

A cool wind began to blow through the forest, the gentle rustle of a hundred thousand leaves helping to soothe my emotional hangover. I took a second to collect myself, then briefly checked in with Grotto and Nuralie as Varrin began his interrogation. Our prisoner was uncooperative and Varrin was working the “good cop” angle, so I suspected it might take a little time to get anything worthwhile out of the man.

The sniper had fired his shot while Nuralie was still some distance away. He’d also been a hundred feet up and hidden in the canopy, so there’d been little chance of Nuralie catching sight of him. The loson had a couple of perception-related abilities, but it wasn’t her focus. When running up against a party of stealth specialists, it was no surprise that she’d missed a well-hidden enemy from hundreds of feet away through thick cover. By the time the crew of traditional fighters arrived, Grotto had been knocked unconscious by the feedback from Shared Fate, which broke our psychic alarm system.

The whole experience made me feel out of my depth. When it came to Delves, the party was well-equipped. When it came to dealing with professional soldiers and traditional battleground tactics, our inexperience showed. Against a normal army, our lack of military focus was irrelevant because of the vast power difference between ourselves and mundane people. The Littans were deploying *Delvers* with a focus on soldiering, however, and we’d been briefly outmaneuvered. We were still able to overcome the surprise attack through brute force, but if the enemy had been a higher level, I might have eaten it without ever knowing what had killed me.

As it was, I’d survived because I was a damn cockroach. Body of Theseus helped me to ignore some of the effects of the headshot, while Just a Fleshwound allowed me to recover without suffering permanent damage. After checking my notifications, I saw that the opening hit had done nearly 500 damage, so my enormous Fortitude had also come into play. That was a one-hit kill on anyone else in the party.

On the other hand, my face being exposed was once again shown to be a big weakness. Seinnador had encouraged the choice, insisting that many spells required the caster’s face to be visible or for their voice to be clearly heard. None of my spells or abilities took advantage of that fact, and I was beginning to think I needed a helm, or at least a thick-ass mask. The only potential exception was my chant while casting Explosion!, but that didn’t give a massive boost. I thought that the extra protection would be worth a minor reduction to the effectiveness of that spell. It wasn’t even a staple, just a nice opener.

Honestly, I needed a total refit for all of my protective gear. My chest piece was trashed and the pieces of Madrin plate that remained only had basic weaves for physical resistance. With the way we’d been dunking on Delves, it hadn’t been an issue, but by

this point, it was becoming a serious liability. Our timeline for entering the phase 2 Delve was flexible, so finding time to get better equipment would need to be a priority. The only problem with that idea was that Eschendur wasn't exactly known for their wealth of skilled smiths and mana weavers. Their Delver population was quite low.

I began looking over some of the gear from the slain Littans, but it was lower quality than what I already had and a bad fit because of their slender frames. I was also in no mood to loot the meager items they possessed, aside from the mini ballista and its accompanying arrows of incredible size. Those were pretty neat. I also kept Shog from eating anyone, since that wouldn't have gone over well with our prisoner and I also held no enmity for these people. I didn't want to deny them a proper funeral. By the time I'd finished my survey, the Littan captive was beginning to warm up.

Varrin impressed upon the man that we had important business in Eschendur, that we would make our way through any obstacle in our path, and that it was in everyone's best interest that the legion not become one of those obstacles. The Littan was willing to give us the general location of the legion but refused to detail any of its capabilities, which was fine. We eventually placed the man in a fortified room inside of the Pocket Closet for safekeeping and I made sure he had decent accommodations. I wasn't trying to run a Gulag. We planned to turn him over to the Eschens once we evacuated Nuralie's village.

"The good news is that the legion is marching west, further into Eschendur and away from the village," said Varrin. A look crossed Nuralie's face that made it clear she didn't agree with Varrin's use of the word 'good'. "The bad news," Varrin continued, "is that Nuralie's village connects to one of the few developed roadways through this region. Thus, it's likely occupied to secure the legion's supply lines."

"How did they move so fast?" I asked. Varrin shrugged.

"Given their tactics so far, I expect there are more Delvers mixed in with movement and stamina buffs."

"This feels like a lot of Delvers," I said. "Litta only gets twenty slots in the Creation Delve each year. Between this crew and the ones who died in the blockade fleet, forty of their Delvers have been killed. That's two years worth of Creation slots."

"Most have been of an average level or lower," said Varrin. "It's a notable loss, but not crippling."

"Assuming 50 years worth of Delvers are alive in Litta, that's already a 4% attrition rate," I said. "That's pretty brutal for two days of war."

“True. But, it’s not our problem and not worth speculating over,” said Varrin. “The immediate question is how to approach the village.”

“We can skirt the mountains to the east,” said Nuralie. “The terrain is too difficult for normal soldiers and there is less cover for ambushes.” She paused and looked at Varrin, who nodded for her to continue. “We can then travel directly west to the village. It isn’t far from the mountains, so we can get there quickly.”

“And if it’s occupied?” I asked.

“Our approach should depend on who it is occupied by,” said Varrin. “If there are mundane soldiers who pose little threat, then we can disable them and then evacuate. We’ve already stirred up enough hostility from our actions so far. I would prefer that we not encourage more by slaughtering soldiers who are helpless against us.”

“I would also prefer less blood on our hands,” I said. “Isn’t that a change of attitude for you since the blockade, though?”

Varrin clenched his jaw and considered the question.

“I have no issue with defending the party when we are assaulted,” he said. “In this situation, we will hopefully be making a surprise attack. It feels unjustified to open with lethal force if we can avoid it.”

“The Littans are the aggressors,” said Nuralie. “What would you do if they were invading Hiward?”

“I would focus on targets that are a legitimate threat,” he said. “To be clear, I am not advocating that we place the lives of the Littans above those of your village. If they threaten the lives of civilians, then we use whatever force necessary.”

