

I woke up with Grotto hovering a few inches over my face.

“Gah!” I instinctively reached up and tossed the C’thon away, and Grotto tumbled through the air, then righted himself without hitting the far wall. “What the hell, Grotto?”

*[I have finished my initial observations and I was waiting for you to regain consciousness.]*

“Did you have to-” I realized I was talking out loud, and swapped to speaking mentally. I didn’t think there was much risk of someone hearing us in the hall, but I wanted to get into the habit of only speaking to Grotto subvocally. This was both to train myself to get better about filtering the thoughts that made it through to him, and also for operational security.

[Did you have to hang there right over my face?]

*[I wanted to be alerted the moment you came to.]*

[Then watch me from somewhere else! Farther away! Actually, don’t watch me while I sleep, that’s weird.]

*[Why is that weird? I have watched many Delvers as they slept within my domain.]*

[First, not your domain. Second, that’s still weird. Third, I’m the boss so give me at least...six feet of personal space while I sleep.]

*[Very well. I will indulge this aimless request. If that matter is settled, I require your participation to perform an experiment.]*

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I wasn’t awake enough for this.

[What kind of experiment?]

*[The door to the Closet stayed open while you slept, but I want you to try and close the door while I am inside.]*

[Fine. Sure. Go back in.]

Grotto floated back inside the modified inventory, and I focused on closing the door. It took another full minute of concentration, then the doorway collapsed into a point and blinked out of existence.

*[Can you still hear me?]* Grotto asked.

[Yeah. Hey, that's pretty cool. That could be useful.]

*[Indeed. If I am in here, then I am not subject to the attention or hostility of those around you.]*

[Wait, can you put yourself inside an inventory slot? Can I pull you out through the interface?] I opened the inventory window and waited a minute, but no mini-Grotto symbol appeared.

*[It appears that I am unable. The stasis may not be able to receive a living organism, or perhaps it has to do with my status as a Delve Core, or as your familiar.]*

[Eh, it was worth a shot. Hey, try taking an item out of stasis.]

I watched as one of my pairs of pants disappeared from the screen.

[Oh, fuck yeah. Now try putting it back.] The pants reappeared. [Ok, hold on.] I climbed out of bed and looked around the room. I picked up a candle and placed it into my inventory. [See that? Can you take that out?]

He did, then placed it back into stasis and I pulled it out of inventory then placed it back onto the writing desk I'd taken it from. While Grotto was inside of the Closet, I could effectively use the entire space as my inventory, with Grotto swapping things in and out of the quick access. I wasn't limited to only half.

*[This will make delivering materials to me much easier.]*

[Oh yeah, that's true. No need to open the door to mess with the contents. You can manage it all from inside.]

It was a discovery that was well worth the rude awakening, and I was sure there were some other ways we could exploit the ability.

Although I understood that Grotto made the discovery with the intent of having me act as a supplier of goods for him, with instant delivery, the fact that he'd discovered such a useful feature pushed me over the edge when deciding whether to go along with his Delve creation. If things got too out of hand, I'd figure it out then... somehow.

Tomorrow's problems for tomorrow's me.

I did not immediately acquiesce to his demands that I become a materials supplier, opting to instead spend the morning trying to figure out a more permanent living arrangement. I placed my leather vest in my inventory, since I wasn't aiming to

intimidate anyone, and dressed in an outfit that whispered of money without drawing attention to it.

Something that showed someone with a discerning eye what I wanted them to see, without appearing ostentatious to those who might judge me for the same. The way a two-hundred dollar dress shirt made most people raise an eyebrow when you told them how much you paid, while still drawing compliments from folks who thought themselves chic. Essentially, it was a bunch of overpriced fabrics that served the same basic function as the ones you could get for one tenth the cost. Still, they looked good.

I kept the boa, though. No reason *not* to look sexy as hell.

Freshly dressed and groomed I set out for Formation's Deedsman. The Deedsman was a position that carried with it the title of low-lord, and the lord held a hybrid role as both realtor and title officer. Based on the information I sussed out from the merchants I'd visited the day prior, there were no private citizens who managed real estate transactions. It was all facilitated through the city itself.

The reasons for this were varied and complex. I won't bore you with the mundane details, other than to say the crown held all the land, and when ownership was transferred all you were buying was the King's grant of rights to reside therein.

Upon meeting with the lord, I discovered that I did not, in fact, want to *buy* a residence in the city.

