

Eschengal, the capital of Eschendur, was a city of three identities. An elemental triad informed all aspects of its architecture, with water, earth, and air being celebrated in equal measure, each a tribute to one of the three gods of the Eschenden. The themes wove together like threads of a fine tapestry, circling the churches that made up the city's center and converging upon a central park of unparalleled beauty and splendor.

That's what I was told, at least. We never set foot inside.

The second leg of our sprint through the swamp began at a slightly faster pace than the day before. An hour in, Zura heard a sound that she alone could detect and her mood darkened. After that, we were no longer on a playful stroll through nature. The water beneath our feet rushed forward with us, doubling our speed as we ran along the moving channels.

By noon we'd exited the swamp and made our way across wet plains, then into more domesticated farmland. Our passing left a small flood in our wake as the waters continually rose from the ground beneath us to hasten our arrival, driving us even faster now that the terrain was devoid of thick vegetation. We quickly encountered civilization, passing entire villages built atop lakes, sprawling through the treetops, and hidden beneath earthen mounds.

We soon crested a high ridge, and in the distance, enormous stone walls could be seen that marked the outer boundary of Eschengal. Before we could draw another step closer, however, the ground fractured, and a twelve-foot-tall boulder emerged, churning up moist soil in large piles around it. A seam appeared along the rock's center with a loud crack and its two halves fell away, the chunks of stone landing heavily on the path. A man, who'd been *inside* the rock, stepped forward.

He was a Hyrachon, over seven feet tall with sandy skin and wide-set eyes on a broad face. Small, granite horns dotted the ridgeline of his head, and thick fur covered his shoulders and back, his frame as broad as a bull's. He wore only a heavy brown skirt, its edges embroidered with black runes and script.

"Zenithar Zura," the man said, his voice deep and rumbling. "You take a trip to the coast to survey the blockade, and now we are at war. I'd wager your trip was not boring."

"Zenithar Dal," said Zura, inclining her head slightly to her peer. "You would win that wager, although I believe we have been at war for some time. Should I expect Zenithar Manar to greet us as well? I'd planned to call a formal session of the triarchs, but I am not opposed to meeting here on the road if she is already on her way."

“Bah!” said Dal, waving a thick hand through the air. A bit of rock dust puffed away into the breeze as he did so. “Sakra Manar is not in Eschengal, she is at Skyharbor.”

“Have you sent a flyer?” asked Zura.

“Why would I?” said Dal. “The Right Ring has rung. The gong will have been heard at Skyharbor as well as it has been heard anywhere else.”

Zura tapped her nails against the haft of her halberd.

“Why is Manar at Skyharbor?” she asked.

“Sparring with Yri, I expect,” said Dal. “It’s all she does up there.”

“You expect her to take note of the gong while sparring with Yri?”

Dal threw up his hands and then dropped to the ground with a thud, sending tremors through my boots. He crossed his legs and heaved out a loud breath.

“She is no fool,” said Dal. “But... she *may* be distracted.” He shook his upper body, more stone dust kicking up from his fur. “You and I may decide how to address the immediate matters.” He looked over our group. “First, tell me who these strangers are.”

“Delvers,” said Zura. “The party known as Fortune’s Folly. They were waylaid by the blockade on their way to Eschendur.”

“You left in such a rush,” said Dal. “Did you go to rescue them?”

“They made it through the blockade under their own power.”

Dal leaned forward.

“Did the Littans pursue?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Zura.

“Into our borders?”

“Yes.”

“And you asked them to leave, no doubt.”

“The Littans refused,” said Zura. “Then deployed three Delver parties to take this group by force. After the Littan admiral disregarded multiple warnings, I sank the encroaching vessels.”

Zenithar Dal sat up straighter, rolling his shoulders back, which made a few loud pops.

“How much of the blockade fleet did you destroy?”

Zura thought it over for a second.

