

Timagrín was Hiward's staunchest ally, and my mind obsessed over how Hiward might respond to the destruction of Canotha. The nations had a shared history of joint defense, and the idea that an invading force was to blame reignited my worry over the potential for a Delver war that would run rampant across the entire continent.

My worries only grew as we traveled with the Ravvenblaq retinue to Hiward's capital, Foundation. Varrin knew little beyond the most basic facts and the Ravvenblaqs who were in the know were unavailable to our humble level 6 party. It was a frustrating, somber journey, but our arrival in the nation's largest city reunited us with Etja and Nuralie.

I spotted the pair on the main thoroughfare through Hiward leading up to the Dark Iron palace, where the meeting was to be held in three days. They were hard to miss, not only because one was a dark, scaled loson and the other had four arms, but also because of the absurdly sized head coverings they each wore.

"Nice hats," I said as I approached them through the crowd of moving people along the road. The pair turned to see Varrin, Xim, and I, and Etja gave us all a bright smile.

"Thanks!" she said, reaching up and running her hand along the side of an oversized tricorn, complete with an array of colorful feathers.

Etja's entire outfit had seen an upgrade. Her simple blue robes had been replaced with a well-made dress of navy and cerulean. She had on jeweled bracelets, anklets, a couple of rings, no less than five different necklaces, and had acquired a taste for bold makeup choices. She held her Staff of Archon's Maker in one hand and there was a stringed instrument similar to a lute on her back.

Nuralie had also taken to a more fashion-forward outfit, though more subdued than the former golem's. She was dressed in an expensive-looking suit of black and gray, with silver buttons and embellishments. Her high-top boots sported intricate filigree and were well-polished enough that I feared to stare directly at them, lest the reflected sunlight blind me. Fortunately, my shades shielded me from the worst of their photic assault. Upon her head was a stovepipe hat that looked to have been crafted by a milliner who may have been better suited for designing watchtowers.

"How was your 'vacation'?" I asked.

"It was so good!" said Etja. "We went to every big city in Bluewren *and* Heronwyte. Nuralie learned how to do magic tricks and I learned to play four different instruments at the same time!"

“Magic tricks?” I said, looking at Nuralie.

The loson held up her hands, spread wide and empty, then took off her multistory hat and held it up so that we could see that it was empty. She snapped, flicked her wrist, then pulled her cat-sized frog, Bertegog, from within.

“That’s just using your inventory,” I said.

“Still magic,” said Nuralie, and I had to give that one to her.

“And *you* became a one-woman band?” I said, turning back to Etja. She nodded with enough enthusiasm that her tricorn bobbed forward over her eyes.

“She is now a bard of some renown,” said Nuralie as Etja pushed the hat back up. “At least, across the western coastal cities.” Pause. “I have never seen so many grown men cry.”

“Twelve different people proposed to me,” said Etja, placing one pair of hands on her hips and striking a dashing pose. “One of them even offered me six goats as a bride-dowry.”

“I’m sure the offer was tempting,” I said. “I was neither proposed to nor offered any livestock.”

“I *sort of* got proposed to,” said Xim.

“There were two Hiwardians and one geulon,” said Nuralie, “who offered to become my mate. There were many others who inquired about”—pause—“more *informal* arrangements.”

“What about you, Varrin?” I asked. “Any offers of marriage during our time off?”

“I’ve received several letters of intent each season since I was fourteen,” he said. “The past few months have been no different.”

“Hot damn,” I said. “This is a popular crew.”

“Rich, powerful, and gorgeous,” said Xim. “*Most* of us have all three.” She gave me a sly look as she said this and I clutched at my heart in feigned grief.

“I won’t ask which one I’m missing,” I said. “I have a difficult time with criticism.”

“Oh, really?” said Xim. “I saw you getting ‘criticized’ quite a lot these last few months. Publicly, while getting your butt kicked. You seemed to handle that pretty well.”

“That wasn’t criticism. That was *instruction*.”

“Is that what you kids are calling it these days?”

“I’m... older than you.”

“Not in this world you aren’t, junior.”

