

I leaned back against the gnarled trunk of a dark, contorted tree as The Operator spun its yarn, wishing I had a bit of popcorn to munch on. Kettle corn, specifically. I liked a little sweet with my salty.

Despite the absence of snacks, I was still intrigued by what I'd heard so far. Much of it added detail to suspicions I'd already harbored, or theories pieced together from the information we'd gathered. One thing that surprised me was the time scale the story dealt with.

The Old Ones being responsible for the System was nothing new. It was practically the first thing Grotto had said when we'd met him. But a hundred thousand years of experimentation to access the divine? Followed by multiple generations of trial and error *before* the System was devised? How old was this original civilization, and how advanced *were* they? Human civilization had existed on Earth for less than 10,000 years when I'd died, but these Old Ones spent 10 times longer than that experimenting, presumably after they'd already reached an advanced stage of development.

"Ascension is not achieved by a single individual," said The Operator. "When the first generation rose to the heavens, 10,000 mortals transcended at once. Their minds and souls joined to push through the thin breach between realms with their combined will. However, their passage was imperfect. It was like a man squeezing through a narrow tunnel of broken glass, shedding flesh and blood in his wake.

"Shards of the ascended were left behind; shattered pieces of individuals, no longer distinct and whole. These shards mimicked the behavior of the ascended and were drawn to one another to form a new entity that sought to ascend. However, by the time it gathered, the ascension had ended, and the breach had closed. There was nowhere for this new being to go. And so, it fell back to the physical world."

"The birth of an avatar," Varrin guessed, and The Operator nodded.

"That does not make sense," said Nuralie. "The avatars are manifestations of fundamental gods. Concepts that are woven into reality. They are not"—pause—"hive minds of mortal people."

"How ascension changes those that ascend is not well understood," said The Operator. "To reach the divine, their essence may be refined to its most basic nature. Perhaps something like humanity is a concept, or perhaps each generation ascends to become part of a concept that the majority leans toward. The ascended might even be divided into a thousand smaller pieces once they traverse the gap, each to join the heavenly force that they resonate with."

“So, they don’t keep any sense of self?” I asked. “Their identity is annihilated.”

“An individualistic interpretation,” said The Operator. “I believe that their identity is added to a greater whole. Nothing is lost, but there is no “hive mind” like the Geulon describes. The new entity is singular, but contains all the distinction of each individual within.”

Xim tapped a finger along her jaw in thought.

“How does a random group of Delves that missed their carriage to the divine realm turn into something like Orexis?” she asked. “Were there a hundred psychos in the god of Yearning’s generation?”

“Moral purity is not required to reach the divine,” said The Operator. “If it were, then reality would be morally pure. It is not. But, I do not believe that it is so simple. When the veil is pierced, divine energy flows into this world. That energy contains the intent of the gods. This intent seeks to shape anything it contacts. The shards are incomplete, lacking the combined will of the ascended. They are... easily corrupted.”

“Alright,” I said. “There are a lot more ‘I believe’ and ‘perhaps’ statements in your explanation than I’m comfortable with, but assuming what you’re saying is correct, then the entire avatar problem was created by the Old Ones and their System.”

“Correct,” said The Operator. “And the problem grows worse with every ascension.”

“Can we go back a little?” asked Etja. “What happened after the first ascension? You said it was a calamity.”

“Yes. All of the world’s most powerful Delves ascended, and the breach to the divine closed. The System would gather mana for the next breach while the subsequent generation grew in strength, preparing themselves for their own ascension. When the first avatar fell upon them, there was no one strong enough to resist it.”

“Which avatar was it?” I asked. “What concept did it embody?”

“The precise aspect is lost to time, but it is believed to be an avatar related to Unity.”

“Unity?” said Xim. “That doesn’t sound very... calamitous.”

“It sought to ‘unify’ all life within itself,” said The Operator. “Whether such life wished to be unified or not. After the avatar appeared, the civilization of the Old Ones quickly fell.”

Varrin grunted.

“If it was so dangerous, why is anything left alive now?” he asked.

“The avatars require a large amount of divine energy to sustain themselves. Once the breach was closed, the flow of divine energy was reduced to a trickle. With the world’s Delvers slain by the avatar, there was no reason for the System to once again pierce the veil. The avatar starved until it went dormant.”