“I believe half of the blockade fleet was present. Not counting the ships Fortune’s Folly destroyed beforehand. The rest were likely still spread out further to the north and south.”

“Half,” Dal grumbled. “Enough for the Littans to finally commit to an invasion.”

“Invasion?” said Nuralie, stepping forward. “Zenithar Dal, you said that the Right Ring sounded the alarm. Does that mean the Littans are entering through the Gap?”

“This is Nuralie Vyxmeldo’a,” said Zura. “She has been stranded in Hiward for some years due to the blockade.”

“Welcome home, child,” said Dal. “And yes. The Littans have marched at least one legion through the Eschen Gap. We await more details, but I expect that is only the beginning.”

“Zenithars,” said Nuralie. “My village is very near the Gap. It is not my place to ask, but what”—pause—“defenses are in place?”

“We monitor the Gap, but do not defend it,” said Dal. “Outposts do not last long in the Gap because of its ‘resident’, which is something the Littans learned the hard way. That is what started this whole mess between our nations to begin with. Currently, each Diocese is responsible for its own defense until we martial the monasteries. I have begun that process, but it will take some time.”

“Arlo,” said Nuralie, turning to me. “It is not why we are here, but-”

“Yeah, let’s go get your family,” I said. “Give me an hour and I can establish a Checkpoint. That way, once we get to your village we can open a portal to Eschengal in the Closet and extract everyone.”

Nuralie nodded, though her anxiety didn’t abate.

I began concentrating on my Checkpoint ability. I was limited to two of the long-range portal destinations and already had one in the Xor’Drel village and one at my estate in Formation. I discarded the one leading to my increasingly pointless mini-mansion and immediately started the process of replacing it with our current location.

“Zenithar Zura,” said Nuralie. “I will still need to be ordained to serve as a guide, correct?”

“Yes,” said Zura.

“Then I will accept the Inquisitor title.”

“Inquisitor?” said Dal. “We haven’t appointed an Inquisitor in decades.”

“Do you disapprove?” asked Zura.

“No,” said Dal after a moment of consideration. “There are no Inquisitors in office at the moment. Unless you plan to make her the High Inquisitor, we will need to appoint a few more.”

“I already have a list of candidates,” said Zura.

“Very well,” said Dal. He took another deep breath and climbed back to his feet. “Now that I’ve confirmed who to blame for this mess, I need to return to managing our response.”

“I will join you shortly,” said Zura.

Dal grumbled something, then raised his hands over his head and gave a mighty clap. The broken boulder rose from the ground and slammed shut around him, sealing itself back together into a single piece. It sank into the ground in an instant, then disappeared.

“Nuralie Vyxmeldo’a,” said Zura. “In my capacity as Zenithar of the church of Geul, I hereby offer you the title of Inquisitor. Do you accept such title and swear to uphold the tenets of its office faithfully?”

“I do,” said Nuralie.

“Good enough for me,” said Zura. She placed her palm on Nuralie’s forehead, and a brief glow surrounded the alchemist’s body.

“Is... that it?” asked Nuralie.

“Traditionally there’s a two-hour ceremony,” said Zura as she fished for something in her robes. “I have opted for the expedient version, given the circumstances. Here.” She held out a small, leatherbound book to Nuralie, who accepted it. “That describes the powers and responsibilities of the office. However, you will find that you are already familiar with the contents, by virtue of being granted the title.”

“I see,” said Nuralie, looking down at the book.

“Now, I’d hoped to spend more time with you all,” said Zura, looking around the group. “Unfortunately, I must assist Zenithar Dal in managing our response to the Littans.”

“Zenithar,” said Nuralie, looking up from the book. “The blockade... and now the invasion.” She glanced at the rest of the party. “We-”

Zula reached out and took Nuralie by the arm.

