

I didn't mind a beach day here and there, but I tried to stay out of the water as much as possible. All the salt made me itchy.

I broke back through the surface of the ocean to find Varrin looking down at me, sword at the ready.

"Arlo?" he said. "How did you-"

"Teleported to the Second Layer," I said, then cast Shortcut to appear next to him on the half-sunk caravel. Shog floated above the water, unperturbed by the sudden Layer transition and still testing his new limbs out. As a dimension-hopping mana fiend, he was probably used to suddenly being portalled from place to place.

"But you were just..." Varrin pointed at the space where I likely disappeared from only a second or so beforehand. "And you're healed?"

"Time was weird there." I looked down to check on Nuralie, but the loson was already bandaging her wounds, an empty potion bottle on the deck beside her. I glanced over the Littan galleons continuing to draw closer. There were at least three within striking distance and a dozen more closing in from farther out. "Looks like the entire blockade is out to get us."

"Right," the big guy said, dropping his hand and sheathing his sword. "We should go, then. Unless you prefer that we destroy the entire blockade?"

I appraised Varrin's expression, trying to decide if it was a serious question. I couldn't tell.

"We got shit to do. Yaretzi said there were more caravels like these, but crewed by Silvers. Plus, the longer we stick around the more likely someone tougher than a level 17 shows up."

"What happened to that bastard?" Varrin asked.

"Slayer removed half of his skull and then I consumed his corpse," Shog said, then held up his sword-wielding tentacle hands. **"Look! I have taken his appendages for my own!"**

"I see," said Varrin. "Good riddance." He eyed Shog with some level of concern as the c'thon continued to swipe Yaretzi's blades through the air.

"Want to train him?" I asked. The big guy's face went through a quick series of emotions from disgust to consideration and finally to curiosity.

“Perhaps...” he said.

I clapped him on the shoulder.

“Awesome. But first, we must commandeer ourselves a vessel!”

I cast Shortcut to the northern caravel, appearing amid seven deeply uncomfortable level 3 Littan Delvers, an unconscious Etja, and Grotto. The core gave everyone mean stares as he hovered over our mage.

“Hi,” I said. “I won’t pretend to understand what the fuck all just happened, but thanks for shooting at Yaretzi, I guess. You shot at *us* first, so really it’s kind of a wash.”

Varrin leaped onto the boat with Nuralie in his arms, landing heavily on the deck. Several of the Littans flinched. The small-ish vessel was getting crowded.

“We’re heading to shore,” I continued. “So, this is our boat now. If you don’t like it, there’s the door.” I pointed at the water. As I did so, a light red hand appeared on the railing and a very wet Xim crawled into the boat. She stood and glared at Varrin, then her body became cloaked in crimson flame. Steam rose off of her as she quickly dried.

“I need a movement ability,” she said.

“You’re letting us go?” one of the Littans asked. It was the mage woman from the central caravel who’d fled with Handless, who lay beside her. The guy was no longer unconscious but was obviously in a lot of pain. Varrin was already moving to get the boat underway heading east toward the shore.

“I never had any interest in fighting the Littan navy,” I said. “We had blockade passes. Your leadership ignored them and tried to kidnap one of my party members. That led to a scuffle, and now we’re here. Do what you want.”

Two of the Littans immediately jumped ship and began swimming toward the closest galleon. The rest looked to the man I suspected was the ship’s former captain, who stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“Where is Captain Yaretzi?” he asked.

“Dead.”

“The body?”

I jerked my thumb at Shog, who had finished his sword acrobatics and was floating closer. There was a hungry glint in his eye.

“Eaten,” I said.

Another Littan dove overboard, leaving us with four. The captain’s eyes went wide at my words, but he stood firm.

“What Captain Yaretzi did,” the man said, “and what he ordered us to do, was illegal. He lied to us about how these weapons functioned.” He nodded at the spike gun. “No one knew that it would... have such a *large* area of effect, and strike our fellow soldiers. Only one of us was foolish enough to fire an unfamiliar weapon while you were aboard the galleon.” He gave Handless a dark look.

“Cool,” I said, giving him a thumbs-up. “I don’t really care. Sounds like something to tell your admiral.” We were now cruising toward the shore at a decent kip.

“What I am saying is that the other vessels will not fire upon this caravel while there are Littan soldiers aboard.” A couple of the others shot the man angry glances but stayed silent.

I rubbed my eyes to try and soothe an oncoming headache.

“We’re not taking hostages,” I said. “We just want to get to Eschendur. I doubt you’d be welcome there.”

“You would still release us, then?” he asked. “Even though you would be safer with us aboard?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do. Honestly, I’m confused about why you’re still here.”

The man nodded and then gave a signal to the others. Two more of the Littans jumped off, leaving the former captain, the mage, and Handless aboard. He knelt by the mage and the pair had a quick conversation in Imperial.

