

“The Inquisitor serves an important role during difficult times,” said Zura. She turned and motioned for us to follow behind her as she continued down the road. “It is important for Eschendur to present a united front in the face of major threats. While our triumvirate is effective at balanced governance during peaceful times, our forebears acknowledged that such a three-pronged structure was less nimble than monarchies or empires, which possess a more vertical chain of authority.”

As we walked, the road curved away from the edge of wild swampland, ruled by trees with corded trunks and thick canopies set over murky water. Zura continued straight, however, and we quickly walked off of the road and began plodding through tall grass, my boots sinking into the wet soil below.

“The Inquisitor is empowered with the authority of both priest and judge,” Zura continued as we grew closer to the tree line. “When there is a disagreement between authorities from different churches in regard to how to respond to the crisis, the Inquisitor—in their role as a neutral party—serves as an arbitrator to settle the matter. Oftentimes, the Inquisitor is invited to make the decision themselves in the first instance.”

By this point, Xim and I were struggling a bit through the muck as we passed under the shade of the first big tree. Highly saturated mud seemed to count as water for Varrin since he walked across the surface without issue. Nuralie and Zura also had little difficulty, neither of whom were currently wearing boots and whose Geulon feet were well adapted for the terrain. Etja was engaging in gravity hijinks, while Shog and Grotto, of course, floated.

Zura paused and glanced back at us with a single green eye. She waved a hand, and the next step I took felt like it landed on solid ground.

“Thanks,” I said as Xim and I stepped up out of the knee-high sludge. I gave the cleric an empathetic look since her boots were now likely as full of goop as my own. She shrugged, took her boots off and put them into her inventory, then kept going barefoot.

I saw no reason to trudge through a swamp in full kit, so I followed suit, then also removed my steel breastplate and began working on my other bits of armor. The gear was heavy enough to be annoying over long walks, and if something or someone attacked... well, Zura was basically a walking nuclear deterrent. The Zenithar continued on and soon enough the road was no longer visible behind us, the midmorning sun disappearing behind the leaves and fronds overhead.

“The Inquisitor may enforce the law and investigate crimes at their discretion,” said Zura. “They may also act as powerful soldiers during war, and serve as the point of first contact for basic diplomatic matters.”

“That sounds like a pretty broad set of responsibilities,” I said.

“Responsibilities *and* privileges,” Zura corrected.

“I am not experienced in... most of that,” said Nuralie.

“Humble is the sea with gentle waves until the storm rolls in,” said Zura. “Do not underestimate yourself, Nuralie Vyxmeldo’a. As I said before, I have familiarized myself with your background. There is a reason that you were chosen to represent Eschundur at the Creation Delve. One of only four candidates that year. The candidate who was selected from the wilds as the *neutral* representative.” She gave Nuralie a meaningful look. “Unlike Eschens who were raised in the more populous Dioceses, you were trained in all three aspects of the faith in equal measure. You excelled in your youth, your first revelation attained at a remarkably young age. Since then, you have not only adapted to life in a foreign nation but flourished with your party while advancing at an unprecedented rate.

“I do not yet know you well personally, but on vellum, you are well-rounded and gifted academically in both secular matters and subjects of faith. More so than many priests I have known. Your ability to navigate the difficulties you have faced evidences good decision-making skills and character, which are essential for a judge or investigator. Your combat prowess is hardly under question. You just broke through an entire naval blockade with only four allies! As for diplomacy”—Pause—“there are few Eschens who are as well-traveled. Even fewer who surround themselves with such diverse friends and allies. I expect you would do better than you might think.”

“I am honored by your words, Zenithar,” said Nuralie. “But I do not think I would be able to”—Pause—“fulfill those functions while we carry out our mission.”

“I did not expect you to take up residence at a local parish and guide the faithful had you accepted the title of Deacon,” said Zura. “This is a means to an end. You would possess the authority, but your obligation to use that authority would be limited to any situations you encounter during your journey. Even then, your involvement may be brief and discrete.”

“I see,” said Nuralie, sounding unconvinced.

“Think deeply upon the matter,” said Zura. “We have a short walk ahead of us.”

“Where are we going, exactly?” I asked. I felt like we’d been swept up into the Zenithar’s wake without much input or explanation.

“Eschengal,” she said.

“The capital?” I asked. “Isn’t that 600 miles inland?”

Zura nodded.

“That sounds right.”

