

“Oh, and feel free to call me Sakra,” said the Zenithar of Deijin.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Sakra,” I said, before introducing the members of our party.

As pleasantries were exchanged, several more of the feathered Deijinon came through the portal. They looked around the interior with curiosity, their heads moving in swift tilts and bobs. Sakra also did a lap of the room while listening to the introductions, and I noticed that her feet never touched the ground. The space was filled with a gentle breeze that continuously emanated from her body.

We were inside one of the bedrooms attached to my half of the Closet, which was by no measure small. Still, as one Deijinon after another continued to appear, it quickly became crowded with peering losons. While I felt a bit exposed, with my personal space being studied by so many prying eyes, there wasn’t anything within that was too personal. There was a reason I’d selected it to house our prisoner, after all.

Sakra Manar eventually paused next to the Littan, looking down at him with the same vague curiosity as the rest of the room.

“Who’s this?” she asked.

“A Littan Delver that we captured,” I said. “Part of an ambush our party ran into.”

Sakra went to the exit portal for the Closet, looking out at the dark wood near the village. She sniffed the air.

“What’re you doing with him?” she said.

“Handing him over to you, actually.”

She nodded and gestured at a pair of her fellows, who approached and carried the man away toward Eschengal. I was happy to have him out of my custody. I’d been worried that the Eschens might not want to deal with the logistics of holding enemy combatants, and I was uncomfortable with the idea of becoming a Littan prison warden. I didn’t ask what would ultimately happen to the man, as it wasn’t any of my business.

Sakra then floated toward Shog, looking him over. The c’thon kept his silence and I noted that his swords had been stowed as soon as Sakra had appeared. The Zenithar eventually moved on to Grotto, and my bonded familiar slowly drifted away from her as she appraised him.

“So,” I said as she followed the Delve Core, “we’ve come to Eschendur over an urgent matter that we believe requires your assistance.” I glanced at Nuralie, hoping that she

would take the reins of the conversation. While I'd learned a little about Eschen culture during my lessons with Nuralie on Eschendur's native language, Losonbinora, I felt that our request would be better received from a local. The alchemist immediately picked up the lead.

"Zenithar Zura was sent a missive from Umi-Doo," said Nuralie. "I would not want to waste your time if you have already been made aware of its contents."

"All we've talked about at our meeting of the Triarchs is the invasion," said Sakra as she moved within a few inches of Varrin. The big guy stood stiffly upright, as though he was undergoing a military inspection. "Explain, please."

"There are many"—pause—"dangerous entities threatening the world," Nuralie began. "We have faced a handful ourselves, and know them to be divine avatars."

Sakra's head tilted, the movement so fast that it looked like a twitch. She didn't comment, however, so Nuralie continued.

"These avatars have begun attacking the nations of the world. First, an avatar known as Orexis threatened Hiward's southern quarter while trying to release his sister, Anesis, from imprisonment. He destabilized a void sphere and tried to destroy a special Delve designed to hold many other avatars in captivity. Our party was involved in that conflict, and Hiward narrowly avoided disaster. However, Anesis was set free, and Orexis fled after fighting with two of Hiward's most powerful Delvers."

"He kicked their asses," I added. Nuralie frowned at me, but Sakra didn't react to my 'informality'. The other Zenithars had been fairly casual, and it looked like Sakra was the same.

"Another avatar, known as Fortune, was also released from confinement during the conflict," said Nuralie. "We do not know his motivations, but he helped Anesis escape. We currently consider him to be hostile." Sakra moved to study Xim, who studied the Zenithar in return. "The avatars disappeared for over a year. The destruction of a major city in Timagrín marked their return."

"Oh?" said Sakra, looking away from Xim. "I heard that Canotha was destroyed, but not how."

"Orexis caused a large mana eruption, likely by destabilizing a nearby Delve."