"I could certainly find someone to sell to you," said the Deedsman. "But it would be vastly overpriced. Most who hold land here have no desire to part with it, even if they don't reside here for more than a week out of the year. It is a matter of some prestige, you see."

"That makes sense," I said. "I'm afraid that I am in need of proper housing, nonetheless."

"Of course, of course. But if it pleases you, m'lord, might I suggest an alternative?"

"Please do."

"You possess three qualities that provide you with an advantage in this circumstance. First, you are an Esquire. Not a lordly title, but still one of some prestige. Second, you are of the Third Layer, which is officially considered to be the equivalent of a ranking of low-lord on its own. Third, and most importantly, you are a Delver. Any of these three would be sufficient to petition for a grant of land from the king, but with all three together

I am fully confident that we may proceed without worrying much about the approval process.”

“Then I would be seeking to found my own estate?”

“That is precisely correct. Delvers are always sharp. It’s a pleasure to work with them. Well, most of them.”

He gave me a sly grin, and I gave him a knowing nod in return. I assumed that some Delvers were not, in fact, a pleasure to work with, given the effect that wealth and status have on some people

He pulled a thick tome from a shelf next to his desk and opened it, then slid a map of the district over to me, which displayed the underground regions. He placed a few pins in it, marking several locations.

“As you may have noticed, while the Formation district is partially built *onto* the mountainside, most of it is built *within* the mountain itself. There is a great deal of space available to establish new residences underground by expanding into new tunnels and chambers. This does come with the caveat that there will be no lands for you to manage, and thus no tenants from whom to collect taxes. Forgive my presumption, but based on our discussion thus far I do not believe that to be your desire.”

“No. I’m happy with a simple estate of my own.”

“Perfect, perfect. If you have no aversion to underground living, then there are a number of locations that have already been scouted for various things, such as structural integrity, absence of valuable mineral deposits, feasibility of connection to public water systems, and the like.”

“Which are marked with the pins.”

“Right again! Depending on your preferred location, I can have a provisional grant drawn up this very afternoon. We can have the new dwelling placed in the construction queue by tomorrow morning.”

“So, they’ll be digging out a new residence. How long does that take?”

“That is the question! A typical mining crew can have the location finished in a few weeks, depending on the size you’re looking for. There are ways to speed that up, of course, assuming you are willing to spend a bit. Then there is the matter of amenities, which also require installation and inspection.”

The long and short of it was that I could hire a normal crew to excavate and finish a basic dwelling and have it complete in a month's time. Not too bad, as far as fresh construction is concerned. Especially underground construction. However, if I wanted to spring for a Delver specializing in physical magic, then someone with a stone-moving skillset could finish the excavation in a *day*. The approximate difference in price was an order of magnitude.

In regards to the 'amenities', there were a variety of magically-enhanced devices that could make the space more comfortable. Such items were created through a process called mana-weaving, and the cost of those was also astronomical compared to what was typically used by more humble households.

All-in, if I wanted a permanent residence in Formation finished in the quickest time frame available with running water, environmental controls, and a comprehensive set of heating elements for food preparation, I was looking at a cost of around four-hundred golden notes, taxes and fees included. It was a pretty penny, but I could buy it with a single emerald chip.

I had six of those.

I'd even have a hundred notes left over for furnishing and decorating. Having my own space was important to me, and it would also allow me to get up to more trouble with Grotto without worrying about things like prying eyes and ears, or property damage. I was also a sucker for instant gratification.

I pulled the trigger, and the Deedsman happily informed me that the entire process could be finished within a week. I was well on my way to having my very own underground lair, where I could cackle madly while wringing my hands and inventing ethically problematic devices and gizmos.

I decided against going for that theme, however, when consulting with an interior decorator immediately afterward. I wasn't really into decorating, so I was happy to pawn that off on someone who could ensure I wasn't violating any unspoken cultural norms, while still finding an aesthetic that suited me. I was a big fan of dark wood and metal, with pops of color on the walls.

I then spent the rest of the day dutifully collecting a diverse array of construction materials that I delivered to Grotto via my inventory screen, which he accepted with many promises about how our enemies would break upon the bulwark that was soon to serve as the foundation for our burgeoning dynasty. The errands took me to more than one magical supplier, who I spoke with at length about the various applications and

uses for their wares. That last bit gave me a number of ideas that, once again, went on The List.

I also didn't feel any eyes on my back as I went around the city this time.