I considered our current speed over the very wet and very overgrown terrain. Even if we walked 16 hours a day it would take us more than a week to make that distance.

“Erm,” I began.

“Is my geriatric pace too slow for you?” she said, turning to give me a roguish smile.

While it was true that I would have preferred that we moved with more urgency, the reality was that the Zenithar would save us a lot of time dealing with the politics of our mission. Getting permission for Nuralie to serve as our escort was a matter that I expected to take days or weeks at minimum, and there had always been the chance that the authorities would want to saddle us with a more traditional babysitter. The kind that might insist on specific routes or modes of travel that would add a lot of time to our journey. The Zenithar was ready to hand Nuralie a title that would solve that problem immediately. If the cost was burning a week on a casual stroll through the swamp, then that was a small price to pay.

“I’m more than happy to move at a pace that you’re comfortable with,” I said.

“Oh?” said the Zenithar. “If that’s the case, then I’ll get more comfortable.”

Zura raised her halberd and balanced the shaft against her shoulder, adjusted her footing, and then sprinted off ahead of us with the speed of a horse at full gallop. I watched her disappear as she effortlessly vaulted over a massive tree root rising out of the water.

Nuralie was behind her in less than a second.

“I like this Zenithar,” said Varrin before sprinting after her.

“We could have *walked*, Arlo,” said Xim as she began jogging up to speed. “When’s the last time we *walked* anywhere?”

Etja just smiled and followed, while Shog flew forward, cutting vines and limbs out of his path with his new blades. I felt Grotto settle onto my shoulder.

[*I will allow you to carry me.*]

[I feel honored,] I thought back to the core, then began rushing to catch up.

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We ran until nightfall, and then we ran some more. By the time Zura called us to a stop to make camp we'd covered *half* the distance to the capital. Despite how absurdly fast that was as a group moving on foot, for Varrin it was about as quick as a swift walk, and equally demanding. His stamina never dropped a point, which allowed his Deep Breaths ability to grant everyone else a buff to their stamina regen if they got low.

When that wasn't enough, Xim could fully refresh her stamina with an occasional self-heal from her Double Recovery evolution, and Etja could burn mana to fly while her stamina recovered. Nuralie got so many movement buffs from being in the dark and shady swamp environment that the journey through her home terrain was probably *less* taxing for her than it was for Varrin. My personal stamina regen was so high that I could move at my full speed forever without issue.

That all *sounded* great, but sprinting for twelve hours was still obnoxious. It was also something that we'd done as a party several times before. After all, why ride horses when we were faster without them?

The Zenithar looked very pleased with herself afterward and hadn't so much as shed a single drop of sweat. Her robes were also impeccably clean, while the rest of us were soaking wet, covered in mud, and had enough random plants stuck in our hair to start a small botanical garden. My beard was riddled with an assortment of thorny burs that I had no memory of acquiring, and as I painstakingly plucked them out the Zenithar made a 20-foot vertical leap into the canopy with all the effort of a cat hopping onto a low stool. I began to suspect she'd been taking it easy on us.

We made camp in the trees since only two of our number found the idea of bedding down while half-submerged in cloudy swamp juice appealing. While I had the option of retiring in my lavishly appointed Pocket Closet penthouse, I thought that immersing myself in the local culture would prove valuable. If nothing else, the slow rhythm of the

chirping insects, the gentle croaking of the frogs, and the violent shrieks of the unseen nocturnal predators made for a soothing lullaby.

Before we all snuggled up into damp bedrolls on the stone-soft bark of the massive tree we were in, however, I decided to run a few questions by the Zenithar. She was happy to indulge me.

“Earlier, when you were talking about revelations,” I said, “you mentioned that they were the types of things that change with you.”

“They are very personal in nature,” she replied. “The archivists try to place them into broad categories, but no two are truly the same. Some change so much throughout a revelator’s life that they have to be reclassified.”

“Is it the revelator changing the revelation, or is the revelation what changes the revelator?”

“A good question. One I wish I heard more often.” Pause. “I believe it is both. A revelation is a profound experience. It is difficult *not* to be changed by one. However, once the insight is received, it is up to the revelator to decide how to use it, which can influence the nature of the revelation. Then, their use of the revelation again changes them. It’s a continuous dialogue. Personality, temperament, morality, even environment are all factors that can shape the revelation’s manifestation.”

“When you say ‘manifestation’, do you mean the ability that a revelation grants?”