“You are in no way responsible for this,” said the Zenithar. “The Littans have been looking for an excuse to escalate this conflict ever since it became clear we wouldn’t give them any of the concessions they demanded. It was only a matter of time before the blockade became violent, even if your group hadn’t forced your way through. Also, know that I did not destroy those ships for *your* sake. I destroyed them for Eschendur. The blockade had become untenable. Beyond the economic impact it has had, the blockade had begun to cost lives. Eschens are dying every day because we cannot import certain medicines. Food insecurity has also become a serious concern in the cities. The blockade needed to be eliminated, and so it has. I shoulder the blame for the escalation. None of you are at fault.”

Nuralie searched the Zenithar’s eyes for a while, then seemed to accept her words.

“Thank you,” she said.

Zura gave her arm a gentle squeeze.

“The Littans have a long history of conquering their neighbors,” said the Zenithar. “They are aggressive, but they are not barbarians. They target soldiers, not civilians. Your village should be safe for the moment, and I have faith that your group can handle any hostility you find. Good luck on your journey.”

Zura nodded to the rest of us, then summoned a stream of water to carry her toward the city.

The rest of the hour passed with the party standing awkwardly on the side of the road while I established the Checkpoint, discussing ways to make it to Nuralie’s village while avoiding the legion. Nuralie and Varrin also talked more about their understanding of why the Littans wanted to be in Eschendur in the first place, and how the conflict started.

“It comes down to magical resources,” said Varrin. “Littan territory is rich in mundane materials such as iron, gemstones, and cropland, but they don’t have access to

extraordinary metals or mana-rich plants and animals. Eschendur is the world's largest exporter of Madrin, has unparalleled diversity in alchemical ingredients, and can produce a variety of materials useful for mana weaving. The Littans wanted a larger share of the Eschen trade that was going to Hiward, but didn't have anything to offer that Eschendur wanted in return."

"Block trade to Hiward, force Eschendur to sell to Litta," I said. "Thus, the blockade. I get it."

"The blockade didn't accomplish much," said Nuralie. "Eschendur refused to sell to Litta."

"Eschendur's economy is fairly self-sustaining," said Varrin. "They've always been somewhat isolationist, so they aren't reliant on outside goods for much. Stonewalling the blockade caused harm to Eschendur, but not to the level the Littans were likely expecting."

"Where's Hiward in all this?" I said. "Litta is fucking up a really important trade channel to the kingdom."

"Hiward can't do much," said Varrin. "It's complicated, but it boils down to treaties. Hiward generally can't interfere with Littan military action. If they do, all existing political relationships between the nations are severed."

"Okay," I said. "So, if it all comes back to Litta wanting Eschendur's magic shit, what was that comment Zenithar Dal made about the Eschen Gap about?"

"Pretense," said Nuralie. "The Gap is home to an entity known as the Operator. It is"—pause—"very strong. Stronger than most Delvers. We don't settle the Gap because of this. The Littans, however, began building settlements within the Gap when they first started testing our borders. The settlements were destroyed and Litta blamed Eschendur."

"What?" I said. "Why?"

"The Operator is... a legend to some extent," said Nuralie. "The Littans think of it like a folk tale. When the settlements were destroyed, the evidence showed that it was caused by a single, powerful individual. There were no survivors to attest to what happened, so the Littans assumed it was an Eschen Delver. When Eschendur responded by saying it was the Operator, it wasn't taken seriously."

"Litta thought you were telling them that the boogeyman did it?" I said.

“I will assume what you said makes sense and say yes,” said Nuralie. “Litta demanded that we turn over the culprit, but there is no one to hand over.”

“That was their excuse to start the blockade,” I said. “Act like it’s righteous when really they just want to take your shit. Bet that angle works great as propaganda.”

A few more minutes went by and I finally got the notification that the Checkpoint was active.

“Alright,” I said. “Long-range portal destination locked in. Time to go interfere with a major international dispute. More than we already have, that is.”

Once again we set off in the direction of an objective that just happened to be on the other side of a major Littan military unit.

Maybe I’d be able to talk my way past this one.