The woman was concerned that they would be silenced before their report made it anywhere meaningful. The former captain tried to reassure her that the rest of the military wasn’t made up of honorless vermin like Yaretzi and that they would be treated fairly. Eventually, she relented and made it into the water with Handless on her back.

“I will be sure to include your mercy in my report,” the former captain said. “Along with your complaints about how your passage was handled.” He gave me a bitter smile, then jumped off to join the rest of his team.

One of the galleons ended its pursuit to pick up the castaways. A few minutes later, the other vessels opened up with their forward cannons.

The caravel was quick through the water and we had a decent lead. The ship was also a small target, sailing away from the larger ships that had more limited weaponry on their bows than their flanks. Most of the shots went wide and I stood on the stern with Gracovus deployed, trying to intercept any that looked like they might land. It was an optimistic idea, since cannonballs move pretty fast. A few struck home, but the caravel limped along until we were close enough to make the rest of the way ourselves.

Etja regained consciousness and had recovered enough mana to zip herself to shore. Varrin sprinted across the sea with Xim on his back and Nuralie joined me on Gracovus. Grotto clutched onto my shoulder while Shog was able to fly beside me with no trouble. The caravel sank soon after we left, and none of the cannons were able to hit us individually.

As we drew close, the massive soul presence I'd seen earlier dominated my vision until I had to reduce the sensitivity of soul-sight. While it emitted enormous pressure, similar to the pressure I felt from Orexis or Fortune, it wasn't hostile or oppressive. If anything it felt like a leviathan welcoming us into its home.

A hundred yards from shore the Littan cannons went silent and I saw the person to whom the soul belonged. It was a Geulon woman in ocean blue robes with gold ornamentation. She was walking out onto the water with a glaive held in front of her, its point dragging across the sea. She raised a hand in greeting and Nuralie took in a sharp breath when she caught sight of her.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

"Ros Zura." Pause. "She is the Zenithar of Geul."

"Okay, so she's like the pope of your water god?"

"She is also one of the ruling Triarchs."

"Pope *and* queen, eh? Well, she's got a soul that lives up to those titles."

We slowed as we drew close and she signaled for us to stop once we were within speaking distance. She continued to walk forward at a casual pace.

"What wonders this morning brings," she said in a voice that sounded much older than she looked. I also noticed that she was using the halberd like a walking stick, its point dipping into the water and meeting some sort of resistance.

"Greetings, Zenithar Zura," I said. "I am Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel and this is my party, Fortune's Folly."

“Oh, I know who you are,” she said, walking right up to me. I lowered Gracorus so that I was level with her, trying to give Nuralie room to stand beside me with some level of decorum.

“That looks uncomfortable,” said Zenithar Zura. “Come down, the water will hold you.”

I stepped off the shield, fighting my body’s instinct to prepare for another dive, but the water was as firm as moist soil. Nuralie followed and I sent Gracorus back into my armguard. Etja also landed nearby.

“Are the c’thons in your party as well?” Zura asked. She appraised Shog and Grotto with olive green eyes that matched her scales, though she didn’t look concerned.

“Bonded Familiar Grotto and Shog the Summoned,” I said, gesturing at each in turn.

She paused and blinked. There was a stretch of silence where my normally talkative octos had nothing to say. Eventually, the Zenithar turned her eyes on Nuralie, who bowed deeply to the woman.

“Nuralie Vyxmeldo’a,” Zura said. “I am happy Geul has seen you safely back to our waters.”

“Thank you, Zenithar,” said Nuralie. “The journey was”—Pause—“eventful.”

“I see that,” said Zura, looking past us at the still-approaching galleons. “The Littans seem to have forgotten where our borders begin.”

“Haven’t they been doing that for a while?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” said Zura. “At least, not according to their maps. They mark Eschundur territorial seas at half of a nautical mile. They have stayed well outside that range throughout the blockade.”

“Half a mile doesn’t seem like a lot,” I said, trying to remember the standard back on Earth. I was pretty sure it was a lot further than that. She raised an eyeridge at me.

“It is not,” she said. “But we have had no reason to bicker over it.” She paused, though it was much shorter than Nuralie’s typical beat. “There are more important things in this life. Still, I cannot overlook such blatant encroachment.” She shook her head, and a look of grief crossed her features. “Now then, children, step behind me if you would.” She flipped her halberd and stood straighter, then drove the butt of it into the water. A ripple flared out across the sea. As it made its way across the hulls of the Littan vessels, three

more caravels were revealed, their illusions broken by whatever magic the Zenithar had just employed. They were each crewed by a team of level 8 Silvers.

The nearest galleon slowed, and I saw a familiar face at its bow.

“Zenithar Zura,” said the Littan admiral, his voice once again augmented by Delver Sandy. “The men and women beside you have committed grievous crimes under Imperial law. Please stand aside and allow us to take them into custody.”