“If that word is convenient for you, then yes. I say manifestation because it is how your revelation *manifests* in the world for yourself or others.”

I leaned back against the tree trunk, looking out into the dark swamp and spotting a large, six-legged salamander creature wriggling through the mud in the distance. The thing was probably twelve feet long.

“Do you think it’s possible for a person to make a revelation ‘their own’?” I asked.

She frowned and scratched at her cheek with a pointed nail.

“I think that depends on what you mean when you say ‘their own’,” she said. “But it sounds like those aren’t your words.”

“Right,” I said. “I have an item, an amulet. When I got it, it did nothing, but it promised to unlock an effect when I finished my Creation Delve. When that happened, it gave me something called Soul-Sight.”

A hint of a smile crossed Zura's lips, but she didn't say anything, so I continued.

"Now it says that I need to 'make Soul-Sight my own' to unlock the next effect. As it turns out, Soul-Sight is part of the first revelation I received. Now I can use Soul-Sight without needing the amulet. However, even though I have the revelation, the amulet's next effect hasn't unlocked."

Zura nodded and motioned for me to continue.

"My revelations are from Sam'lia," I said, "and I actually got to have a chat with her." Zura's eye ridges rose at that. "She said that the task is impossible because you can't 'own' a revelation, that the power flows through you like the air we breathe or the water we drink. It's borrowed power."

Zura chuckled.

"I am struck by that simile," she said. "Perhaps the next time I piss, one of my revelations will flow out with that morning's tea." She lost herself in a brief fit of laughter, though she struggled to stay quiet. I was caught off guard by the Zenithar's appreciation for the fine art of middle-school bathroom humor.

"I may be misquoting her," I said, smiling as her mood infected me. Eventually, the Zenithar calmed down and she patted me on the shoulder.

"I hold great respect for the Goddess of the Third Layer." She locked eyes with me. "*But*, she is, by her nature, a deity of the present moment. Her nature is one of thought, dream, and I would argue emotion. These are very immediate concepts. Vengeance is her most forward-looking aspect, but not one that I would say is strong on contemplation of the future."

"What about thought, though? You can think about the future."

"Yes, but you can only think *in* the present. I will not attempt to codify the behavior of deities by any firm rules, but that is my impression of Sam'lia, based on all the tales that I know and all of my discussions with her followers. She is a wonderful protector, a terrible foe, and quite easy to talk to, I hear."

"Sure, but why is thinking about the future important? In this context, I mean. Obviously thinking about the future is quite important. Sometimes I think it's *too* important."

"That resonates," Zura said. "As for the future, Sam'lia hears 'make Soul-Sight your own', and considers it in the moment. Soul-Sight cannot be yours, right now, right here, because it is constantly flowing through you, to use her words. But that phrase, I do not

believe it is meant to say that you must 'own' Soul-Sight to *make* it your own. Perhaps the phrase invites you to take ownership of the revelation not in a literal sense, but in a personal sense.

"Take this swamp, for instance," she continued. "One does not need to 'own' the swamp to make the swamp 'their own'. Someone who has made the swamp their own is someone who thrives in the swamp, and who thrives there for reasons that are unique or personal to them, not someone who can exclude others from the swamp, or isolate a piece of it."

I glanced over to Nuralie, who was buried under no less than six cat-sized frogs. None of them were frogs she'd had when we'd woken up that morning.

"To make something your own, you must first become familiar with it, you must consider your experience with it, and then you must commit to it. It requires thinking deeply about both the past and the future to develop a certain mindset, and then applying that mindset to the present."

I found Zura's logic about past, present, and future and how those related to Sam'lia questionable, but I liked where she was going otherwise.

"Which takes us back to your words from earlier," I said. "If a revelation changes and grows with the revelator, then a revelator can focus on guiding that growth in a direction they like. And maybe, by guiding that growth in a personalized direction, they might make that revelation 'their own'."

"It helps if it is a direction that makes sense for the revelation," she said. "A revelation of sight is unlikely to grow in a direction that allows you to fly."

"Unless, through my powers of observation, I *learn* how to fly."

She swatted my chest with the back of her hand.

"You may take your sophistry to your bedroll now," she said.

I grinned and bid her goodnight. As I climbed back toward my uninviting bed, I thought about how easy Zura was to talk to. It was like hanging out with somebody's laid-back grandma, not a theocratic pope-queen head of state.

You'd also never suspect that she'd massacred more than a thousand people earlier that day.