"It's what he tried to do to Ravvenblaq," I said. "Although, that was more of a side effect of him trying to get his sister out. He also tried to detonate the void sphere after we made him mad, but we fixed that afterward."

“Why are you all alive?” asked Sakra. “If Orexis is really an avatar he could kill your group with a thought. He could literally—” She pointed her fingers at her temples and squinted at us. “Just, think really hard and splat!”

“Erm, he wanted to use us first. Only level 1 Delves could enter the special Delve where his sister was kept.”

“Really?” said Sakra. “That’s odd.”

“Yeah, it was a whole thing. He also had a shard of his soul running around inside that we had to kill. Kind of annoying.”

“How’d he manage that?” asked Sakra. She’d begun drifting up into the air and spun lazily, horizontal to the floor. “Delves are pretty tough with their entry requirements. They won’t even let me inside with my divine treasures. I practically have to go in naked.”

“He piggybacked in on me!” said Etja, raising her hand halfway into the air. “I was a golem he made, but then he used a primordial creation obelisk to give me a level, and then he hid a piece of *his* soul under the Delver part of *my* soul. The Delve kicked him out of me once we got inside, though.”

Sakra swept over to Etja, turning fully upside down to look at her. She was still at eye level with Etja, the Deijinon’s feet nearly touching the ceiling.

“I like your feathers,” said Etja.

“Thanks!” said Sakra. She spun around to give Etja a better look. Her outfit had an open back that exposed white feathers running down from her shoulders all the way to her waist. Once she did a full rotation, she smiled at the former golem. “I like your extra arms!”

“Much appreciated!” said Etja. She lifted off the ground and also did a spin. Soon, the pair were rotating around one another as they spun and floated. It looked like some sort of humanoid orrery. They just needed a central figure to act as the sun.

“Anyway, after Orexis set off the mana eruption, Timagrín sent some of their highest-level Delves to deal with it,” I said. “He and Anesis killed them all. A Hiwardian Delver party was there and reported back what they witnessed.”

“Soooo, do you want me to fight them?” Sakra asked.

“No, Zeni—” Nuralie began, but stopped herself. “No, Sakra.” She paused after struggling to refer to the Zenithar by her first name. “Our party discovered a way to

increase the power of the System. This will allow more Delves to be created and give all Delves greater tools to fight the avatars.”

“There are more avatars out there as well,” said Xim. “We spoke with my goddess, Sam’lia, who told us the avatars will continuously get stronger over time.”

“Culminating in worldwide destruction,” I said, finishing the thought.

“There are three Delves that need to be conquered to advance the System to what is called phase two,” said Nuralie. “One is level 30 and above, but we believe God-King Ayamari has already completed it. One is level 10 and above, and no available Delver parties are strong enough to face it. The third is level 10 and below, which is here in Eschundur. We plan to clear that one.”

“Really?” said Sakra. “Which Delve is it?”

“It’s called Deijin’s Descent,” Nuralie answered.

“Hey, I know that god,” said the Zenithar, giving us a wink. “Didn’t know Deijin made a Delve, though.”

“I doubt that the god—” I began, but paused. I didn’t know enough about Delves to be certain whether or not any *were* made by gods. I glanced over at Grotto, who shook his octopoid head. It was more of a whole-body shake, really.

[Deijin would not be directly involved with creating a Delve,] the core thought to us. [The name of the Delve may be symbolic of the challenges within, or it may refer to the nature of the divine power that it taps into.]

“Interesting,” said Sakra. “I guess that you guys want me to beat the level 10 and up Delve. Kind of disappointing that I can’t go to the Deijin one.” She pouted a bit. “You have to tell me about it when you get back. Where is it, by the way?”

I brought up the map the System had granted us and shared it with the Zenithar. She looked it over, her expression growing serious.

“That’s going to be a problem,” she said.

“How so?” I asked.

“I did a fly-by of the Littan forces on my way back to Eschengal. It looked like they were setting up a forward operating base near that location.”