“This guy’s worse at diplomacy than I am,” I muttered.

“And a greater fool,” said Varrin. “Has he not learned his lesson?”

“State their crimes, Admiral Richtin,” said Zura, her voice booming and suddenly sounding twenty years younger.

“Destruction of naval property, piracy, and murder,” the admiral replied. “More charges will be forthcoming as well, I’m sure.”

“Is that so?” said Zura. “I have it on good authority that this team of Delvers was granted permission to pass through your blockade unimpeded.”

The admiral frowned and exchanged a few whispers with Sandy. He turned back and straightened his uniform.

“Do you argue that this excuses their crimes?”

“Your blockade attempted to detain this group without cause,” said Zura. “Fearing for their lives—most reasonably, I would say—they attempted to flee, but were given chase by your fleet. You sought to use lethal measures to complete your unlawful detainment, to which these men and women responded in kind. Do you deny this?”

“She... knows a lot about what just happened,” I whispered to Nuralie.

“The Zenithars see much,” was her response.

“Their passes were issued in error,” said the admiral. “Rather than submitting to inspection, their leader destroyed my vessel while his allies slaughtered good men and women.”

“Your characterization of events is delusive, admiral. I will not condemn these people on such specious grounds.”

“Then you intend to harbor enemies of the empire?”

“I intend to grant asylum to a group fleeing your barbarity.”

The admiral flinched.

“If that is so, then I will have no choice but to send my soldiers to retrieve them.” The admiral made a gesture and the Silver caravels began sailing closer.

“Admiral,” said Zura, “you should consider your actions more carefully. You are within Eschen territory, which is already a violation of our treaties. If you insist on deploying soldiers I will consider this an invasion.”

“This is no invasion, Zenithar. I am apprehending criminals who’ve not yet set foot in your lands.”

“Now you’ve resorted to complete falsehoods, Admiral. We are within Eschen borders at this very moment. Recall your soldiers, or I will respond with force.”

By this point there were at least fifteen Littan galleons spread out across the sea, along with the three Silver caravels that continued to sail toward us. There were no Eschen ships, nor were there any soldiers.

The admiral had nothing else to say. Zura bowed her head, shaking it in disappointment.

“A fool’s blade still cuts,” she said softly. “And the fool is still to blame.”

She raised her halberd into the air, spun it, and then drove the blade down into the ocean. This time, it did not stop at the surface but drove deep into the water. Another pulse rippled out from the impact, growing in intensity as it traveled away from us until it was a mighty wave that rocked the hulls of the galleons.

Zura’s soul shone with even greater intensity, then fell upon the halberd and traveled its length into the sea. The water shook and trembled beneath my feet causing me to adjust my footing. The effect also grew more intense the farther it got from us until the admiral fell and disappeared behind the railing of his ship. Even the Silver Delvers were unable to keep their balance, though a couple took to the air with flying abilities rather than struggle on deck.

You have observed the Geul’s Embrace spell!

Geul's Embrace

Deific

Cost: 2000 mana

Requirements: Zenithar of Geul

Effects:

All enemies that you can see within 1000 feet of a significant body of water are embraced by Geul. This effect may only occur within the borders of Eschendur.

There was a heavy thud from below us and ice ran through my veins as I saw something vast rising from the deep. The ocean churned and a tendril nearly as thick as one of the Littan galleons burst from the sea and wrapped itself around the admiral's vessel. It constricted, destroying sails and shattering through the vessel's planks like toothpicks, then pulled the entire ship down into the ocean.

The bright snaps of boards shattering filled the air and the resounding crash of massive waves heralded the arrival of another tentacle, yet the screams of the Littan soldiers could still be heard over the tumult. The titanic feeler wrapped around a second galleon, smashing through it like a sledgehammer across twigs. Two more tendrils rose and took the rest of the ship down into the drink.

Across the entire fleet, the massacre repeated. Smaller tentacles assaulted the Delver caravels, wrenching them apart and seeking out their crews. Those that had taken to the air tried to fly away from the assault, but more limbs shot from the water and wrapped them up. The tendrils twisted and contorted the Delver's bodies until they were wrung into pieces, their blood and viscera splashing down into the water in streams and chunks.

The billowing sea sent a surge of rocking tides toward us, but the waters settled and calmed before reaching the Zenithar. We all watched in quiet awe as the Littan blockade was swallowed up. It all happened in under a minute.

By the end, the sea was an endless shipwreck save for a single galleon. The galleon that had stopped to pick up our castaways, and which had never sailed close enough to enter Eschen waters.

The Zenithar stood unmoving for several minutes after the catastrophe ended and none of us dared to break the silence. Eventually, she turned to us, looking worn out and with tears in her eyes.

“Let us go then,” she said, “and tell the other Triarchs what I have done.”

She walked past us across the water, and we all followed without a word.