

“In my experience, most heads of state travel with a large entourage,” I said as we ran. The party traversed a span of grassy hills that spread for dozens of miles on our journey east of Eschengal. Some of the rolling mounds were the size of petite mountains, with ponds and small lakes nestled between them. “Yet, between Zura and Dal, not a single groupie.”

“Our interaction with the Zenithars was”—pause—“unusual,” said Nuralie.

“Our interactions with powerful individuals as a whole are unusual,” said Varrin. “Meetings with my own mother feel more formal than our average talk with prominent authority figures.”

“Even Fortune was kind of laid back,” I said. “Aside from all the fuckery with Anesis.” This sentiment drew strange glances from both Xim and Varrin. “What?”

“I have three different abilities that increase my resistance to fear effects,” said Xim. “None of them helped with Fortune.”

“I endeavored to be formal with the avatar,” said Varrin. “At the time, I believed that if I did not show him the utmost respect, I would die without even knowing how I’d perished.”

“Scary doesn’t mean he wasn’t casual,” I argued.

“He didn’t scare *me!*” said Etja, doing a little jump and spin through the air as she ran.

“Must be that divine heritage,” I said. “You’re inoculated against deific intimidation. For the record, I wasn’t afraid of him either. At least, not in a visceral way. More an intellectual understanding of how trivial it would have been for him to kill me.”

“I was not yet strong enough to challenge him, so I kept my silence,” said Shog.

“Sure, bud. Same logic for you as well, Grotto?”

[I am no fool. There was no reason to draw his attention to me, and so I did not do so. He also displayed a great deal of antagonism toward Cage, so I did not believe his attitude toward my status as a Delve Core would be positive.]

“Wonder what that guy’s up to, anyway,” I said. “We know he didn’t hide Anesis from Orexis if the reports from Timagrín are accurate.”

“It is likely foolish to ponder it,” said Varrin. “If gods have little insight into his actions, I doubt that we will.”

“Kind of defeatist. I know tons of stuff gods don’t,” I said. “Like how to make a proper apple martini. I bet we all have some insights that transcend the divine.”

“Doesn’t Sam’lia know everything about your life on Earth?” asked Xim.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean any other gods do.”

“Fair.”

I considered Sam’lia’s ability to replicate delicious apple juice, and whether that would translate to a superior cocktail. It probably would.

“We’re close to the forest,” said Nuralie, and we came to a stop atop one of the massive hills.

A mile ahead of us the sparse trees became vastly more numerous, growing dense and dark. It looked like another swamp to me, with most plant growth sprouting from ubiquitous pools of water. Just, with a lot more trees than the swamp we traveled through on our way inland.

“How far to the Gap?” I asked.

“Four hundred miles or so,” said Nuralie.

“And your village?”

She paused to think it over.

“Around three hundred and fifty.”

“Alright. How fast does a legion move?”

“Across open land, twenty miles a day, give or take,” said Varrin. “Through this type of jungle... less than that.”

“Assuming this is day one,” I said, “then the Littans won’t make it to your village until sundown tomorrow. We can make it there first, I bet.”

“There will be scouts,” said Varrin. “We know they’re mixing Delves with their traditional military as well. They may have elite units that move much faster.”

“So we want to avoid those if possible.”

“That will be difficult,” said Varrin. “Nuralie is the only one of us that specializes in stealth. Three of us wear medium to heavy armor, and our movements through the forest will not be quiet.”

“We could fly,” I offered. “Rest in the Closet to get mana back when we run out.”

“We really can’t go *that* far flying,” said Xim. “Your shield takes, what, 1 mana per second?”

“Yeah, it’s not really made for long-range travel. I need to fix that.”

“I can’t carry *everyone* for too long,” said Etja. “I have an evolution that makes Siphon cheaper to use on allies, but it would still burn through my pool twice as fast compared to using it on myself.”

I turned to my favorite extra-dimensional carnivore.

“Can you carry people while you float, Shog?”

“I can.”

“How fast?”

“I will be slower with more mass.” He looked us over, sizing us up and lingering on Varrin. Shog certainly outweighed the big guy, even while the warrior was in full gear, but probably not by a whole lot. Or, Shog *would* have outweighed him if gravity had any effect on the c’thon. ***“Perhaps half as fast as we have been moving.”***

“Assuming 15 miles per hour, that takes us 23 hours and change to make it to the village. Still beats the legion there, even if they move at normal speed through the terrain.”

“Can you carry all of us for that long, Shog?” asked Xim.

“Of course! My tentacles are plentiful and potent.”

“Does it take resources for you to hover?” I asked. “Mana, stamina, anything like that?”

“No more than it takes for you to stand, I expect. There is also this cloak that one of you could use.” Shog reached into his tentacles, then pulled out a length of gem-studded cloth. He held it up and I identified it.

