

We were given three days to get ready for our excursion south. Originally, Lito had advocated for an earlier departure, but Myria and Nuralie each had things they wanted to accomplish that would take a bit longer, with Myria saying “You think I can track down the triplets and get them on board in *a day?*” and Nuralie simply stating “I need to brew more potions.”

Myria decided to stay at Nuralie’s place in the artisan quarter during the evenings, and assigned a rotating guard from Central to Nuralie during the day, while Myria worked on securing additional Delver support. Xim, deciding she had no further business at the temple, stayed with me. Unfortunately, Lito decided the two of us needed to be guarded as well, so he set himself up in one of my extra bedrooms. The house was big, so I didn’t feel crowded or anything, but Lito’s presence felt a bit paternal.

It was early evening by the time Umi-Doo released us, so we all went to have dinner before separating into our two groups. After getting Xim and Lito settled in their guest accommodations I spent the evening meditating, working my aura, and helping Grotto use the mana that we ... acquired from the Artemix group.

There was eighty-four-thousand mana, which would allow for eighty-four-hundred additional cubic meters of space, assuming we wanted to spend it all on raw size. I had a few other ideas, though, especially since we were about to go on a somewhat lengthy road trip.

After all, who wanted to sleep on the dirt when we could have more comfortable accommodations?

First, I added a thousand square meters to the top of the main room, creating a vaulted ceiling. This would allow Grotto to begin adding additional size to the obelisk, doing so by creating a new ‘shell’ that could fit on top of the original. Doing this over time would create an increasingly powerful obelisk with many layers, like a big pointy onion, and each layer could be mana-woven with additional enhancements or functions. The core was currently focused entirely on gathering mana, and Grotto advised that the next layer do the same. After all, more mana gathering helped us snowball the Pocket Delve’s growth even faster.

I then spent the rest of the mana making three additional rooms, separated by walls, with spaces where doors could be set. I adjoined these rooms to one another, then created a long hallway which led to the obelisk room. That way I could keep any guests separate from the more sensitive areas of the Closet.

The first room would be focused on lodging, with a basic barracks feel and a couple smaller rooms for changing clothes or whatever other private activities might be required. I planned to rely on the great outdoors as a restroom, since I wasn't about to try and figure out plumbing and fresh water inside of an enclosed dimensional space in the span of a couple days. I was also able to move the Closet's entrance to this room, which gave me some ideas about spooky things like disappearing exits and shifting hallways. Those ideas went on The List.

After speaking with Nuralie for a while about the length of time it took to practice her alchemy and the difficulty of "brewing on the road", I decided the second room could serve as an alchemy lab, at least for the time being. The third room would be a general-purpose practice and training space.

I spent the next morning acquiring some doors, basic furnishings and supplies, and one sturdier, reinforced door to block off the obelisk room. It probably wouldn't deter Myria or Lito if they really felt like snooping, but it was an obvious sign that said "off limits".

After a night of meditation, Delve-shaping, and aura manipulation, I gained another level to my *Who Needs a Cleric?* aura skill, and a fresh point in Dungeoneering. Working with Grotto on the Delve, in addition to our projects over the last couple of weeks, raised my Bonded Familiar skill to five.

Satisfied that I had the requisite furnishings and fixtures for my expanded Closet, I spent the afternoon doing something I *really* should have done earlier.

I went gear shopping.

Lito and Myria were happy to provide me with a few recommendations, and they both agreed that my best bet to find quality gear for my "early career" was a place called Seinnador's Combat Regalia. Lito and Xim accompanied me to the store, then moved on to make some purchases of their own while I perused. Lito made it clear that anyone trying to make trouble with me inside of Seinnador's was "gonna' get made into a pair of boots."

Seinnador's was a larger shop than I'd imagined. I was expecting a cramped space full of racks of weapons and armor, but the floor plan was much cleaner. It was closer to a high-end collector's boutique than what I imagined as a standard medieval fantasy front. It was about the size of a small department store, gently lit, with rows of neat and clean display cases lined with glow-stones and presenting a variety of different types of equipment. It seemed the idea was for you to pick the particular style of item you'd like, and then it would be custom-made to your specifications. Larger items, like halberds and greatbows, lined the walls behind a lengthy counter that ran along three sides of the

shop. The countertop was made of glass, under which a wide array of smaller items, such as daggers, jewelry, and gadgets, were displayed.