“It’s your country, Nuralie,” I said. “I won’t tell you what you should or shouldn’t do, but I’d prefer we limit our involvement. So far, we’ve responded when attacked. If we’re taking the initiative, we should at most aim to capture.”

Nuralie’s tail twitched and her features were taut, but she didn’t voice an objection. After a few more minutes of discussion, we headed out.

We made our way to the mountains without issue and traveled north uninterrupted. It was a significant detour and since we were no longer racing the legion, we took it at a slower pace to keep a better watch for ambushes. By the time we were ready to head west, the sun had begun to set.

We decided that a night assault would be preferable, especially given Nuralie's skillset. Those of us with darkvision helped to guide the others in the group through the forest, and we made it to the outskirts of the village by midnight. We parked ourselves a quarter mile from the village's outer dwellings and Nuralie began to prepare for her incursion. She wanted to go in alone, with the rest of us getting involved only if shit went south.

She produced a set of long needles and began coating them in one of her concoctions.

"It's non-lethal," she said when she caught me watching the process with interest. "If I'm not back in an hour, assume that there's trouble."

She took a step into the dark and disappeared. We waited in silence as the minutes ticked by and my anxiety grew with each passing moment. I began running worst-case hypotheticals through my head, worrying that a party of high-level Delvers might be lying in wait for us. What if the Littans had gotten ahold of information on Nuralie once they realized a loson was in our party? They might have been able to track down her hometown and laid a trap. The rest of Tavio's party were likely part of the invasion since Yaretzi was involved in the blockade. What if Tavio was here for a round two? There might be other, stronger Delvers involved as well.

After forty minutes there was movement in the woods, and I peered intently into the dark, trying to make out what was approaching. I quickly saw the familiar form of a Guelon approaching, but it wasn't Nuralie.

An older woman walked out from between the trees, pausing when she noticed our group. She spent a while looking at Shog before squaring her shoulders and marching forward, right up to Varrin.

"Are you Arlo?" she said, peering up at the big guy. He shook his head and gestured at me. The woman turned and looked me up and down, raising an eyebrow. "You're the leader of your group?" she asked, sounding skeptical.

"Only because no one else volunteered," I said. "Arlo Xor'Drel. And you are?"

"Tiania Vyxmeldo'a," she said. With no further pleasantries or introductions, she turned and produced a frog from beneath her skirt. She gave it a gentle squeeze and the creature let out a loud croak. She repeated this several times, and a horde of Geulons began to emerge from the trees. Even as a large group, their movements were silent and their bodies seemed to blend into the dark. Soon, there were over a hundred of the losons, with more on the way.

"Well?" said Tiania, turning back to me. "I was told you were a portal mage."

“He has a wide skill set,” said Nuralie, who was suddenly right next to me. This time, I only flinched *a little*. “Not just portals.”

I grinned, then opened the Pocket Closet, an act that was received with wide eyes and a few soft words of surprise. One Guelon even gently clapped. The moment the portal was open, Nuralie darted inside. I walked in behind her, finding her sticking a needle into the shoulder of our captive Littan, who’d been sleeping. He grunted and sat up in alarm, then his eyelids drooped and he immediately fell back. Nuralie caught him, then gently guided him back onto the bed.

“Just in case,” she said. I ignored the light prisoner abuse and focused on my Checkpoint to Eschengal. I cast Shortcut, hoping that I hadn’t fucked up this skill combo when I reforged the spell, but the portal opened without trouble.

“One hour to get everyone through,” I said, and we began herding Nuralie’s village through the portal to the nation’s capital. The crowd found this feat far more impressive than opening the Closet, and there were many thanks given and I even received a few gifts of fruits and vegetables as the people went through.

Not all of the villagers were in good spirits, however, and I noticed more than one family with red eyes and somber expressions.

“How did it go?” I asked as Nuralie ushered more of her kin through the portal.

“There were twenty soldiers. I put them to sleep without issue. The villagers”—pause—“were treated humanely,” she said. “But there were several in the village who were sworn to defend it. They were all killed, along with the village priest.”

“They killed the priest?” I said. “That seems... unnecessary.”

“Eschen priests are often the strongest fighters in a small village like this,” she said. “They are at least second-stage revelators, and have all been trained in the art of combat.”

“Really?” I said.

“All of the nation’s defenders are affiliated with the Church in some way.” Pause. “Father Kiagalo was a good man,” she said softly, and I could tell that she was struggling to keep up a strong front.

Etja had been watching the migration, uncharacteristically silent since our earlier encounter with the sniper. She came over and took Nuralie by the shoulders, then gave

her a tight hug. She maintained a silent vigil with Nuralie, and the pair stood side-by-side until the last villager was through the portal.

Tiania was the last to step through, and she stopped to study Nuralie's face for a moment.

"You've grown up," the older Geulon said. "That's good." The pair watched one another awkwardly, and I figured there was some history there that I wasn't privy to. Eventually, Tiania nodded and then stepped out through the portal herself.

My eyes turned to the unconscious Littan Delver, and just as I was about to ask how we wanted to approach handing him over, a gust of wind blew in from the portal.

Standing just inside the Closet was a female Deijinon. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, was a hair over 5 feet tall, and had skin the color of a ripe peach. Along her head and shoulders were feathers of the purest white and wore loose-fitting clothes that matched, reminding me vaguely of an Eastern martial artist. She was smiling as she looked us over and had the level 15 above her head.

Her soul, however, was even more potent than Zenithar Zura's, and the platinum of her Delver levels was woven into a rapidly swirling gale of mist.

"Zenithar Manar," said Nuralie, bowing deeply.

"Hi!" she said, tilting forward and giving us a wave. "I heard you were looking for me!"