

Vines and foliage whipped past me as I sailed through the canopy in The Operator's grasp. Its grapple had come so quickly that I was snatched from Shog's tentacled grasp before he could tighten his grip. Varrin had drawn his sword, but even he couldn't match the Architect's Speed, and his blade cleaved through empty air behind us. We hurtled through space until gravity took its hold, and we landed amidst the water and mud with enough force to send the mire scattering for a hundred feet.

I sputtered, nearly choking as soiled water flooded my nostrils and sought to invade my lungs. I blinked filth from my eyes to find The Operator drawing back an arm, its flesh molding into a spike. My mind raced and I strained to figure out how to defend against the appendage's inevitable descent into my skull. This time, I didn't think that I'd survive the hit.

I discarded the idea of struggling after a split second. The power pouring out of this entity's soul was immense—it was out of my league. Even if I could get my shield up in time, I doubted Gracorus would hold up. Instead, I forced air through my compressed throat and wheezed out a few short words before the strike came.

“The Mimic sent us!”

The Operator paused, and its head tilted slightly to the side. His eyes flashed with stuttering light as he appraised me. On a whim, I concentrated on my memories of the party's interactions with the Mimic. I focused and reached out to my assailant with Reveal, holding the remembrance in place. I didn't seek to force my way into the creature's soul—I doubted I had the power. I reached out with the barest touch on its spirit, offering the experience to prove the truth of my words.

The Operator flinched when it felt the connection, and the spike descended an inch toward me, but it hesitated. Another series of lights flashed in its dark eyes beneath the porcelain mask, and then it accepted the link. I focused on The Mimic's appraisal of the party—the good and the bad—and then on its description of the three Delves. The Architect above me processed what I sent it, then loosened its grip on my throat.

Varrin splashed down behind it, Kazandak held aloft to attack, for all the good that would do. I held up a hand to stay him, and Varrin held back. The rest of the party joined soon after, each person cautiously watching The Operator. It eventually released its hold on my neck, although it continued to straddle me, its thighs like an iron vice on my ribs. The experience was made stranger when I realized that, whatever this thing was, it appeared to be naked. The clothing that I'd interpreted as ragged, stitched-together leathers was actually its skin.

The spike morphed back into an arm, the patchwork skin sewing itself together as the muscle and sinew finished transforming. It turned to look over the party, then gave me a final, hard stare before it stood.

“The Mimic,” it spat. “That whimsical child. It is too early, this will become another aberrant event.”

While I was no longer mounted, the creature continued to stand over me, so I kept my spot in the mud. We’d made a small crater when we’d landed, so it was sort of cozy in a slimy, rapidly filling-with-water kind of way. Like being buried in the sand at the beach, but fucking gross.

“Sorry?” I said. “The Mimic mentioned something similar. She said that this civilization wasn’t advanced enough. Is that what you mean?”

The Operator suddenly reached down and grabbed me by the collar. It roughly hefted me to my feet. Gobs of muck slid down my back and fell off in sloppy chunks. I also felt a hefty amount of mud oozing in my pants. At least, I hoped it was mud.

I had to crane my neck back to meet The Operator’s eyes, which was an experience I was sick of having. Seriously, if I’d known that half of all the sentient beings I met in Arzia would be taller than me I’d have given myself more than a couple of extra inches when I got the option to customize during my pseudo-resurrection. I was six feet and change, but between Varrin and Shog I was uncomfortably close to the median of our party’s vertical measurements. At least Grotto was only three feet from top to tentacle tip, but he still hovered a hair above me at all times.

“This generation’s technological development has advanced at an above-average rate,” said the Operator. “However, it is still at a nascent stage.”

I took a step back since the creature had hoisted me within a couple of inches of itself. It made no move to stop me as I recovered my personal space, and I began wiping gunk off of my bare head.

“Right,” I said. “Well, early or not, we’re here to challenge Deijin’s Descent. We’re not scavengers.”