“Then what?” I said. “A few hidden survivors decided to start Delving again, despite the consequences?”

“No. All of the Old Ones were either slain or perished as the world became a barren wasteland devoid of most life.”

“Well, if everyone was dead then who-” I froze mid-sentence as a thought occurred to me, but it seemed too absurd to be true. The time required would make 100,000 years a drop in the bucket. “Did... an entirely *new* sapient species evolve and rediscover the Delves?”

“Correct,” said The Operator. “The next generation had no knowledge of the Old Ones or the dormant avatar. When they discovered the System, it was likely viewed as an incredible treasure. What records I can access indicate that they were able to proceed through all of the phases before the avatar of Unity reawoke. They ascended without ever knowing what they left in their wake, and with their ascension, created a new avatar.”

“How fucking old is the System?” I asked.

“I do not know,” said The Operator. “The time between generations has also grown shorter with each cycle. There is no reliable way to estimate.”

“You’re not an Old One?” asked Etja.

“No. I am from a much later generation.”

“Why hasn’t anyone shut this shit down?” I asked. “If the System creates avatars with every ascension, but the avatars are dormant while the System is offline, then turning it off would solve the problem, right?”

“For most early generations, the avatars were not discovered until they were on the verge of ascension,” said The Operator. “As the cycle repeated, the avatars began to awaken earlier. Some of the more recent generations have attempted to destroy the System or to disrupt it before the avatars grew too powerful, but they all failed.”

“Why are the avatars showing up earlier each time?” asked Xim.

“I do not know for certain. Some avatars may be less powerful and require less divine energy. The avatars may act as beacons for the divine energy, pulling more through the breach or spreading it across the planet more rapidly. The breach created by the System may be growing larger or more unstable with each subsequent piercing. There are likely many factors at play.”

“Why couldn’t the other generations destroy the System?” I asked.

“The creations of the Old Ones are very durable.”

“How durable?” I asked skeptically. If the prior generations were using magic and weapons granted to them by the System itself, it would make sense that–

“This planet once had a second, smaller moon,” said The Operator. “The generation before yours first attempted to contain all of the avatars within The Cage. Then, to prevent the cycle from repeating, they brought the moon down upon the Delve housing the first System Core during their ascension.”

My mind flashed to the map of Arzia and how Hiward was at the center of a large, circular gulf.

“Was that Delve the Creation Delve?” I asked.

“In what is now known as Hiward, yes.”

“They dropped a moon on the Creation Delve and it... is fine?”

“As I said. Very durable.”

My plan of developing magic nukes to atomize the System died as soon as it was formed. If an orbital strike big enough to carve a crater a thousand miles wide wasn’t enough, then what would be?

“You can’t just turn it off?” asked Etja. “You’re part of the System now, aren’t you?”

“My role as an Architect does not grant me that power, no.”

“Grotto?” Etja asked, looking hopefully at the core.

*[If I even contemplated such an act I might be eliminated. I do not even have high enough permissions to divulge this kind of information to you without being terminated.]*

“But you both participate,” I said. “You’re enabling this to continue.”

“All System assets go dormant after the ascension,” said The Operator. “By the time we are brought back online, the process has already begun again. Core 1156 is bound by his role to assist the System. Although, his current circumstances may grant him greater capacity to act outside of his original parameters.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Are you ‘bound’ by your role as well?”

“As an Architect, I have responsibilities that require greater authority than a Delve Core. I may take nearly any action I deem appropriate to test candidates seeking to advance to phase two. I have made... ‘creative’ use of my authority to inform Delvers and try to find a solution to this dilemma. That is why I chose to become an Architect, rather than ascend.”

“You used to be a Delver?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why The Mimic stuck around as well?” I asked.

“No. She is just insane.”

That followed.

“Shit,” I swore. “What do we do with this info? Hell, will unlocking the next phase even help?”

“The breach to the divine was triggered upon the Creation of this generation’s first Delvers. Advancing the phase will trigger the System to expand the current breach, allowing for more divine energy to flow both to Delvers and to the avatars. However, the advantages granted to Delvers will be augmented by the System’s guidance.”

“Oh, I see. It might make it *worse*. What if we don’t advance the phase?”

“The avatars will continue to grow in power, but their progress will be slowed. The Delvers of the world, however, will stagnate.”

I rubbed at my eyes and struggled to keep myself from pulling tufts out of my beard in frustration.