I looked at the map, realizing that it was in the direction that the legion had been marching. Still, even with their accelerated speed, they shouldn't have made it that far yet.

"What kind of forces were present?" asked Varrin.

"Mostly Delves," said Sakra. "A bunch that were level 10 and under, but there were four level 17s and one that was level 34. He looked pretty important and tried to shoot me down when he noticed me. It was pretty impressive, considering I was half a mile up." She rotated until she was oriented upright again, dropping closer to the floor. "But I got away," she added with a grin.

"That's... not good," I said. "I mean, it's good that you got away, but bad that the Littans have so many Delves right where we need to go."

"Why are they gathering there?" asked Xim. "Do they know about the Delve?"

"They may know we are headed there," said Varrin. "We've caused them some significant losses. It may be an attempt to capture or kill us."

"I'd prefer to think we aren't that high on their list of priorities," I said. "They've got a whole nation's worth of defenders to deal with."

"How big was that ambush you fought?" asked Sakra.

"There were fifteen Delves. One party of level 7s and two parties ranging from levels 3 to 4."

"You survived that?" she said. "That's not as impressive as surviving an avatar, but still admirable. Between the blockade fleet and that ambush, your group and Zenithar Zura have caused most of their losses from what I know. We haven't ordered the monks to attack yet, and the local priests and deacons in those areas are sparse. You're probably a big deal for them right now."

"Well, shit," I said. "When are the monks getting involved? Zenithar Dal said that you were marshaling the monasteries. I'm assuming that's where the monks would be coming from."

"Eh, we *will* be launching a counteroffensive," said Sakra. "No offense, but you all aren't on the list of people who need to know the specifics."

"Even with an inquisitor on our team?" I asked, gesturing at Nuralie.

"Maybe if she were the High Inquisitor, which she isn't."

I grumbled over the minor inconvenience of not immediately being considered trusted allies to the level of receiving top-secret information of the highest order from a foreign head of state.

“Will the Zenithars fight alongside the monks?” I asked. “Honestly, from the power you three hold, I feel like you’d obliterate the entire invasion in an afternoon.”

Sakra sighed and her shoulders slumped.

“Maybe,” she said. “But if the three of us went to war immediately, it would create too many problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

“We’re the highest authority in each of our respective churches,” she said. “We’re sort of important, so risking our lives in battle is a last resort. We also rule over the government. That makes us a little bit *more* important. It would be like King Celeritia fighting a war on the front lines.”

“He has done that,” said Varrin.

“That was a hundred years ago,” said Sakra, rolling her eyes. “And he wasn’t the king of Hiward then.”

“True,” Varrin admitted.

“The Zenithars taking the field would probably cause an escalation, as well.”

“Hmm. You mean that Litta might send in bigger guns?” I asked.

“They’ve got at least one full party in the 30s,” said Varrin. “That level 34 you saw is probably a part of that group. They have three in the upper forties, including the emperor. They keep a lot of their Delving secret, so they may have more high-level Delvers than we thought.”

“Might explain why they’re willing to throw away so many low-level Delvers,” I said.

“They weren’t thrown away,” said Varrin. “They got unlucky that they ran into *us*.”

“Point is,” said Sakra, “we don’t want to invite every big shot from Litta to join in.”

“How effective will your monks be against Delvers in those level ranges?” I asked.

“What’s their Delver-level equivalent?”

Revelators were categorized in “stages”, rather than levels, which referred to the number of revelations they possessed. The notable exceptions were revelators who were also Delvers, such as Sakra, Xim, me, and to a lesser extent, Nuralie. Those were quite rare, however. The people in the room might comprise the majority of the ones who existed.

“You’re getting back into state secret territory,” said Sakra. “Also, that’s not an easy question. What level would *you* be without your revelations?”

It seemed that all of the Zenithars could smell revelations on a person without being told about them.

“Uhhh.” My mouth hung open as I pondered the question.