“That claim is under consideration, but inconclusive.” It turned and began carefully studying the other members of my party. Its eyes lit up with flickering light as it looked at each in turn.

“What does that mean, anyway?” I asked. “Scavengers.”

The Operator ignored me.

“High-grade summon,” it said after scanning Shog, then turned back to me. “Yours?”

“Shog is his own man, but yes.”

Its finger swiftly turned into a blade and it swiped at my arm, leaving a shallow cut. I flinched back as everyone else tensed, but all The Operator did was watch the wound as it closed in a handful of seconds.

“Moderate Fortitude,” it said, “with high regeneration.” It closed the distance and grabbed my arm, then squeezed. “Low Strength, but above base.” It twisted my limb in a few directions, putting an uncomfortable amount of pressure on my joints, Varrin raised his weapon again.

“It’s chill,” I said with a groan while The Operator bent my wrist in a direction it shouldn’t bend. “We’re chill, right?” It met my eyes but continued its examination without responding.

“Similar Agility. Previous reaction time indicates the same for Speed. Verbal compulsion strength indicates the same for Charisma” Its eyes flickered. “Mana matrix development at low-moderate, indicative of average Intelligence and Wisdom for a caster in the sub-10 level bracket.” It continued to hold my arm in its bone-creaking grip.

“Going to criticize my Luck as well?” I asked.

“Impossible. Insufficient data.” It looked my mud-covered form up and down. “I suspect it is low, however.”

“I feel called out.”

“Attributes show clear progression outside of normal parameters,” it continued. “Soul-manipulation of divine origin evidences revelatory capability.” It reached up and tapped a finger on my Ring of Healing, then pulled me closer and dug under my armor to produce the Traveler’s Amulet. “Avatar-made trinkets.” It finally released my arm, and I shook out the kinks from the rough treatment.

“Think it knows your mother’s maiden name?” asked Xim. The Operator turned to her.

“Sam’lia does not normally concern herself with the First Layer,” it said. “Another divergence.”

“Ah, I don’t want to be analyzed next,” said the cleric. “Do someone else.”

“I believe it is doing its own evaluation,” said Varrin. “To confirm The Mimic’s decision to send us here.”

“Correct,” said The Operator as its flashing eyes dissected Varrin. “Evolving Spiritual attunement. Rare.”

“That’s a better review than you got from The Mimic,” said Xim as she elbowed the big guy.

“I suspect circumstances have changed,” said The Operator. “Or she is blind.” It tilted its head again. “Equal odds.”

“What about me?” asked Etja, looking like a teenager ready to have her fortune read. “Do me next!”

“Soul-imbued construct, evidence of avatar involvement,” it said dismissively. “Even without your dynamic matrix, your candidacy is not in question.”

Etja looked like she didn’t know what that last part meant—to be fair, neither did I—but she was happy to receive a positive evaluation.

“Have we passed your test?” asked Varrin, eyes narrowed.

“You four have,” said The Operator. “But the Geulon hiding in the shadows displays insufficient qualities.” I raised an eyebrow and scanned the swamp, then spotted Nuralie stepping out from under the cover of a particularly shady tree. Grotto floated off of her shoulder and hovered toward the Architect.

*[Nuralie is an emerging revelator,] my familiar thought to us. [She also possesses enhanced attributes like the rest.]*

The Operator appraised the mini-c’thon.

“Core 1156,” it said. “Why are you outside of The Toxic Grotto?”

*[The Delve was infiltrated by a Delver who summoned a c’thon to drain its mana harvest, after which this group slew the invaders destroying the Delve in the process.]*

It sounded like Grotto already had that explanation rehearsed and ready to go.

“Not a fan of how you worded that,” I said. “You make it sound like we destroyed the Delve.”

“Why have you remained with them?” asked The Operator. “Your priority should have been to seed a new Delve.”

*[Yes, well, there were various limiting factors in scouting out new locations. Further, I have found that this group provides advantageous resources in regard to—]*

“He’s my Bonded Familiar,” I said. The Operator took a second to digest the information.

