

“There are many who are worried,” said Nuralie. “Between the avatars and Litta, there is much to be concerned about.”

“True,” I said. “What’s going on in Eschendur and whatever Orexis is brewing is serious. I don’t want to downplay that. But...” I took a moment to look around the tavern. So far, everything I’d said was either something I didn’t care about other people knowing, or the type of thing that could be written off as a joke or drunken boasting. However, I needed to get into some more sensitive topics to properly explain my trepidation. “Tell you what, this is probably a discussion better had in private.”

“Geez, Arlo,” said Xim, “and you complained about The Mimic stringing us along.”

“Now you decide to be discreet,” said Nuralie.

“I’ll tell you! Just let me pay the bill, and we can hop inside the Closet back in my room.”

“If I go upstairs, I’m going to bed,” said Xim.

“We just got up three hours ago.” I leaned over to peek out one of the tavern windows. It looked like the sun had long set.

“Yeah, but my schedule’s all screwed up after we left the Delve. I went to bed at sunrise today.”

Etja yawned.

“I can always sleep,” she said.

“Just give us the basics,” said Xim. “Use... code phrases or something.”

I rubbed at my eyes, then gave her a tired glance. She watched me expectantly.

“Really? You can’t wait five minutes?”

“If we go upstairs,” she said, “open the Closet, and go into your magic penthouse to talk about one of your theories, it’s not going to be five minutes.”

“I will admit, that’s true.”

“Outline it for us. Entice me with your hints and intrigue.”

I drummed my fingers along the table and considered.

“There are some patterns I’m noticing here that remind me of some things that happened in my... *homeland* during the century before I was born. Mutual defense pacts, an aggressive imperialist nation, an ongoing technological renaissance... Most importantly, however, you’ve got the most destructive weapons the world has ever seen, and these lands have yet to experience the devastation that fielding those weapons in open conflict will cause.”

“Are you talking about Delves?” asked Xim.

I nodded.

“Among other things. Hiward also has a fucking airship the size of a small lake hovering over Foundation.”

She furrowed her brow and thought for a moment. “People know Delves are dangerous,” she said. “No mundane soldier in their right mind would try to fight one.”

“Soldiers rarely choose whether they go to war,” I said. “Or, who they fight when they do so.” I took a deep breath. “Look, I’m not claiming anything will or won’t happen. The conditions here are very different from where I came from, but maybe not as different as you might imagine. It’s something that I’m paying attention to.”

“You said this reminds you of your history,” said Nuralie. Pause. “What happened?”

“How about this,” I said. “Timagrín, Mittak, and Hiward all have reciprocal defense treaties. If one of them gets pulled into war, all three of them do. On the other hand, you have the Litta Empire, which is made up of Litta and six vassal nations. When Litta marches, that’s a seven-nation army. If conflict arose between those two sides, you’d have three quarters of Arzia wrapped up in it.”

“You think Litta would be that stupid?” asked Xim. Nuralie was the one who answered.

“Yes.” Pause. “They are already doing it.”

“Hiward and Eschundur are friendly,” I said, “and that hasn’t deterred Litta from whatever dumbassery they’re engaging with over there. Hiward’s relationship with Litta, however, is one of necessity. Given the history between Litta and Hiward, it’s surprising they haven’t fought more than they already have.”

“Right now, peace is kept through mutual deterrence. Hiward has way more Delves, but Litta has way more people and resources. Litta can’t approach Hiward because of how well entrenched the nation is. There’s a big stretch of ocean between them, and every port along Hiward’s coast doubles as a military fortification. Hiward can’t approach Litta,

either, because they don't have the manpower to seize and control such vast swaths of territory. If given the chance, I'm sure either side would be happy to be rid of the other."

"But, why?" asked Etja. "What would they fight over? I know the Littans enslaved the Hiwardians a long time ago, but is it worth starting a war because you're grumpy about the past?"

"The most important 'natural' resource in the world," I said, "is the Creation Delve. Only a hundred new Delves can be minted every year, and Hiward gets to say who those hundred people are. They have total control over the number of superhumans available to every nation on this planet."