As Xim and I exchanged kind words, I noticed Varrin’s posture move from his usual upright and proper bearing to an evolved form of ‘I’m a serious noble doing respectable things with respectable people.’ I thought his spine might fracture from the force he was exerting to eliminate any natural curvature that it might hold. When the big guy placed a hand on his chest to give a ramrod-straight bow, I caught sight of the person who’d caused the change.

I turned to see, for the first time in my life, Ealdric Ravvenblaq Senior, Patriarch of the Ravvenblaq house, and one of the founding fathers of Hiward itself.

The man was a little shorter than Varrin, which placed him somewhere just north of six and a half feet. He was also less broad, so he looked like he had the physique of an NFL quarterback under his simple, dark outfit, rather than that of a straight-up demigod. His pale skin and arctic blue eyes were identical to Varrin’s, however, and the family resemblance was uncanny. He looked about 60 years old, though the man had to be somewhere north of 130.

He had long, silver hair down to his waist that shone with enough luster to put a Maybelline model to shame and that was so bright it nearly melded with the platinum that suffused his soul. He was level 56, and his presence was like standing in the shadow of an eclipse on a cold winter day.

His silent footsteps brought him closer and he paused in front of Varrin who was still bowing. He tapped the big guy on the shoulder with a knuckle.

“Stand up straight, Var,” he said. “You know I hate that.”

Varrin snapped back to his broomstick-up-the-ass position and Ealdric Sr. gave him a look like Varrin had just told an amusing anecdote.

“Patriarch,” said Varrin. “Please allow me to introduce you to my party members.”

“You may,” said Ealdric Sr. “We’re overdue for a meeting. No fault of yours. The world’s a busy place.”

“As you say, Patriarch,” Varrin looked like he was about to bow again, then thought better of it. He turned to face us. “Lords and Ladies,” he began, “it is my honor to present Ealdric Ravvenblaq Senior, Patriarch of the Ravvenblaq—”

“Yes, yes,” said Ealdric, waving a hand. “Patriarch of this, master of that, hero of the war of rebellion, and object of desire for men and women across twelve countries spanning the breadth of Arzia. Enough of that, tell me who these fine young men and women are.”

Varrin nodded, lips tight, then began gesturing around the party. “This is Lady Xim Xor’Drel, hailing from the Third Layer, Esquire Arlo Xor’Drel of the same, Lady Nuralie Vyxmeldo’a of Eschendur, and Lady Etja Nothosis of...”

Etja smiled and blinked as Varrin’s words hung in the air.

“I guess I’m Mirtasian?” she said.

“Of... Mirtasia,” said Varrin, grimacing.

“That’s curious,” said Ealdric Sr. “Mirtasia was destroyed a thousand or more years ago if I remember my history.” He bent his head forward slightly toward Etja. “You don’t *look* like you’re a thousand years old.”

“It depends on how you think about it,” said Etja. “I am, but I’m not.”

Ealdric smiled when she offered nothing further and clapped Varrin on the back.

“An interesting group you’ve curated,” he said. “Maybe the other family members could learn from your worldly approach. I’ve never seen a group level so fast.”

“Thank you, Patriarch,” said Varrin. “Our growth is due in no small part to Esquire Arlo’s unique contributions.”

“So Nola has told me,” said the patriarch. “Esquire.” He paused, tasting the word. “Why do you prefer a lower title than you are due? A Delver who calls the Third Layer his home is viewed as an equal to a lord here in Hiward.”

“It’s a branding thing, Patriarch,” I said. “People take note of the only esquire in the room.”

“I suppose they would,” said Ealdric Sr. “They would also view an esquire as the least of threats that surround them in that room if the room were full of lords and ladies. Do you *want* to be underestimated?”

“Underpromise and overdeliver,” I said. “It impresses every time.”

Ealdric considered my statement, eyes distant. We all stood, waiting, but the man drifted into his mind for long enough that I began to wonder if we’d lost him. Eventually, he gave a sharp shrug.

“Puzzling,” he said. “Now that we’ve all been introduced and the pleasantries have been dealt with, I’ve come to tell you all that you shouldn’t come to the summit.”

“We what now?” I said.

Varrin cleared his throat and gave me a sharp look.

“Forgive me, Patriarch,” he said. “If that is your wish, we are happy to oblige. May I ask whether we should be made aware of the reason for your request?”

