

Lito led me up a flight of stairs and down a hallway to a suite of offices, complete with harried individuals scrawling on paper behind compact desks. One of the offices had a large, dark wooden door with a crest carved into it, featuring a naval vessel and an unfamiliar winged animal with horns. Lito knocked on it gently, and a woman's voice came from within, telling us to enter.

This office was much larger than the ones we'd passed, and was dominated by a wide desk set in front of a wall-sized tapestry featuring a more intricate rendition of the crest set into the door. A dark-haired woman with rich brown skin sat behind the desk, and looked up at us as we entered.

I halted mid-step, literally freezing in my tracks as her hazel eyes caught my own. I couldn't help but imagine cherry blossom petals raining down around us. A swell of orchestral music filled my ears as she gave me a sly grin. My heart melted so much that I knew in my bones that a man with a lower Fortitude score would be sent into cardiac arrest.

She was beautiful. *Too* beautiful. My mind struggled and thrashed in the throes of the hackneyed romance trope. My lungs burned as I struggled to release a breath I only now realized I was holding. The dopamine receptors in my brain rebelled at the flood of chemical love that ravaged and ran through them, and yet, I was still awestruck.

She glanced at Lito, then looked me up and down. She was surrounded in a golden glow like the man escorting me, her level the same and with every inch as much power in her soul. The power was inviting, though, even beckoning. Whereas Lito's was quietly menacing, like a whispered threat.

She smiled warmly and gestured for us to come closer, then at a pair of overstuffed arm chairs in front of the desk. My senses returned to me and the paralysis in my chest abated. I took a deep breath. My cheeks were flushed, but the warmth left them in a few moments as it took me to sit down. The flash-flood of obsession drained from my mind, and I blinked a few times, then took another look at her. She *was* beautiful, there was no doubt. But that didn't explain the fucking soap opera moment I'd just experienced.

"Hey Lito," she said as we sat. "What's up?"

"This is Esquire Arlo," said Lito, nodding at me. "He's not in Dalton's records, so we came to get it worked out."

“Oh,” the woman said, frowning. She turned to me, “I’m very sorry about that. We take our record-keeping seriously, so I can assure you this is atypical. It’s an easy fix, though. Shouldn’t take a minute.”

She stood and picked up a dark, stone tablet from her desk and brought it around to me. She knelt down by my chair and leaned in close enough that I could feel her body heat. She smelled something like jasmine and vanilla.

A violin concerto played with the sounds of passion and longing. The world was a blurred vignette, with this woman at its center. Inspiration struck, and I knew in my heart of hearts that I must speak my truth to her! That I must find out if she feels the same way! Yes! I will confess my—

[*You’re experiencing a disturbing increase in your oxytocin and norepinephrine levels,*] came Grotto’s voice in my mind. [*I am going to adjust your tolerances.*]

My emotions crashed harder than the world economy after the 2008 housing crisis.

“Just put your hand on the tablet, and we’ll get your documentation taken care of. I’m Myria, by the way.”

I put my hand on the stone, which was chill to the touch. Its inky surface was an abyss that echoed my own heart, so broken was I.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, struggling to keep my voice level. “No worries.”

I started to say more, but her presence was *still* overwhelming and I didn’t want to risk it. Either this was the teenage hormones in my new body taking over or there was some magical effect happening. At least, that’s what I told myself. I hadn’t felt anything like this since the first time I kissed my fiancé, and never once for a stranger.

A few seconds went by without anything happening, and I noticed Lito shift a little in his seat. Myria knelt patiently, her hand still on the tablet, just an inch over my thigh. Then, text started to appear on the stone, as though it were carved into it.

“There we go!” Myria said, then stood to study the information. She walked back around to her desk, and I felt like the room cooled by ten degrees. “Esquire Arlo,” she read aloud “Level one *platinum*.” She looked up at me. “Very impressive. Aiming for a big career?”

“It wasn’t my choice,” I said, and briefly regretted not taking advantage of the factoid. I wasn’t above a little deception here and there, but I was staunchly opposed when it was

for something so trivial as merit or impressing strangers. Better to let your own achievements speak for themselves.

The impulse toward braggadocio was another atypical feeling that I cast into a mental bucket with half of the emotions I'd felt since walking into the room, labeled: 'Magically compelled? Or just down bad?'

"I see," Myria said. "Overeager party leader?"

Someone was overeager...

"Yeah."

"Still impressive. Maybe even more so. You *are* alive, after all. Let's see, records show that you entered the Delve with the creation group, but... hmm. You were a last minute replacement for one of the Losons from the Eschendur group."

Lito grunted.

"The Littan blockade is showing its teeth," he said. "If they're already stopping aspiring Delvers from crossing to Hiward, I expect all trade will dry up next. Soon you won't even be able to buy those mushroom patties you like so much, Myria."