Part of me wondered whether I could trust anything this entity was telling me. It was, after all, a tool of the System. Everything we were being fed might be designed to keep the whole apparatus going, avatars or not. Maybe running into The Operator wasn’t a

coincidence, but something orchestrated by the System itself. Alternatively, maybe an avatar set this into motion and if we advanced the phase we'd be handing it a nice powerup, damning us all in the process. We didn't have a good way to verify anything The Operator was telling us, other than to go into the Delve and poke around for ourselves. I decided to try and get some additional info from a different angle.

"Why were you fighting Tavio's party? The Littans?" I asked.

The Operator's eyes smoldered behind its porcelain mask.

"There are several reality anchors binding Deijin's Descent to Eschendur. One of my duties is to monitor and maintain these anchors. Some time ago, the Littans discovered one of the anchors and began to interfere with it. I eliminated that interference. A second anchor is nearby, so I have been engaging any Littans that get too close."

Was it possible Tavio's group *wasn't* following us, but was hunting for one of the anchors? It seemed like too much of a coincidence. It was more likely that their group was following—or at least searching for—our party, and happened to stray too close to the anchor.

"Was that first anchor in the Gap?" asked Nuralie.

"Yes."

"Then you *were* the cause of the Litten encampment being destroyed," she said. "You set off the entire conflict with Litta." Nuralie's tone wasn't accusatory. She sounded more like a belief she'd held had been justified.

I took a deep breath.

"Let's say that we still want to get into Deijin's Descent," I said, then looked at the Operator. "We've passed your test, right?"

"The Mimic administers the test," said The Operator. "I ensure the Delve is operational and govern its access."

"Alright, so we can go in?"

"The Delve will grant your entry," it said.

"Great. Now the problem is how we make it to the entrance of the Delve. Maybe you can help us with that."

The Operator tilted its head as it considered the request.

“Why?”

“The Littans have established themselves around the Delve,” said Varrin. “We expect that some of them will give us trouble.”

“We’re on their bad side,” I said. “We’ve been told there’s at least one that’s pretty high level, so it might be tough to get through them.”

“I am aware of the Littans around the entrance,” said The Operator. “How significant is the animosity between your groups?”

“We killed fifteen of their Delvers yesterday,” said Xim. She squinted up at the morning light coming through the canopy. “Or was it the day before? Hells, maybe it was *today* since we haven’t been to bed. I need some sleep.”

“They attacked us first, though,” I added.

“We were also partially responsible for sinking one of their fleets,” said Nuralie.

“Only like 10% responsible,” I countered.

“And Arlo slew one of Tavio’s party members,” said Varrin.

“That was a team effort,” I corrected.

The Operator scratched at its patchwork neck.

“I am heavily discouraged from assisting Delvers in any capacity,” it said. “I have already disregarded that dictate several times, however. If you can complete Deijin’s Descent, then I would no longer need to worry about the reality anchors for now. I could focus my energy elsewhere.”

“That’s a yes? I’m taking that as a yes.”

“I can create a distraction,” it said. “I will not defeat an army for you.”

“A distraction is good enough,” I said. “We can help with that, as well.”

“Many distractions,” said Nuralie. Pause. “*Big* distractions.”

I clapped my hands together and looked around the party.

“Before we move forward, have any of us changed our mind in light of what we’ve just learned?”

“We need more advantages,” said Varrin. “Hiward’s best Delvers can’t face the avatars as they are now. If they’re allowed to develop further, then they will have an insurmountable lead. Even if unlocking the phase increases their growth, we just have to grow faster with the tools the unlock gives us.”

As usual, Varrin had a well-thought-out and reasonable point of view.

“It is also a special Delve,” said Nuralie. “We will be stronger for having completed it.” Pause. “I look forward to disrupting the Littan’s operating base, as well.”

I thought that Nuralie may have been focusing too much on the Littan part of the situation, but that was fine.

“We already came all this way,” said Xim. “I’m not leaving without seeing what’s inside.”

A wholly irresponsible take from Xim, but I’d allow it. We all looked at Etja, who shrugged.

“Go team!” she said. I grinned and shook my head.

“Good,” I said, opening my inventory screen and scrolling through the list of our ready-made kits. I stopped on the group labeled “Shock and Awe”.

“Let’s go confuse some Littans.”