

In order to investigate potential real estate acquisitions, it is important to look the part.

Although my feather boa and leather vest weren't likely to hinder my progress in that regard given their magical nature, the inexpensive pants, shoes, and general dishevelment of my hair and beard weren't likely to do me any favors. As such, I chose to visit a tailor to acquire clothes for a variety of occasions, assisted at great length by a lovely woman named Lesi, purveyor of the aptly named Lesi's Garments and Garb.

I then went to a cordwainer (distinct from a cobbler, basically just a fancy kind), where Baerno of Baerno's Boots and Footwear provided me with shoes for a variety of occasions.

I then visited a general store whose owner was rude and unhelpful and as such, shall not receive a shout-out herein. There I acquired a number of personal goods that I later found to be of insufficient quality and which were quickly replaced.

In any event, having purchased a number of crucial items for my societal endeavors, I chose to spend the evening having a relaxed meal. This resulted in Grotto taking the opportunity to harangue me further with petitions to begin building a new Delve.

[Let's assume that I got on board with making a Delve,] I thought as I dipped a piece of warm brown bread into a delicious, meaty stew. [Where would you even make it? You mentioned the Pocket Closet, but I still don't know how that would work.]

[It requires additional study, which we could have accomplished by now had we not spent the afternoon frolicking from store to store purchasing pointless costumes.]

[Never underestimate the power of a good fit, Grotto. Despite what people want you to believe, everyone judges a book by its cover, at least at first. Bias is a necessary shortcut to enable the brain to perform expedient processing of environmental information. Being able to influence that bias before I even speak to someone provides a profound advantage when dealing with others.]

[A *deception*.]

[More like a promise. If I *look* like I have money, I'm making a promise to the person who sees me that I have deep pockets. If I *do* have money, that's not a deception, it simply avoids the matter of proving that I am a man of means through social niceties before getting on with business. There's also a subtle psychological edge. People treat you better if you appear in a manner they find pleasing. Anyone that tells you otherwise is naive. Clothes are highly valuable in social situations, and having different styles for different encounters is worth the time and effort of acquiring them.]

*[Regardless, the nuance of your strategies when interacting with the citizens of this land are less important than accruing **power**.]*

[Grotto, do you know the easiest way to get something you want? Be it power, money, or anything else?]

[*What?*]

[You ask for it.]

[Somehow I doubt that it is so simple.]

[Of course that's an oversimplification. The lesson in the sentiment is that in order to accomplish most things as a social organism one must engage effectively in the social hierarchy. You need people to enable you to accomplish your goals. No man is an island, as they say.]

[Hmm. If I required resources in the past, I would either acquire them myself, or submit a request to the System. There was none of this skullduggery involved.]

[Alas, you have bound yourself to a human, and as such, you must grow to learn the human ways.]

[Are you engaging in these 'human ways' or are you simply attempting to manipulate others with them?]

[You will quickly come to learn that those are both the same thing. Listen, I understand you're eager to get on with your Delve. Let me finish dinner and we'll rent a room and figure out this Pocket Closet skill. We can assess our Delve needs afterward.]

[*Very well.*]

I didn't stay in the mega-inn again, opting for a more modest room that ran me twenty silver notes a night. It was still nice, with its own bath and attached sitting room, but nowhere near the luxury I'd slept through the night before. Once I'd gotten situated, I finally acquiesced to Grotto's demands and spent one minute concentrating on opening the door to my new inventory dimension. A tear in space formed a thin, bright line about seven feet high, which stretched outward and created a doorway about five feet wide.

Through the door was a dark space with hundreds of glowing poison essences floating in a grid along the wall. When I walked into the room, it became filled with a low level of light with no discernable source. A notification window appeared.

You have entered your Pocket Closet! You have gained access to the Pocket Closet interface.

Pocket Closet Interface:

Quick Access space: 1,000 cubic meters

Total Closet space: 2,000 cubic meters (20m X 20m X 5m)

You may meditate while inside the Closet to dedicate your mana regeneration toward increasing the space available.