My Revelations gave me abilities that might be classified as top-tier perception and mind-affecting skills. Those would be governed by Wisdom and Charisma, respectively, but they did nothing for survivability or physical attributes. It might take a 30 in both WIS and CHA to get similar Delver skills, but those skills would be a lot narrower in scope and less potent overall due to their interaction with resistances. It also wasn’t as simple as taking the required attribute score and translating that to levels, since the revelations didn’t give me all the other benefits of possessing high attribute scores, such as a robust mana pool or a potent social presence.

“I dunno,” I said, and Sakra gave me a see-what-I-mean? gesture.

“Moving back to the topic at hand,” said Varrin, “getting inside the Delve will become even more complicated once the legion makes it to that forward operating base.”

“Yeah, if we have to go HAM on Littan Delvers to make it inside, then having a thousand mundane soldiers in the mix would make for a bloody mess.”

“I don’t just mean the potential for collateral damage,” said Varrin. “With wide-area buffs, they may become an actual threat.”

I thought back to the ruffians that had been imbued by Demarsus when I’d fought the crime lord in his warehouse alongside Lito and Myria. The henchmen hadn’t given me too much trouble, but they *had* been able to hurt me. I’d gotten a lot stronger since then, but Demarsus hadn’t been built around buffs. Those people had also been thugs, not soldiers, there’d only been a dozen of them, and their gear had been dumpster-tier. A thousand well-trained and well-equipped soldiers with high-level buffs from Delvers dedicated to enhancement skills might prove troublesome.

“They may also have more tricks, like those specialized ships,” Varrin added. “Those mana-woven cannons could put out a lot of damage, and it may not take a Delver to fire one.”

“They’re still magic items,” I said. “They’d need a connection to their mana matrix. That would fry a mundane soldier.”

“Maybe. We don’t know enough about their technology right now.”

“Okay, sure. If we want to beat the legion, then we need to make our way to the Delve sooner, rather than later.”

“Based on the legion’s speed so far, we’d have a day and a half at most,” said Varrin.

“Great. We don’t even have a good way to keep ourselves from running into another ambush, especially if we’re rushing.”

“There are solutions,” said Nuralie. “We had too many people in the field last time. It makes us easier to target.” Pause. “Some of us could stay in the Closet.”

“Good idea,” said Xim. “Arlo could also wear something *other* than a brightly colored hood and pants. Even your steel breastplate stands out in the middle of a forest.”

“I could carry us through the canopy,” Shog offered. ***“If I am only burdened by Slayer, then I am confident I can move silently while staying hidden.”***

“Shog *is* green and black,” said Varrin. “That will give him an advantage for blending in with the environment. There would also be no sound from footfalls or pushing through the brush.”

“I’d need some camo,” I said. “Maybe some leather armor that’s been dyed.” I quickly checked on the portal to Eschengal, reviewing the time we had left before it closed. There were only a few more minutes. “Looks like we don’t have time for shopping.”

“It’s also the middle of the night,” said Xim.

Nuralie responded by pulling out several blankets from her inventory. They were darkly colored, ranging from black to olive green. I looked down at the pile.

“Guess I can wrap myself up like a woodland banshee. Dammit, I really wanted to look for some better armor.”

“Nuralie can scout from stealth like she did previously,” said Varrin.

“Grotto was obscured by my stealth skills while he”—pause—“rode me.”

[I do not like that characterization at all.]

“Grotto stays with Nuralie then,” I said. “I have to stay outside for the Closet to move, so I’ll follow behind at a distance while carried by my own faithful steed, Shog. Everyone else can wait it out inside.”

“Sounds great!” said Sakra.

We all looked at the Zenithar, and I realized we’d forgotten about an important matter. The entire reason that we’d wanted to speak to Sakra Manar in the first place.

“So, uh, do you want to go and do that level 10 and up Delve?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I don’t think that I can do that right now.”