"Just Delves," said Nuralie. "There are other roads to power." Pause. "But delving is the easiest."

"Litta has guaranteed slots every year," said Xim. "It's not like Hiward can completely deny them."

"There are treaties, sure," I said. "But how secure is that? Litta has the largest share of Creation slots next to Hiward, and Hiward still has twice as many as Litta does, despite having a fraction of the population. As far as what everyone else gets? They're fighting over scraps."

"So, Litta wants the Creation Delve?" said Etja, "And Hiward wants those extra slots back?"

"Maybe," I said. "I'm not a politician, but wars have been fought over less. Regardless, if it comes down to conflict, you'd have two multinational superpowers going to war with an army of Delves at their backs, in addition to their traditional militaries. That's never happened, and I'm afraid of what that looks like."

"There was the Davahn invasion," said Xim. "Thirty years ago. That involved Delves."

"Only in a minor way. Davah didn't have many Delves because they didn't have many Creation slots. That's why they sailed against Hiward in the first place, and they were beaten so badly their whole country went into hiding and hasn't come out since. History has shown us that you can't fight Delves *without* Delves, but not what it looks like when you do.

"Just imagine Matriarch Dukgrien raining fire on a Littan city. She can light up an entire mountain with *one* spell! Now, what does the retaliation for that look like? A single fight between *two* high-level Delves could annihilate an entire region. What about a fight between a hundred mid-level Delves? A thousand?" I turned back to Nuralie.

“What happened in my homeland is that no one really understood how devastating a war with these new weapons would be. Once the fighting started, everyone got sucked into it, and that only led to even faster development and production of deadly technologies. By the end, entire nations were ruined, and millions were dead.”

Nuralie shifted in her seat, and her tail began to swish in agitation.

“Something like that,” said Xim, “don’t you think it would end quickly? What general would send a mundane army against a group of Delvers?”

“It’s common knowledge here in Hiward how dangerous Delvers are, because Hiward’s concentration of Delvers is tens of times higher than anywhere else per capita. I expect there are a lot of traditional military commanders in the world who may have never met a Delver, or if they have, only ones who are low level. I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t take the threat seriously, especially if one little party of Delvers told them to turn their whole ten-thousand-man-strong army around. It’s the type of thing that defies common sense until you’ve seen it in action.”

“You think you could fight ten thousand people?” asked Xim.

“Normal soldiers?” I said, then sat forward in my chair. “How would they hurt me? I wouldn’t need a single spell or technique. I could just swing my hammer until my arm got tired, and my arm would *never* get tired.”

Xim tilted her head to one side as she thought about that, and I saw that the message got through. Even amongst Delvers, the impact they could have on a battlefield had no frame of reference.

“This... has been lovely,” said Nuralie, and she stood. “But, I do not want to hear more. I’m going to go and be depressed in my room now.”

“I’ll come, too!” said Etja, hopping up behind the loson. The pair wished Xim and I a good night, then went on their way.

Xim and I sat in silence for a while, the sounds of the tavern growing more raucous as new patrons filed in for the after-dinner revels. A trio of musicians took to a low stage and began filling the room with jaunty tunes and a scandalously worded song about a well-endowed bar maid and her three equally well-equipped suitors.

A dark expression marred Xim’s features, until she blew out a breath and it disappeared.

“That’s a lot to think about!” she said. “I’m gonna go think about it in bed. Also, Arlo?”

“Yeah?”

“The world isn’t your responsibility.”

“I know. But I live in it.”

“We should try to do something fun,” she said. “I never thought I’d get sick of Delves, but you can only do one thing for so long, ya’ know?”

“Believe me, I know.”

“We’ll figure something out tomorrow.” She hesitated before leaving, studying me, but left without voicing whatever it was she was thinking through.

I let the sounds of the tavern flow over me for a time, and tried to allow my mind to exist in the moment. I banished the thoughts of what the next year would look like, how to improve my training or build, and any lingering worries about what had happened in the past.