Current cost to upgrade: 10 mana per cubic meter

Current features: None

At least it wasn't complicated. I walked around the edges of the room, which were lined by all the items in my inventory hovering in the air. Nine-hundred-and-one poison essences, four pairs of clothes, four pairs of shoes, miscellaneous personal goods, ruby and emerald chips, stacks of Hiwardian notes, and Hognay's backpack.

That last one reminded me that I was still carrying around the Bag of Refreshments slung over my shoulder, and hadn't investigated it yet. I reached out and Hognay's pack floated down from where it was hovering, the strap finding its way into my grip. I sat it on the ground, then turned to Grotto.

[Whaddy think?]

[The dimensional forces within this space are superb. Harnessing them would yield fertile mana upon which to seed a new Delve.]

At the mention of dimensional forces, I checked out my mana regeneration, which got a boost from absorbing dimensional energy. It was currently sitting at forty, which was the highest I'd ever seen it.

[Ok, so what do you want to do with a new Delve?]

[Many things can be accomplished. The only limitation is the availability of resources and the scruples of those engaging in the Delve's operation.]

[What was your old Delve for?]

[Aside from serving as a whetstone against which new Delvers were sharpened, it was, among other things, dedicated to the production of these essences you stole.]

[Acquired.]

[Looted.]

[Sure. So, we could use a Delve to grow more poison essences?]

[That is possible. You possess a significant amount of essences for use in seeding such an endeavor. Of course, the space required is more significant than what we are presented with here.]

[What about other types of essences?]

[Any essence is technically possible, though each requires its own particular conditions. Poison essence thrives in more toxic environments, which is why a portion of each essence's yield was dedicated to toxifying the air of the Delve.]

[Ah. So, for this to be an effective poison essence farm, we'd need to fill it up with poison fog again?]

[Or poisonous plants, venomous creatures, toxic materials, preferably all of the above.]

[I don't think I want to have my inventory sharing space with something like that.]

Grotto hovered over to a row of the floating items. He ran a feeler through the air around one of the essences.

[I believe this is a form of stasis. I doubt any items held in this quick access space would be affected or damaged by the external environment.]

[I still don't understand what you get out of this. Why do you want to make a Delve?]

[Why does a painter paint?]

[To express emotions. To reconcile trauma. To inspire others. To make money. Shall I continue?]

Grotto's eyes narrowed.

[I will grow in power alongside the Delve that I am linked to.]

[I see. Is that your long term escape plan? Get strong enough to mind control me or something?]

[You misunderstand. We are linked to one another. I already grow stronger when you acquire power. I expect the same can be said from the other direction.]

[You're saying that I can draw energy from a new Delve?]

[Perhaps.]

[What form of power? More stats?]

[Stats are enticing, but may be an inefficient use of a new facility. It can take many years to harness enough mana to provide a platinum level stat boost. It would also grant you a new Delver level, while draining much of the accumulated power within the Delve. You may as well just go conquer a new Delve.]

[What about chips, how do those work?]

[Mana can be condensed into chips. This can be accomplished through the ambient mana absorption of the Delve, though it is more effective to gather the mana from living organisms.]

[What kind of organisms?]

[The most lucrative kinds are other Delvers.]

[Aside from that.]

[Mana monsters. They are drawn to high mana regions, and sometimes arise within them naturally. They consume mana for food, and naturally condense it within themselves over time.]

[Is that what the C'thon was doing?]

[No. A C'thon is a mana fiend. They do not consume mana for food, but gorge themselves on it to grow stronger. To a mana monster, mana is sustenance that allows it to grow naturally according to its nature as a creature. There is an organismal upper limit, such as how a human will grow no stronger for having eaten three breakfasts every day once they are an adult. A mana fiend often consumes other materials for food, such as meat, but can fill itself with mana to grow stronger endlessly.]

[Since Delves apparently absorb mana from these Delves to grow stronger, but require other resources to live, like food, does that make Delves mana fiends?]

Grotto stopped waving his tentacles through the air, then floated to me.