“How?” it asked.

*[Several unfortunate events led to the System forging the bond.]*

The Operator squatted and placed a hand on its chin. “That... is strange.” It ran a finger through the wet soil. It was still in the form of a blade. “What level of permissions does this group have?”

*[Phase two precursor information.]*

The Operator began drawing complex shapes in the dirt. I watched him work for a minute, and the shapes developed into something that looked like a mathematical formula.

“This iteration has produced candidates 23% faster than the last. The largest reduction so far.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked. “You said that it’s too early, but what is it too early for? *Why* is it too early?”

The Operator looked up from his equation to Grotto.

“Have you provided them with any historical context?”

*[No. Much of the information from the prior generation has not been categorized. I have been hesitant to share it.]*

“Evidence of further degradation,” said The Operator. It stood, then peered back down at its formula. “The System has had ample time to process that data. If it has not done so, it is by choice.”

*[I find that idea unsettling.]*

“Okay,” I said, stepping forward and putting myself between Grotto and The Operator. “You two are obviously talking about something that the rest of us have no context for. Care to enlighten us?”

The Operator slowly turned its head up to the sky and stared at the canopy. It held his arms out, as though it were basking in the few rays of morning light coming through the foliage.

“This world has been caught in a diminishing cycle,” said The Operator, and I was struck by its sudden turn from frosty and analytical to top-tier drama. “The Great Work was set into motion by the Old Ones with holy intent, but the blessing they sought to bestow upon these lands has spawned a curse that endless peoples have endured for eons.”

My brow went up, as it sounded like we were finally about to receive some concrete detail about the history of the world and the System. Of course, Grotto tried his best to get in the way.

*[I do not believe this information is necessary for the party to advance at this stage.]*

“Really, Grotto?” I said. “I thought you were cool again.” The mini-c’thon bowed his head, but his eyes shifted as though he was watching for some unseen danger.

*[The System is always listening,]* he thought to us ominously.

“Ever have we hidden the truth,” said The Operator. “To force mortals to discover the methods of their own accord. To provide trials, to test and strengthen the candidates. Secrets, in every era, until the precipice of calamity.” It faced Grotto with its porcelain mask, the impassive expression marred by angry eyes. “I shall not reveal the challenges, or solve the formalist puzzles. But there is no longer time for this age of sapients to discover the histories for themselves.”

The Operator’s gaze bore into Grotto, and the core averted his eyes in submission.

“The Old Ones sought to ascend beyond the physical realm,” The Operator continued. “Through a hundred thousand years of effort, they birthed a method which could breach the membrane between this world and the divine. Through this breach, fragments of divinity flowed, and with these fragments, the Old Ones would saturate themselves. As their bodies and spirits fused with these fragments, their existence would naturally rise to the divine realm, as a bubble rises to the surface of the sea.

“Or so it was theorized. The process was not easy. For many generations, it met with failure. Countless perished during their attempts at fusion, and the energies involved were great. Such failures often led to vast destruction. Yet, there was limited success that drove them forward. New magicks were discovered, and men and women grasped power beyond what was possible with mundane biology.

“As the Old Ones experimented, they learned. The fusion needed to take place over time, which varied greatly from one person to another. Such fusion could also only occur with meritorious individuals, but such merit was not always measured by human values. Even with careful application, the subjects would also need to possess a fortified mind and an unconquerable will. These variables were vast. They were unpredictable. A guiding hand was required to manage the process. Thus, the System was created.

“The System knows more than the most learned scholar, sees more than the wisest sage, and is more incorruptible than the most valorous knight. With a world of knowledge and a singular mind to encompass it, the System alone possessed the insight and resilience necessary to fuse fragments of divinity with the mortal shells of the Old Ones. With reverent dedication, the divine veil was pierced, and with glorious celebration, the first generation used this tool and ascended.

“And after the first ascension from this world, the first cataclysm befell it.”