I spent the evening watching Grotto work, and idly checked the Bag of Refreshments to see if I'd missed any snacks, the way I used to open the fridge five times a night after procrastinating grocery shopping in the hopes that some hitherto unknown food would magically present itself. However, rather than sad disappointment and a bank balance inquiry to determine the fiscal irresponsibility of an UberEats purchase, I found the bag once again filled with a stout charcuterie's worth of snacks.

I now knew why this was a spatial item. Somewhere in the universe there was a charcuterie dimension, and it delivered food-stuffs of modest quality to this little bag of endless goodies. Or maybe elves filled it up while I slept. Or maybe there was a chef somewhere enslaved for all eternity, forced to prepare and teleport whole foods to bags like this across the world. However it worked, I now had a ready source of presumably endless chow.

I munched on some of the *Trailmix of Refreshments* and watched as Grotto began carving complex runes and symbols along an eight foot length of metal called dark iron. He did it with his mind somehow, though he also held several delicate crafting tools in his tentacles, using them to make slight adjustments to his work on occasion. I wondered if he used tools telepathically while in orb form, or if this were something new for him.

[Is that mana-weaving?] I thought to Grotto, taking clues from my discussions with the suppliers earlier in the day.

*[It is, though nothing so rudimentary and crude as what I have seen wielded by many Delves.]*

[Doesn't that take refined chips and essences?]

*[It does.]*

[Are you going to use *my* chips and essences?]

*[You mean the ones you pilfered from my Delve? I am.]*

[How many?]

*[One emerald chip will be sufficient to serve as the seed mana for these inscriptions. The poison essences are not ideal for the process, but I can break them down into more fundamental components to get what I need. It may take two dozen or so.]*

[I see.] On top of the cost of materials earlier in the day, the startup capital for this project was ballooning pretty quickly. [Any other materials of staggering value you'll need to get this thing going?]

*[You don't even know how much the essences are worth. But, no. This will suffice for now. Once the obelisk is constructed, the Delve will begin providing its own resources, though the process can always be enhanced by procuring more materials.]*

[Maybe I should have started an LLC to offset some of these costs. I wonder if Delve Obelisk is something I can depreciate and claim on my taxes.]

*[Your words are nonsensical.]*

[See, this is why they need to teach business fundamentals in public schools. Our education system has failed you, Grotto.]

Grotto paused his work and glanced at me with his dark eyes.

*[Are you done?]* he asked.

[I guess so. Is there anything I can help with? Maybe you should teach me some mana-weaving. Is it hard to learn?]

*[I came into existence possessing all the knowledge required to perform the necessary weaves. I am unable to pontificate on the relative difficulty an organism such as yourself might have when learning the art. I also doubt that I would be a suitable instructor for the same reason, and such instruction would be an impediment to completing this obelisk.]*

[Well, shit. I should have bought some books or something. Library is on the agenda for tomorrow, but if I'd known I'd be sitting here staring at a fluffy octopus all night I would have grabbed something to make use of the time.]

*[If you wish to maximize your utility in this endeavor, then you may meditate and dedicate your mana regeneration to expanding the space.]*

[Oh yeah. I guess instead of staring at you I can stare into the void.]

*[You have an aura, do you not?]*

[I do.]

*[Then if expanding this domain is insufficient to motivate you to apply yourself, you can advance your aura while meditating as well.]*

[I didn't say I wouldn't do it. Just getting myself mentally prepared. Meditation has never been my strong suit. How does advancing my aura work, though?]

*[It continues to astound me the amount of knowledge that you lack, but I do not fault you for it.]* He spun back to me. *[I suppose your Earth education system has failed you.]*

[Was that a- a joke? Grotto?]

*[Merely an observation.]*

[To be fair, there are no auras on Earth. I mean, none that work like this, if there were. Then again, it's not like I was too plugged in to the new-age lifestyle. So, maybe?]

*[Simply meditate as you would normally. Focus on the world around you that falls within the embrace of your aura, and attempt to bring it into focus. And don't forget to dedicate your mana regeneration, this space is too small to accomplish anything meaningful.]*

[At four cubic meters per hour, it's going to take a lot of meditation to make a substantial increase in total volume.]

*[More reason to spend all the time you can working on it. I can further augment the process once the obelisk is online. The obelisk's functions will also be improved in a larger space.]*

[Ok, I get it. We need the obelisk to do a bunch of ambiguous shit, so leave you alone to finish the obelisk.]

*[That would be ideal.]*