"If that happens I'll tear the Imperials apart myself. No one keeps my mushrooms from me." She flashed me another smile. "Anyway, everything looks to be in order. You must have fallen through the cracks since you were a last-minute add. It says here you're from the nation of... The United States of America?" She looked puzzled. "Where's that?"

Lito scratched his head and looked at me with the first genuine expression he'd given me. Confusion.

"It's, uh," I said, "it's pretty far away."

I was getting concerned. How had I ended up in their records anyway? Was this part of the divine reincarnation package I'd been given? Was the being who resurrected me doctoring the records as well? If so, why did they leave my country of origin the same? *Of course* no one here will have heard of it. It doesn't exist. It also had me listed as officially being an esquire, even though I'd fudged that detail *after* being resurrected. Or cloned. Or whatever had happened.

[*This seems to rule out our delusional psychopath theory,*] thought Grotto.

[Your theory. Not mine. I knew I wasn't delusional.] At least, assuming that one of my delusions wasn't that I was perfectly sane and not delusional in the first place.

"Lucky then," said Lito, "that you got all the way here just in time for a slot to open in the Creation Delve." This guy was still trying to catch me in some sort of lie.

[*Tell them you were portalled in,*] thought Grotto.

[I think Lito can tell when I'm lying.]

[*It's not a lie. As best you know, it's true.*]

[Intentionally stating something you don't know to be true as fact *is* lying, Grotto. Fuck, they're staring at me.]

"I was brought in with an ability," I said. "Like a portal, I think."

Myria nodded. "Makes sense."

"In what direction is The United States of America?" asked Lito.

"You can just call it the U.S.," I said. "The whole name can be a mouthful. And, I don't know much about the geography of this region. I honestly couldn't tell you what direction the U.S. is in."

Separate, unrelated statements, each true on its own, but which imply a connection that invites a conclusion that is inaccurate. I was starting to feel like a fucking politician.

Lito looked skeptical, but let it pass.

"Well," said Myria, "I guess we're all squared away. I'll get a copy of this to Dalton, and make sure that Central is up-to-date."

Lito gave another grunt, then stood.

"Esquire Arlo," he said, "sorry for the rough treatment. Gotta' be careful, especially after hearing your story about Hognay."

"Hognay?" Myria said.

"Arlo came out with a severed head," said Lito. "But seeing as how it wasn't a Loson head, then everyone's accounted for. And Hognay didn't look like he had scales to me."

"An intruder?" said Myria. "That's... troubling."

“Killed two from his party on the inside.”

“That’s terrible. There will definitely be an inquiry then.”

“Yeah,” said Lito, turning to me. “Keep an ear out for that. Where are you staying?”

“I don’t have a place yet.”

“Check in at the front once or twice a week, then. There’ll be a notice posted and they’ll want you to be involved. Did *you* kill the guy?”

“Yeah.”

“Solo, or with your party?”

“They distracted the big C’thon. I took Hognay on by myself.”

Lito checked out Grotto when I said this, but didn’t rehash the issue of what he was.

“Killed a silver ten at level zero,” he said. “Even if Hognay was shit, that’s still a feat.”

“I’ll say,” said Myria. She looked me over again, eyes lingering on my boa. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Esquire Arlo. I’ll be here if you have any questions. Don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Of course,” I said, already planning my next visit. Wait, no! Fuck, I should have taken the Virgin Chad evolution.

She gave me a shallow bow, which I returned, then Lito led me back out.

“You can find your way back?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I got other shit to do, so have fun.”

He sauntered away without waiting for a reply, and I felt a wave of relief wash over me.

I went back to check on Xim and, to a lesser extent, Varrin. He'd at least been conscious when the Delve ended, but Xim's condition was unknown to me. When I approached the room, I was surprised to see the two of them standing out in the hall talking, surrounded by their individual entourages.

"Arlo!" Xim said when she saw me.

She'd also taken a spin through the baths and changed her clothes, and she looked like an entirely different person. Her hair was intricately braided, and she had on a light layer of makeup. She wore an outfit that was more flattering to her form, though I could tell the burgundy top and tan pants were designed to give her free range of movement without getting in the way. Coupled with the high-top leather boots, she still looked like she could kick some ass.

She trotted up to me as I approached and Varrin turned to follow, but decided to stay back. It was an odd little moment of indecision in the large man, something that would have seemed alien on him inside the Delve. But, he was standing next to the group of people I assumed was his family, and everyone had their own little quirks around their loved ones. Maybe that was one of his.

"Hierti told us you went to get cleaned up," Xim said, "but that was so long ago I started to think you'd left."

I raised my arms out to my sides in an exaggerated shrug.

"Where would I go?" I said. "There was an issue with my paperwork, and a gentleman named Lito was kind enough to help me get it taken care of."

"Ah," she said, then leaned in to speak more softly. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't be on the lists."

"I was, actually."

"Oh, ok. That's not what I expected. Did you get any more info on what happened to you?"