Seinnador himself was a level sixty Delver, equal parts silver and copper. Like his store, he also defied my expectations. He was distinctly *not* Hiwardian, standing well over seven feet and with a willowy, yet graceful frame. Two small antlers extended out from his scalp, parting a long and lustrous mane of hair the color of red clay, which ran down over a pair of pointed and furred ears, similar to a deer's. His skin was a deep tan with a reddish hue, and he had a wide, flat nose, much larger than a human's. He wore an immaculate suit which evoked a sense of forestry and wildlife with organic patterns and leafy edges. He looked up from a ledger as I entered, and watched me approach the counter with a pair of sparkling, slate-gray eyes. There was no one else in the store.

"Welcome to Seinnador's Combat Regalia," he said in a smooth voice with slightly musical undertones. "I am the eponymous Seinnador. Whose acquaintance do I have the pleasure of making, this afternoon?" He held a hand to his chest, palm up, and gave a small bow as he spoke.

"Esquire Arlo Xor'Drel," I said, deciding that his formal address was worth a full name in response.

"Yes, yes, wonderful," he said with a slight grin, managing to sound pleasantly surprised by the information. "I presume that makes you of the Third Layer."

"Yes, though it's a recent move. Haven't had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the new motherland quite yet."

Seinnador's eyebrows crept up the slightest bit, and he gazed intently into my eyes.

"But you have already been touched by the Eye. I see. Yes, yes. So do you as well, it would seem." He chuckled, though I wasn't precisely sure what the joke was. The sound also caught me a bit flat-footed, as it was made up of more than one tone and created a light harmony.

He caught my look of confusion, and as I opened a mouth to try and formulate a response he held up a hand to stop me, then bowed again.

"My sincerest apologies, Esquire Arlo. My comments have danced out of step with you. Yes, yes. Before we proceed, is esquire the title you prefer? One of the Third Layer may also be addressed as low-lord or simply lord in this kingdom."

"Feel free to call me Arlo."

“As you will it, Arlo. You are not familiar with the Eye?”

“I believe it to be an anatomical feature primarily concerned with sight, though it seems you are speaking of something else.”

“I am, it is true. The Eye is one of the seven divine organs of Sam’lia. The distinct appearance of your own eyes is often considered a mark of Her blessing. The solid black of your sclera combined with the hint of an endless starry expanse within your iris is known by several names, though the one I am most fond of is The Witness.”

“And here I was just thinking they were cool.”

“I also find them striking. Yes, yes. The seven. Are they the organs of a god or are each of them a god unto themselves?”

I hadn’t expected a theological discussion heading into the store and, though the information was interesting, I didn’t have much time to spare getting into the fine details of doctrine with the gentleman. Besides, if I needed to know more about whatever “The Eye” was, I’m sure Xim had a whole host of thoughts on the matter, since she was a literal cleric of the entity, or at least the entity that it was a part of.

Seinnador had taken to staring off into space while I processed his information and tried to figure out a tactful way to move the conversation somewhere more productive.

“I imagine your craft exposes you to many fascinating aspects of mythos and the arcane,” I said. The man *did* sell magic gear to Delvers who had access to literal divine magic, after all.

“Enough so that if I were to know all that I wished for, I would have three heads!” He swept a lock of hair over one shoulder and settled his gaze back upon me. “Your eyes are but one of many unique attributes that must be considered when producing bespoke equipment for the discerning lord or lady. It does not seem you’ve a special need in that regard, unless you have manifested a gift as a result?”

“I don’t think so? What kind of gift?”

“The whims of the gods are unknowable, though I would presume it is something to do with sight.” He held his hands out in a gesture that I took to be the equivalent of a shrug.

“I don’t *think* I have any new sight-related abilities.”

“Then I fear I have misguided our conversation, and I lack the means to unlock a blessing.” His own eyes drifted down to my boa, then quickly darted to my vest.

“No worries, though I *am* in need of some guidance on equipment,” I said, abandoning my attempt at a graceful transition.

“C’thonic,” he said. I looked down at my chest, where he continued to stare at my boa and vest.

“That is an accurate statement.”

“May I inspect them?” He locked onto me with another intense gaze.

“Feel free.”

Seinnador reached out and ran a hand across the blue and violet feathers. He had two thumbs and his fingers were exceptionally long, even considering his height, with an extra knuckle on each digit. Seinnador then touched the deep blue leather vest so lightly that I couldn’t even feel it through the soft garment. A gentle light danced in his eyes, and he let out another multi-tonal chuckle which quickly grew into a full-bellied laugh. He brought his hand back to wipe a tear away.

“The descriptions!” he said. His reaction reminded me that both items contained not-so-subtle innuendos concerning my sexual proclivities and aspects of my personal anatomy. “These are rewards handed out by a Delve?!”

“They are indeed.”

