

“You don’t know where the Delvers attacking Ravvenblaq came from?” 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 with 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.”

Umi-Doo was throwing a lot of Delver terminology around, and it required me to do a bit of mental gymnastics to figure out how *powerful* the Delvers he was talking about were in relation to one another. I decided to start using my own internal rating system, since all the nonsense with metals, tiers, and levels was opaque, at best. We’ll call it Power Rating, or PR for short.

Thus, we will step aside for a moment to discuss *Arlo’s Treatise on How Delver Levels are Bullshit*. Don’t care about that? Skip down to the next line break.

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*\*Ahem\**

The basic problem was that Delver levels showed only the number of Delves someone had done, and were the only thing one Delver could see about another Delver through the interface provided by the System. Levels were useful for seeing how much *experience* a Delver had in conquering Delves, but provided next to nothing about how *strong* the Delver was. The difficulty of the Delves conquered by a Delver determined the amount of stat points they were awarded, so knowing the types of Delves they'd conquered in addition to their Delver level could provide someone with a good guess at the total number of stat points that Delver had.

The metal associated with a Delver's first run of Delves--copper, silver, gold, or platinum--generally stuck, regardless of whether the Delver later went on to drop down to a lower difficulty. So, a level forty with thirty gold Delves and ten silver Delves was still called a level forty gold, despite the inaccuracy of the title. And to be clear, it *was* a title.

Copper Delvers were seen as nobles who were out to grab a quick bag of superpowers before returning to rule their lands, or cowardly opportunists if one were being blunt. Silver Delvers were seen as pragmatic and measured, having chosen a reasonable path to power without whole-heartedly risking their lives. Gold Delvers were viewed in high esteem as the truly talented, brave, and driven. Platinum Delvers were seen as bat-shit insane, though they were still respected for the sheer skill and luck it took for them to remain alive, and the power it afforded them.

So, there was utility in considering level, and utility in considering the metal associated with Delve difficulty, but I didn't care too much about that. What I wanted to know was how many *stats* people had. That's where Delver tiers came into play, but being classified under a specific tier required a Delver to submit to grading, which many Delvers were reluctant to do. It would, after all, tell the world how strong they were. Nevertheless, there were some advantages to getting graded beyond bragging rights, and the tiers were broken up into forty-point brackets based on total number of stats possessed by the Delver as follows:

F - 19-40

E - 41-80

D - 81-120

C - 121-160

B - 161-200

A - 201-240

S - 241+

With a little research, legwork, casual bribery, and a touch of extortion, one could find out what difficulty Delves different Delvers did, and as such could eventually figure out what tier that Delver likely belonged to. However, because of my soul-sight ability, I was uniquely suited to figuring that shit out just by looking at somebody. No crime or bothersome research required.

For example, by looking at Umi-Doo, I could see through the interface that he had ninety levels, and with my soul-sight I knew those levels were equal part gold, silver, and copper. Because I knew the stat allocations for the different difficulties of Delves, his level, and the types of Delves he'd done, I could figure how many stats Umi-Doo possessed without having to rely on... everything else I just mentioned.

Thirty gold Delves at four stat points a piece was 120, thirty silver at two stats a piece was 60, and thirty coppers at one stat a piece was 30. That gave me a value of 210. Then, I added the eighteen points gained through character creation (eight from the starting value of one in each stat, and ten from the initial stats provided) and I was able to come up with a total stat value of 228. Thus, Umi-Doo had a Power Rating (PR) of 228.

That was a lot easier than saying he was a standard-progression level ninety A-tier gold Delver.

This didn't take into consideration skills, passives, evolutions, special abilities, gear, or assholes that violated all the aforementioned rules like myself, but it gave me a ballpark number to work with.

I was currently a PR 62, which put me in E-tier. Xim and Nuralie, as first level platinums, were PR 26, while the level ten coppers of the Artemix group were PR 28, all F-tier. This led my brain the long way back around to Umi-Doo's assertion that a single copper ten has more stats than a level one platinum, which was true, and *would* have been true for me as well if my stats weren't completely broken. Bad for Artemix, good for Arlo.

Thank you for coming to my Ted Talk.

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With all that sorted in my head and squared away, I returned my attention to Umi-Doo's lecture, pondering over how the Sorcerer had framed all of the attempted kidnappings as being poorly planned, before immediately contradicting himself by saying they were all close calls.

"If they all came close to succeeding," I said, "then why did you say they were poorly executed?"

Umi-Doo scratched at his chin with a furry, ebony-taloned 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'd have been assigned to me practically the day I walked out of the Delve. That would match up with when I started feeling 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."

"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 would also match the timeline of when Artemix was hired."

"Certainly," said Umi-Doo. "While these aggressors would not have known who *in particular* may have ended up in low-lord Varrin's party before entering the Creation Delve, the list of prospective Delvers is available through various channels, and keeping tabs on a hundred Creation Delve participants would be a trivial matter for large organizations, or those organizations with but a single *specialized* Delver in their employ. They would have known their habits, residences, where they'd be staying in Foundation after the Delve, etcetera. However, you, Arlo, came out of nowhere. You weren't on the list, until you suddenly were! This necessitated a different skillset to find and apprehend, since they were dealing with an unknown. 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."

"You're still 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 Delvers. 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' Delvers, 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, “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 Timagrin.”

“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 on with concern. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. 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.

Lito squinted at her.

“It’s not even under Central’s authority,” he said. “It’s military property.”

“A girl can dream.”

Lito frowned, but turned back to Umi-Doo.

“What other Delvers can we get? 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.”

I translated that in my head to two PR 164s, two PR 186s, two PR 98s, three PR 26s, and myself at PR 62.

“Maybe not a heroic-level party, but nothing to scoff at,” said Umi-Doo. “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 *not* to wear the same outfits, at least."

"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? In any event, I was sure this wouldn't come back to haunt me in any way in the future. Nope. No chance at all.

"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...”