Bedazzled Cloak of the Aeronaut

An exceptionally high-quality cloak earned as a System reward by the Delver Yaretzi of Seaward. It has since been adorned with equally high-quality—and gaudy—gemstones mined in the Littan province of Seqaria. This cloak grants its user the ability to fly, while simultaneously letting everyone around them know how fucking awesome they are.

Requirements:

AGL 20, SPD 20

Effects:

Allows the user to fly at their normal movement speed. Allows the user to perform any action while airborne as though they were on the ground.

“Yaretzi’s cloak?” I said. “I thought you ate that.”

“I consumed his corpse, not his items.”

“Oh. You can’t absorb mana from items?”

“I can, but I did not ask you if I could feast upon the little mouse’s items, only his delicious body.”

“You saved them for me? That’s very thoughtful.”

“I am keeping the swords, though.”

“As expected. Can any of us even equip that cloak?” I looked around the group, but no one had the stats. “Varrin, you’ve got the Speed, just need to get your Agility up, and then you can fly and do neat aerial tricks.”

He eyed the glimmering cloak with obvious disdain, but reached out and took it nonetheless. Varrin had his pride, but he was, at heart, a practical man. He wasn’t going to let a good item go to waste.

“I don’t plan on focusing on Agility for a few levels,” he said. “But it’s a good item. There’s not even a cost for the flight ability.”

“I know, right? Need to get that on my shield.” I looked into Shog’s big, generous eyes. “Did Yaretzi have any *other* good shit?”

He reached into his beard of tentacles and produced Yaretzi’s full suit of armor, which was half-destroyed from the fight, along with two rings and an amulet. One ring had a rock on it big enough for the 22-year-old supermodel fiancée of an octogenarian oil tycoon, while the other was studded out with at least a thousand tiny prismatic gems. The amulet, in contrast, was a simple pendant of alexandrite. It was probably the coolest, with the way the stone changed color depending on how you held it, but a bit out of step with the whole Yaretzi theme otherwise.

“Where the fuck were you keeping this stuff, Shog?”

“***In my beard,***” he said, sounding confused over the question.

“Does your beard have dimensional storage capabilities?”

“**Yes,**” he said, again perplexed that I would even ask.

“The more you know,” I said, looking over the finery. We were on a timetable to make it to Nuralie’s village, but it was worth it to take a minute and see if any of Yaretzi’s gear would help us out along the way. I started with the it’s-definitely-true-love-sized engagement ring.

Fortunate Ring

Requirements:

LCK 20

Once per day, one of the following effects may occur, although you may not choose when or if one triggers.

- 1) An attack you make that would otherwise miss miraculously hits.**
- 2) An attack made against you that would otherwise hit miraculously misses.**

“Interesting, but useless,” I mumbled. No one in the party was building into Luck, and as far as I knew no one was planning to. I passed it around the party, letting everyone else

take a turn and decide if they cared for it, then moved on to the ring with a thousand sparkling facets.

Ring of Many Blessings

Requirements:

Divine Magic 20

This ring may store up to 5 stacks of Blessed. So long as this ring holds any stacks of Blessed, you are considered Blessed. You may consume these Blessed stacks as though they were your own. If this ring holds less than 5 stacks of Blessed, you may choose to transfer any number of Blessed stacks you possess to the ring until it is at capacity.

Current stacks: 0/5

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” I said, tossing the ring to Xim. Both Nuralie and Etja also had Divine, but neither had the intrinsic skill high enough to use the ring. The cleric’s eyebrows raised as she read the description, and then she slipped it on and cast a blessing on herself. I moved to the color-changing amulet.

Amulet of Efficiency

Requirements:

WIS 20

Effects:

Whenever you would spend mana, the amount you spend is reduced by 10%. The minimum cost reduction from this effect is 1 mana (1 mana every 6 seconds while channeling), but cannot reduce the mana cost to less than 1.

“Damn, so close to making me fly cheaper,” I said, before handing the amulet to Etja. Xim and I also had enough Wisdom to use the amulet, but it would benefit the group’s

dedicated caster most. Besides, Xim just got a ring and I already had the Traveler's Amulet, despite it being completely useless at the moment. Finally done with the belated loot session, I turned back to the matter at hand.

"A couple of upgrades, but nothing that helps with our immediate problem. How are we feeling about the floating Shog cuddle-puddle?"

"We would be an obvious target," said Varrin. I was proud of the man for allowing my description to go unchallenged, as profane as it had been. "We may not make noise, but there would be no cover while flying over the forest."