[An interesting conclusion.]

He then went to the middle of the space, and looked up. *[I would prefer the ceiling to be higher, but I can begin assembling a basic obelisk in this space. It can begin by harvesting the ambient dimensional mana. Then we can work on ways to improve the density of mana.]*

[Can Delves just be built anywhere, then? I thought they were all underground.]

[A Delve needs only be in a location of suitable mana density.]

[You still didn't answer my earlier question. If stats and chips aren't the best use of the Delve, then what am I getting out of it?]

He turned back to me, dark eyes glittering.

[Manufacturing.]

I dug through Hognay's pack as I ran Grotto's ideas through my head. He'd pitched using the Delve to engineer additional automated functions, such as the poison essence farm with its harvester bots. It would take a while to get something like that running, and a lot of time and materials, but being able to passively produce a preselected good would definitely be useful.

I was a big fan of passive income.

Grotto also hinted that there may be other things that can be made that are of greater utility than simply money-producing goods. We'd just have to figure out the best utility, based on how the obelisk functioned once online and after Grotto had spent more time within the space, to gauge its suitability for different use-cases.

The only weird thing was that he kept talking about all the traps he was going to install.

There wasn't much inside Hognay's pack, aside from some dirty clothes and a variety of camping and mountaineering supplies. I separated the items into one pile to keep and one pile to burn to ashes, lest any of Hognay's stank infect my new inventory space. There was one item that interested me, which was a stack of envelopes bundled together with twine. Inside each was a letter written in a script I didn't understand. Either it was a language I hadn't yet learned, or it was some kind of code. I went over them for half an hour or so, before giving up deciphering them and deciding they'd be better off in the hands of Lito or someone else associated with the upcoming inquisition.

I opened the Bag of Refreshments and emptied out the contents. It was all food goods, like I'd seen before. Bread, cheese, dried meats, fruit and nut mix, and a canteen full of something. I pulled the cork out of the top and sniffed. It smelled like water. I poured some out onto my hand. It looked like water. I took a sip. Tasted like water. I checked my bars to make sure I didn't get any debuffs, but I doubted Hognay was the type to go to such extreme lengths to booby trap his own food. Still, better safe than sorry. No debuff was forthcoming. Guess it was just water.

I munched on some of the food, keeping an eye out for debuffs again. They were simple, but tasty. Nothing I'd turn down at a party if found on a charcuterie board. In fact, this was all the essentials for a decent board. Maybe some honey, a softer cheese, and a bottle of wine. Bam! Charcuterie. I'd be able to pretend I was sophisticated in front of my overeducated friends who worked at Starbucks during the day while laboring over their conceptual jazz-folk fusion album at night.

I went over the list of materials Grotto needed to get started, still trying to decide if I really wanted to let him do this. From what I'd heard and seen so far, the Delves in and of themselves didn't seem too nefarious. If anything, they provided huge benefits to Hiwardian society, and were necessary for Delvers to get stronger.

They were dangerous, sure, and I knew Grotto was still keeping a host of secrets from me, but I was more curious than anything. I kept munching on my pilfered snacks and before I knew it, they were all gone. I drank down the last of the water in the canteen and stuffed it back into the bag, wondering how something like that could be considered a spatial item. There was no more secret food hidden inside, and the interior was

exactly as big as it looked from the outside, so no Dr. Who hijinks going on. Figuring it out went on The List,, and I got ready to call it for the night.

[Grotto,] I thought to the Core as I went back outside to my rented room, [I'm heading to bed. You staying in there?]

[*Yes. There is much I must continue to observe.*]

[What if the door disappears when I go to sleep?]

[*Then I will wait for you to awaken in the morning.*]

[Think there's oxygen in there when it closes?]

[*I do not require oxygen.*]

[What about all your C'thon bits?]

He paused at that.

[*I will take the risk.*]

I shrugged. He could decide for himself. He was an adult. I think.

I crawled into the more reasonably-sized bed, which was still extremely comfortable, and went to sleep.