Tension left my neck and shoulders, and I realized that I’d been letting the stress build without a release valve for some time. I think that everyone had been. I was making incredible progress with skills and levels, but I somehow still always felt behind. That was nothing new, though. Just part of the Arlo condition.

I slid into my meditative state, something I hadn’t done in a while, and time passed without my notice. At some point the waitress came to check on me and I ordered a glass of what I’d come to consider whiskey, but left it untouched on the table in front of me. I started into its amber surface, running my fingers along the side of the crystal tumbler as I let the world’s sensations travel through an empty head, unbothered.

The trance was broken when a man sat down across from me and slid a mug of fruit juice in my direction.

I looked up from my drink to find dark eyes and brown fur, a gently sloping snout, and delicate whiskers.

While most Littans were lithe, the one across from me had a thick layer of densely packed muscle across his arms and chest, and I presumed the trend continued down below the table. His body was still on the leaner side, lacking the broad and beefy girth of a high-Strength Hiwardian, but I didn’t let his physique tempt me into thinking he couldn’t bench-press a rhinoceros.

He was level seventeen, full gold, with a few of the violet striations that told me he'd conquered at least a couple of special-grade Delves. The base layer of his soul was a flowing river of grain, eagerly awaiting its turn to sprout from the earth.

"You are Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel, no?" he said in sharply accented Hiwardian. The last Littan I'd spent any time speaking with was Sir Sayil back in the Creation Delve, whose accent had been close to a western drawl. The way this gentleman spoke made it sound like he was from an entirely different country altogether. He probably was, in fact.

"That's me," I said, trying to hide my apprehension. I couldn't think of many reasons a Littan would track me down, and the ones I *could* think of weren't good.

"My name is Tavio," he said, pressing a hand to his chest. "Tavio of Seqaria. I was wondering if I might speak with you for a few moments?"

"You've got me curious, Tavio. What would you like to speak about?"

Tavio smiled and scooted his chair a little closer under the table.

"You and your party discuss some interesting things," he said.

"Eavesdropping?" His grin broadened and he waved a hand.

"Please, one does not need to eavesdrop to hear what you were saying. You announce it to the whole room. I could practically hear you across the street."

He had a point.

"Which part got you interested?" I asked.

"All of it, I think." He sat an elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand, looking off toward the raunchy minstrels. "I have heard about mana-shaping, but not this thing, restrictions, as you called it. Did you know that you can mana-shape techniques as well?"

I raised my eyebrows. The thought had occurred to me, but I'd had no reason to explore it.

"Do you call that... stamina-shaping?" He pursed his lips.

"I call it mana-shaping," he said, looking as though this were the first time he'd considered calling it anything else. "Mana for spells, stamina for techniques, at the end of the day they are both magic. It matters little what you call it when the application is the same."

“Hmm, I like specificity in my nomenclature.”

“You said that you stumbled upon your restriction for your explosion spell. Have you had any success designing restrictions intentionally?”

I watched him for a second, realizing he'd heard more than some snippets of my party's chat. It was like he'd been right there at the table with us. Did that mean... high Wisdom? A specific evolution? Or maybe I was louder than I realized. I'd heard that complaint a few times in my life.

“Not so far,” I said. “My skill set has been pretty effective, and nothing else has felt quite right, if that makes sense. With *Explosion!*, the chant began partially out of necessity. I adapted the spell to my role. I haven't needed to do that with anything else so far.”

“Ah, a solution for a challenge. That is the best kind of progress, I think.”

“More fun than theory-crafting,” I said. I went ahead and took a sip of the juice. The guy was being nice enough, and it was more expensive than the whiskey. No reason to let it go to waste.

I did *not* get any poison notifications.

“So, did you just want to interview me about my team meeting, or...” I trailed off as Tavio turned back to lock eyes with me. His expression had turned grim.

“I am afraid not, no,” he said, crossing his meaty arms. “My duchess has tasked me with finding you, to ask you some questions about your Creation Delve.”

“Ah. Sir Sayil.”

