria, getting halfway out of her chair in excitement.

"Whatever you need *within reason*. You cannot take the dreadnought."

"Boo," said Myria.

"It's not even under Central's authority," said Lito, squinting at Myria. "It's military property."

"A girl can dream."

"What other Delves can we get?" said Lito. "We have no idea what we're walking into."

"The Ravvenblaq Thundralkes and Varrin will meet you there. They are also bringing the Xor'Drels."

"That still feels light, considering everything you've told us."

“Two level forty-three golds, two level twenty-one platinums, two level twenty golds, and four level one platinums,” said Umi-Doo. “That’s a ten-Delver party with four B-class Delvers as the core. Maybe not a heroic-level party, but nothing to scoff at. Besides, didn’t you listen to anything I just told you? Many of our most competent Delvers are spread out across the world. The best controller Central has is babysitting Demarsus and the two surviving Artemix members. Most of the other high-level Delvers beholden to Central are part of the core defense group, including myself. We can’t leave the capital, especially under the current circumstances. I can authorize funds for you to do some recruitment among private Delvers, but this quest needs to be carried out post-haste, so there isn’t a lot of time.”

“We might be able to pull in the triplets,” said Myria.

“They hate government work,” said Lito.

“But they love money!”

Lito groaned.

“That they do, Myria. That they do. Just... tell them to leave the wine at home.”

“Oh, there’s no way Ashe will agree to that.”

“Then ask them to at least *not* to wear the same outfits.”

“Afraid you’ll try and kiss the wrong one again?”

Lito sank low into his seat in response, then stared vacantly at the wall across from him.

“What about the inquisition?” I said. “Wasn’t there going to be an official investigation into our Delve? With interviews and everything?”

“Oh, that,” said Umi-Doo. “Normally, yes, but I got involved personally. A typical inquisitor might take weeks to finish their investigation, but I reviewed the existing records and reports after your incident with Typhoon earlier today. I then extrapolated the contents of the interrogatories that hadn’t yet been produced and used a mental model to provide your individual responses. I manually entered a no-fault judgment before this meeting.”

I had no idea what most of that meant, but I was happy to have the matter settled.

“There *is* a minor issue still outstanding, though,” said Umi-Doo. “A Littan duchess named Isaebel Ruinis arrived yesterday to participate in the proceedings. She’s a very striking young woman. Lovely ears, and her fur is quite lustrous.”

I considered the idea of a mini-yeti fawning over a mouse-person, then looked down at my gifted copy of *Can I Have Sex with That?* Umi-Doo was the *sole* author of that text.

“A *duchess*?!” said Myria. “Why a *duchess*?”

“That Sayil fellow was some sort of distant cousin. It caught us all by surprise, since she was only a countess until very recently. She jumped a few ranks due to some sort of intrafamilial struggle within the former duke’s household. Regardless, I’ll have to inform her of my findings this evening,” He scratched at his furry face thoughtfully. “Maybe over a drink or two.”

“You really think a duchess will take that lying down?” said Myria.

Was she aware of her double-entendre?

“Oh, I’ll be invoking a number of articles in the Delver Treaties. I have firm legal footing for my decision, but I’ll probably end up throwing the whole issue to one of Filix’s diplomats. I’m going over to debrief him about this meeting in an hour or so anyway.”

“*King* Filix?” said Myria.

“His Royal Highness King Filix “God-Step” Celeritia, Sole Sovereign of the Kingdom of Hiward and Defender of the Realm, long may he reign. Yes, the very same.”

Myria stared at him wide-eyed, then shifted in her seat and ran a hand over her hair.

“I trust you’ll impress upon him my pivotal role in unraveling Typhoon’s dastardly plot.”

“With great poise, intelligence and grace,” said Umi-Doo. “I will tell him that your competence is second only to your beauty.”

“Yes, that sounds nice. Please do.”

“Really, Myria?” said Lito.

“What? We’ve gone too long without a queen. I’m thinking of my country.”

Umi-Doo shook his head, then levitated out of the room, the double-doors opening and closing behind him on their own. The meeting was over, apparently. Dalton came in shortly afterward to gather his notes off the table.

“Did he even use these?” Dalton asked.

“No,” I said. “No, he did not.”



“Of course he didn’t,” he said, clutching the documents to his chest. He rifled through them, making sure everything was in order. “Well, at least he filled out the minutes.”

I had no idea when Umi-Doo would have done that. Maybe he *had* used the notes after all, in some unseen way. Dalton quickly left in a huff soon after.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence where Myria daydreamed about the King, Lito pulled out a fresh smoke, and another drop of water fell down from the fresh flower tucked behind my ear, Xim leaned over to me.

“So,” she said, “about that book...”