“There are two reasons,” said the patriarch. “First, I’ll tell you what they’re going to say in the meeting right now. They’ll drone on and on... I’m sure it would be very boring for a group of eager adventurers like you five. This way, you can avoid a tedious meeting headed by the old and slow like myself.

“Second, your group plays an important role in the narrative Hiward is about to hand out to all five of the major houses. I think it would be better if you made yourselves scarce until everyone is more concerned with what was said at the meeting that was *truly* important, rather than busying themselves trying to figure out who all of *you* are.”

“We’re important?” said Nuralie.

“Wait,” I said. “The only reason that we’d be important is if it has to do with what happened in Ravvenblaq last year.”

“For this level of play, that is true,” said Ealdric Sr. “Central has good reason to believe that the avatar you encountered last year is responsible for what happened in Canotha.”

“That was fast,” said Xim, and Ealdric looked at her expectantly. “Sam’lia *just* told us that the avatars were going to be a big problem.”

“Timely advice,” said the patriarch. “Sam’lia... Could it be advice that *looks* timely?” He pondered that for a few seconds, and I had no idea what he’d meant by it. He took a quick breath and moved on. “A large mana vent opened near the outskirts of Canotha twelve or so days ago. One that grew and threatened to cause an eruption much faster than anyone expected. Very similar to your experience in the mountains. Because of the size and density of the mana vent, one of Timagrín’s most advanced Delver parties was

sent to investigate and remedy the situation. There was also a party of mid-level Hiwardian Delvers in the region who responded to see if they could help.

“When the Timan Delvers arrived they were ambushed by a pair of powerful giants. The Hiwardian party described one of them as “breaking people down into the faintest of particles and breathing them in like the most horrible of pipe smoke.” The other was said to “lay siege to the lands with her flesh, which turned all it touched to her own likeness.” I think it’s reasonable to believe the first is a description of this Orexis creature. The second may be its sister, Anesis.”

“And Canotha?” I asked.

“Destroyed by the mana eruption,” said Ealdric. “The buildings and structures still stand, but all of the people were laid to rest by the mana toxicity and the region will be uninhabitable for years.”

“How did the Hiwardian team escape?” I asked.

“They fled as soon as the avatars began dismantling the Timan team.”

“They didn’t help?” asked Etja. She had her hands clasped together, worry clouding her expression.

“I think they made the right decision,” said Ealdric. “They were level sixteen. If the Duckgriens couldn’t fell *one* of those beasts, then that party had no hope. They brought back an account of events, which is useful. Throwing their lives away for honor would have been... *less* useful.”

“What’s Hiward’s response going to be?” I asked.

Ealdric Sr. crossed his arms behind his back and looked up at the sky.

“Most of the inner circle knows what happened in our mountains—the patriarchs, matriarchs, and thundralkes. We agreed to pursue the matter quietly. Our hope was that we could find some clues without stirring up more trouble with these creatures or whatever groups might be allied with them. That’s part of what has kept me so busy these last sixteen months. The strategy has had mixed success.

“Now that these avatars are openly attacking Delver parties and civilian populations, our cautious approach is... not needed. Hiward will give an account of what transpired in the mountains to everyone present, along with what I just told you about Timagrín and Canotha. We will then be advised that Hiward’s official position is to kill on sight, and we will be encouraged to break the seals on any treasures, relics, techniques, tricks, or

dangerous imprisoned relatives we may be hiding away. If any such object, skill, or person was considered forbidden, illegal, or in bad taste, Hiward will kindly look in the other direction while we aim them at the enemy.”

“War footing,” I said.

“It goes farther than that,” said the patriarch. “Wars are fought against people. There are *some* rules for war. These things are not people and so there are no rules.”

“And our party knows more about them than most,” I said.

“Which is why I think it is wise that you stay out of the way of the other houses while they process how much grace Hiward has just given them to act like fools.”

“What about the System phases?” said Xim. “If Hiward is looking for tools to use against the avatars, unlocking the next System phase might do that.”

The patriarch tilted his head to the side. His relaxed and somewhat distant demeanor evaporated as his eyes focused and fixed on Xim.

“Tell me,” he said, “what are System phases?”