“Yes, may Griosan bless his path through the darkness beyond.”

“Alright,” I said. “We all gave our accounts to members of Central. I expect those reports sum up the events fairly well.”

“It is not usually our custom to rely upon reports when one of our own has perished. Especially when those reports are prepared by officials who are subservient to one of the... involved parties.”

“What, Varrin?” I said. “He doesn't have any authority over members of Central.”

“Certainly you are not so naive, Esquire Arlo. His great grandfather helped to establish the organization. If anyone would receive special treatment, it would be him.”

“Yes, nepotism is a thing. However, I’ve spent a good amount of time with the Ravvenblaq since then. They’re not so... subtle, I suppose? If they wanted to help Varrin get away with something, they’d just draw a sword and dare you to come and get him, not participate in some kind of coverup.”

“Such is as I’ve heard. Still, it is something that I must do.”

“Then what do you want to know?”

He sat up straighter.

“Did Varrin Ravvenblaq take any actions that contributed to, or resulted in, the death of Sir Sayil Starion of Nohrrin?”

The way he worded the question was so precise that I suspected he was using some ability to tell the truth of my reply. Either that, or he’d recited words dictated to him by someone else.

“Varrin chose the difficulty of the Delve without consulting the party,” I said. “Sayil had an issue with that, but nothing physical ever occurred between the pair of them. Once we were inside, Varrin acted with skill and care, but the challenges of the Delve were greater than any of us contemplated. Sir Sayil was killed by a level two Delver named Hognay Haskagander, who was aided by a Delve Core that he’d coerced into his service.”

I took another sip of juice, waiting for any further questions. Tavio frowned thoughtfully and played with a whisker.

“It is a good answer,” he said.

“It’s the truth.”

“Yes, I believe you.”

“Does that mean we’re done?”

“No, I do not think so.”

“Then what else can I do for you?”

“Where do you come from, Esquire Arlo?” he asked, uncrossing his arms and resting his chin on his palm again. “I heard you speak of your home, but it does not sound familiar to me.”



“Does this relate to Sayil in some way?”

He looked up toward the ceiling, and his nose twitched.

“It could, I suppose, but it is not why I am asking.”

“I don’t like to discuss my past.”

Tavio looked disappointed, but let his arm drop to the table and sat back.

“There are other questions I was told to ask,” he said, “but I do not feel they are important. The types of things that one with no nose for the truth might ask.”

“If that’s so, I should be getting back to my room. I’ve already stayed up later than I intended.”

“Before you do that,” said Tavio, holding up a hand, “I would ask a favor.”

“What... kind of favor?”

Tavio placed both hands on the table top and leaned in toward me, his eyes growing a little wider, his whiskers dancing.

“Fight me.”

I took a cue from Nuralie and froze for a second.

“What?”

“I would like you to fight me.”

“Dude, you’re level seventeen.”

“And you have done five platinum Delves in one year!” he said, growing excited. “I wish to know how strong you are, to do such a thing.”

“I don’t... No, I’m not going to fight you. I’m not trying to die tonight.”

“I will pull my punches!”

“Yeah?” I said, doubting. “What’s your Strength score?”

“What is your Fortitude?”

Tavio had continued to lean in, rising to his feet until his chair clattered over onto the ground. The jacked beastman loomed over the table, and I'd pulled back so far that I was slumped into my chair. He seemed to realize what he was doing, and a cool look came over him as he stood upright.

"You will not fight me?" he asked. I shook my head. "It is a pity."

He looked me up and down out of the corner of his eye, then walked away toward the bar.

"What the shit," I mumbled, watching him as he beckoned the barkeep forward. I saw a viridian glint from within Tavio's palm as the Littan slid the barman something. It was a chip.

A fucking *emerald* chip.

Tavio leaned over and I barely made out what he said over the noise of the tavern.

"For the damages."

The barkeep's eyes went wide, and Tavio spun on his heel then marched back toward me.

"Hey," I said, "you're not about to—"

He *was* about to.

Tavio punched the fuck out of me.