"Not really." I looked around at the crowds mingling close to us in the hall. "At this point I think I need to start getting some, well, I guess some advice. I'm not the most trusting guy so I've held some things back about my situation. At some point I'm going to have to come clean with some people and, well, you and Varrin are the only two people that aren't strangers to me at this point. I dunno. I also don't want to info dump on you. I mean, I appreciate that what we went through can sort of bond people, but maybe it didn't."

I scratched at my head. *Real smooth, Arlo.*

“No pressure if you just wanted to check in and then head off with your family,” I rushed to say. “But if you don’t mind talking a bit, that’d be good too. Wow, this is fucking awkward sounding. Basically, I have secrets. No one knows them. But I need to tell someone about them.”

Xim nodded along as I rambled, her expression never changing.

“Sure!” she said, then turned to Varrin. Before she said anything she turned back to me. “You want Varrin along too?”

“What do you think is the right move?”

“He’s pretty influential and owes you his life. He’s also a complete fuck up who nearly got us killed. So, half chance he’s invaluable for whatever it is you need and half chance he’ll ruin your life.”

“Yeah, great. Fuck it. I’ll take the gamble.”

“Varrin!” she yelled, which caught the attention of several of the people from the surrounding groups. The big guy said something softly to his entourage, then started to make his way over.

“Arlo,” he said, pressing his palms together and giving me a bow, “I am in your debt for everything you did for us inside. I was foolish and my actions endangered our entire group. I humbly apologize for my rashness and ask your forg-”

“We got time for that later,” said Xim. “Arlo has secrets!”

Varrin peered up, still bowing.

“Secrets?” he said.

“Yeah, secrets. We’re gonna find out what they are.”

“I see,” said Varrin, standing back upright. “Is that what we’re doing?”

“I guess so,” I said.

“Does this place have somewhere we can go for some privacy?” Xim said.

“It does...” Varrin hesitated. “There are a number of party prepping rooms on the far side of-”

“Ok, let’s go!”

“I, um,” Varrin stuttered.

“We’re going to have a chat!” Xim yelled at the group of her and Varrin’s family members, sending more heads turning. The woman who looked like Xim’s sister gave us a little smile, while the man with skin like the night sky raised a hand in farewell. Varrin’s group looked distinctly more flustered, but he gave them some sort of signal, and they reluctantly acquiesced.

“Also, hello Grotto,” Xim added. “How are you? Killed anyone else yet?”

[I have not, but I have many contingency plans in place should the need arise.]

“That’s good. Lead on, Varrin.”

The prep rooms were a five minute walk away and I caught the pair up on my dealings with Lito and Myria, sans all the thirsty bits. Xim also let me know that her parents were planning on giving me some sort of reward, but they hadn’t decided what.

“Those two were your parents?” I said. “I thought the woman was your sister. She looks young, but maybe that’s normal here? I think I’ve seen one person over thirty since I exited the Delve.”

“Hmm, well people of the Third Layer age a bit slower than Hiwardians or other First Layer races. I’m actually twenty-seven, not eighteen like Varrin here. Also, both my parents are Delvers, which generally slows your aging. High Fortitude slows it even further.”

“My parents were with me as well,” said Varrin. “The couple that was next to me. My father is forty-two.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “That’s good to know.”

Turns out the System’s joke about Fortitude causing you to outlive your friends and family was true, so long as none of them were Delvers as well.

“Some of the surviving original Delvers are well over a hundred,” Varrin added. “The ones that tackled the higher tier delves still look like they’re less than forty.”

“Original Delvers?” I said. “Like, the first?” Varrin nodded, eschewing any odd looks over my ignorance. He’d come to accept it by now, it seemed. His statement implied that the whole Delver thing was only a hundred or so years old. Maybe a bit younger, even.

“Why would only the high-tier Delvers age like celebrities?”

“Takes a lot of Fortitude,” said Xim, “to not die in a thirtieth level platinum Delve.”

“This is us,” said Varrin, opening a door for us to enter. The room was fairly plain, with a single large table and a few chairs and loveseats. The furniture looked more utilitarian and worn than the trappings inside the exit room and once inside, Xim and Varrin both looked at me expectantly. I dropped into one of the loveseats and took a deep breath.

I told them.

I told them everything. From my death to my character creation, all the way up until I met them at the Delve entrance. I touched briefly on the type of world I came from, but didn't go into too much detail. Trying to describe an alien world to someone was more difficult than I'd imagined, and I quickly decided to just let them ask questions if they had any.

“Not that I don't believe you,” said Varrin in a tone that said he didn't believe me, “but are you willing to show us your character screen?”

“My character screen?”

“It's typically considered a rude question outside of things like trying to join a party or signing up for an official position using your Delver credentials. In this case, I think it's warranted.”

“Honestly, I was hesitant to even tell you what my stats were earlier. But we're in this deep, so sure.”

You've received a request from Varrin Ravvenblaq to view your character screen. Would you like to allow this action? Y/N

I mentally selected yes.