"Loud through the woods, or quiet out in the open," I muttered. "Five people in the loving embrace of a mana fiend while soaring through the sky at the speed of Grandma on her way to Sunday service would make a pretty big, easy target. We'd also be grouped together and just asking to get hit with a fireball or something. It's probably safer to go on the ground. Nuralie, you can scout ahead while we follow at a distance. Grotto, stick with her and psychic reports back to us once in a while."

Nuralie nodded and Grotto floated over to land on her shoulder, wrapping his tentacles around her upper arm. The two eyed each other for a second—I was pretty sure this was the first time they'd ever made physical contact—but Nuralie darted off toward the swampy woods without a word. We gave her a five-minute head start, then followed. I could keep up with her relative position using my aura, so her presence became our compass.

We kept quiet as we moved through the brush, using Grotto as a psychic relay whenever something needed to be said that couldn't be communicated with a hand gesture. While he was outside of the Closet, everyone could consent to his mental presence, which was a boon we didn't take enough advantage of as a party. Stealth wasn't our typical strategy though, and I was the only one comfortable with the internal comms. It gave everyone else the sort of buzzing discomfort I'd felt any time Grotto had scanned my brain back in the day.

We still moved quickly, so our progress was anything but silent. The goal wasn't to avoid notice but to cause any prying ears to assume that we were a herd of swamp rats or rampaging toads for at least a few seconds, rather than a group of dangerous humanoids. Enough time for us to spot them or react in some way, hopefully.

Nuralie kept ahead of us by about a mile, and with her movement bonuses from being in the shady terrain, she was *faster* while in stealth than she was moving normally under the sun. She even got a touch of invisibility based on how dark it was and could teleport between shadows like a proper ninja-chemist-archer.

Hours went by, and while our pace was slower than our mud marathon with Zura, we still made better time than we'd have made with the Shog-blimp strategy. We kept our eyes peeled, but the only living creatures that we saw were the local wildlife. A couple of ambitious predators tried to ambush us, and Varrin sent a lanky, ten-foot-tall simian creature running away with a flash of his sword and a skin-deep cut across its wide nose. Later, some sort of anaconda-millipede hybrid dropped from the branches above and clamped down onto my neck, wrapping its thirty-foot-long body around me. It couldn't break my skin, and a quick Shortcut got me out of its thousand-arm grapple. I was happy to let it scurry away as well, but Shog hadn't had a proper meal since Yaretzi and decided the creature had volunteered to become lunch. The c'thon's snacking was surprisingly quiet despite his victim's crunchy exoskeleton.

I eventually started playing around with my Soul-Sight, raising and lowering its sensitivity while trying to identify different levels of detail. I'd wanted to play a few rounds of two truths and a lie with the others, but current circumstances didn't allow for it. Instead, I tried to hone in more on the feeling Soul-Sight provided, rather than relying on the visual information it gave. It was something I'd been practicing in my spare time anyway, but I felt like my recent reflection on the revelation had opened me up to new ideas.

I began to filter away the biases that the title of my first revelation gave me, migrating from the concept of sight and seeing to the idea of *experiencing* souls. The ability had never really manifested as a purely visual phenomenon. There had always been a physical component, even if that component *had* been centered in my eyes, feeling like they might pop out from staring at someone who was overly strong.

It had progressed to something I felt all over, though the experience migrated across my body depending on where someone was, among other things. Like a powerful light source, I felt their metaphysical heat on my skin. That was an overly simple way to put it, but it got the idea across well enough.

We continued through the night, stopping only briefly for food, drink, and biological necessities. None of us needed any of that nearly as much as a mundane person, but we all still required it to some degree, although by this point I could go days without feeling much hunger beyond an annoying tug in my gut.

We'd put about three hundred miles behind us by midmorning the following day, and we slowed down substantially as we crossed into what we expected was scouted territory. We hadn't heard much from Nuralie, but I could still detect her moving and her health was full in the party interface. She was still a little under a mile ahead of us and we felt fairly comfortable that such a significant lead would give us a good buffer if she detected anything.

I continued under this delusion, only realizing how wrong it was when I felt a fierce pressure and lost vision in my right eye. My head snapped back a bit. It was like something had tugged on the back of my hair with incredible strength but for only a fraction of a second. I heard a small explosion behind me at the same moment, and I noticed that my shades fell off of my face, broken. As I looked down, I saw that the right lens was completely gone. I was desperately confused.

Why were my glasses on the ground? Did they break from just falling off my face? I'd always bought special lenses that were more durable, so that didn't make sense. Those were always expensive too, and insurance only covered one pair per year. Shit, now they were sinking into the muck—going down and down. I'd lose them at this rate, but when I tried to bend over, I'd forgotten how to move. Where'd all this mud come from, anyway? I hadn't mopped the kitchen in a while but...

No. Wait.

Something was *very* wrong.