“I have seen some flavorful descriptions in the past, but these place highly on my list of the unusual. Have you had these inspected by a craftsman with *System Insight* before?”

“I don’t even know what *System Insight* is, so no.”

“Oh, you poor child of the deep! You know not what you possess.” He took a deep breath, shaking his head. “*System Insight* is a skill most craftsmen unlock and hone to varying degrees. We are able to view some of the more nuanced information about an item. Tell me, has this vest or boa ever been soiled?”

I thought about my experience in the post-Delve spa where I’d found the vest and boa to be spotless, despite being worn over my otherwise filth-ridden body.

“Not that I remember.”

“How about damage? Any holes or tears? Has this boa even lost a feather?”

“You know, now that I think about it, I did fight twelve members of an organized crime ring all at once yesterday. These both came out the other side of that unharmed.”

“A curious way to spend the day, but I am not one to judge. Yes, yes. These items both have a form of the ‘immutable’ property. It is a durability enhancement with many intriguing uses, but it requires a rather rare essence to craft.”

“What all does it do?”

“It prevents the item from being changed, more or less. There are limits, of course, as with all mana-woven properties. It is similar in structure to different ‘resistance’ weaves, like fire resistance, pierce resistance, and so on. I like to describe it as *reality* resistance, though that characterization is somewhat flawed. I’ve yet to find a better term, however.” He drummed his lengthy fingers on the counter and stared off into the distance again. “It changes as its concept demands, but changes not for concepts that seek to change *it*. Perhaps... *conceptual* resistance?”

My brain did some backflips trying to figure out how that would even work, or what the limits of an ability like that would be.

“Does dirt being *on* something really change it though? I mean, this vest can be washed. The dirt isn’t becoming a part of the leather. Does it create some sort of... causality field that prevents anything from gathering within range of creating a molecular bond... or something?” I struggled to put my thoughts into words, as I had a no-good-really-bad understanding of subatomic physics and the general science of very small things. My comprehension was also based on rules from an entirely different dimension, so I was assuredly out of my depth.

“Hmm, I believe you are trying to ascribe scientific principles to a magically imbued item. The practice can be useful for certain types of mana-weaves and item attributes, but at a certain point it all breaks down and leaves the Men of Letters weeping.”

“If this vest is immutable-”

Seinnador held up a finger.

“*Sort of* immutable,” he corrected, then gestured for me to continue.

“If this vest is *sort of* immutable, will it stop an arrow? Or a knife? Does it ignore things like heat generated from friction? Why is it blue, and not black? Or should it be white, since it reflects light, rather than absorbs it?”

“Excellent questions, but you misunderstand the nature of the property. It will do the things you expect a leather vest to do, in addition to the effects listed in its description. The same for the boa.”

I squinted at Seinnador, trying to decide if that meant my items had some sort of entity making conscious decisions about what constituted normal leather-vest things, and what didn't. Maybe it relied on my *own* understanding of the item?

"Perhaps it is better to show you," Seinnador said, seeing me wind up with more questions.

He walked down the length of the counter to where it was fitted with a hip-height door and opened it, waving for me to join him. Once I was behind the counter, Seinnador waved a hand and the back wall of the store became translucent, exposing a large workshop beyond, which was full of tables and shelves covered with in-progress weapons, armor, and trinkets. A pair of women walked between the tables, taking down notes or depositing jars and pouches of an array of unidentifiable substances next to the projects. Near the back were three beefy men working a forge and hammering away at lengths of metal. There was also a large space cleared of anything, though the stone floor and the wall beyond were riddled with scorch marks, divots, and cracks.

Seinnador walked through the semi-transparent wall, and I walked behind him, feeling a gentle sensation of pressure as I went through. Once on the other side I looked back, finding the view of the storefront completely unobstructed, as though no wall existed at all.

It was pretty impressive. I thought I might want to consider the idea for the Closet.

*[It would be a wonderful mechanism for spying on intruders,] Grotto spoke into my mind. [Perhaps it could also hide a small chamber full of mana-monsters. Or maybe a wall full of arrow traps.]*

*[No illusory walls full of hidden dangers.]*

*[Then what did you want it for?]*

*[I thought it might be badass to put a lounge behind it. On one side is a dining hall where guests can enjoy a tasty meal, then the wall melts away to reveal a well-appointed sitting room complete with a fully stocked bar. Coffee and desert to be served there as well.]*

*[Are we building a Delve or a penthouse?]*

*[You do what you want with your half, I'll do what I want with mine. Besides, I already have a penthouse. This will be a magic penthouse.]*

I ignored Grotto's subsequent grumbling, and followed Seinnador deeper into his workshop.