

We returned to the strategy of keeping most of the party inside the Closet while Nuralie scouted ahead. The Operator moved with her, able to stealth using its own methods. Nuralie may have grown up in these swamps, but The Operator had called it home for much, much longer. It knew exactly how to move through the terrain.

We made it close to the encampment without running into any further trouble. Between Nuralie's advance scouting and my Soul-Sight, we avoided a couple of basic patrols, but the Littans didn't seem concerned with catching a small group. I expected the watches they held were designed to keep from being surprised by an advancing army.

After observing the movements of the sparse patrols for a while, Nuralie guided Shog and me forward using Grotto's psychic link. We stopped a few hundred feet from the edge of the camp. We couldn't see anything through the thick foliage, but The Operator assured us the camp was there. The Architect possessed a sense for anything close to one of the constructs it was responsible for guarding, and since the Littan encampment was built around the Delve entrance, the entity had a good understanding of its bounds.

I opened the Closet, and we started our preparations in earnest.

"You're sure you want to sneak around the perimeter?" I asked as I handed a heavy pack to Nuralie. It was full of various goodies for her to distribute around the northwestern side of the Littan camp, which would hopefully help to obscure our approach from the south.

"The only reason the last group saw me is because Grotto started flailing through the brush before splashing down into the water," said Nuralie. She eyed the mini-c'thon as she deposited the pack into her own inventory. I handed her two more.

[*See how you react to the spiritually transmitted pain of your head exploding,*] Grotto thought to us. He crossed his feelers and gave Nuralie an octo-sowl. [*I cannot help that I am bonded to a man who insists on suffering life-threatening injuries every second sunrise.*]

"It's not like I'm *trying* to get hurt," I said, eliciting several doubtful expressions from the group.

"Khigra might disagree," said Xim with a grin. "How did you deal with *that*, Grotto?"

[*His training with the dominatrix did not communicate as... pain. It came across as—*]

I cleared my throat. "Moving on," I said. "Shog, are you confident that you won't be seen?"

***“Any true predator knows how to take advantage of the shadows,”*** he purred. It sent a tingle down my spine. I nodded, then handed him two packs of his own, which he stuffed behind his tentacles.

“Then the rest of us will wait for Nuralie to return before moving in,” I said.

“Wait,” said Etja. She’d been gazing into the forest since we came to a stop, but now turned her eyes to the soil and knelt. She ran the fingers of her lower pair of hands over the muddy turf, fingertips glowing blue. “It’s faint, but I can feel a ward.”

“Wards?” asked Varrin, looking urgently at the ground. “Have we triggered them?”

“It’s only one, and no, we aren’t in its area of effect yet,” said Etja. “I think that it’s surrounding the camp.”

“One ward?” said Varrin. “Surrounding the *entire* camp?”

“That’s a big ward,” said Xim. “Or a small camp.”

“The camp encompasses several square miles,” said The Operator.

“No single ward is that large,” said Varrin. “To cover an area that big would require using many smaller wards in unison.”

Etja shrugged.

“Don’t know what to tell ya’,” she said. “It’s one really big ward.”

“Can you discern its function?” I asked.

“Not until I’m closer.”

“Think it’s something you can deal with?”

“I can probably shield us from its effects if everyone stays close to me. The ward is huge, but I don’t think it’s super strong. Still, disrupting the entire thing would take a *lot* of mana. Way more than I have.”

“Will it cause problems for Nuralie and Shog while they set things up?”

“Not if they stay outside of the camp itself,” said Etja. “The problem will come once we’re inside.”

“Another minor inconvenience,” I muttered. “Doesn’t change much. We’ve all got out marching orders.” I turned to The Operator. “What do you plan on doing?”

“I’ll engage the Level 34,” it said, before stepping away into the forest and disappearing.

“Power move,” said Xim.

I turned to give Nuralie and Shog the go-ahead, but both of them had already disappeared as well.

“Did anyone know Shog could be that sneaky?” I asked.

*[The mana fiend’s abilities have grown considerably since encountering the specter and even more so since consuming Yaretzi. His intelligence has always been unusually high for a c’thon, but I suspect he has also gained access to something analogous to intrinsic skills.]*

“What, and he put levels in stealth?” I asked.

*[He survived for months within his own dimension after being grievously wounded by the specter and came out of it even more powerful. We do not know what methods he employed to slay the countless other c’thons that sought to consume him while he was in a weakened state.]*

“Fair enough,” I said.

*[With his rate of growth, it will not be long before he is powerful enough to become a brood king in his realm.]*

My brow knitted at the thought but decided not to enter the rabbit hole Grotto was inviting me down into.

“I don’t want to count entirely on the distractions,” I said. “I also don’t want to go on a wholesale slaughter through the Littans. Whatever price the Empire might have on our heads at the moment, we should try to make sure it doesn’t go much higher. So, does anybody have any fresh crowd-control tactics?”

“I picked up a new active,” said Xim. “It’s a fear ability, but it’s nowhere big enough to affect a whole camp full of people.”

*[I may be able to help with that.]*

“Oh?” I said, looking at Grotto. “Do tell.”

*[I considered your advice to work on a skill for use outside of Delve management. My capabilities are ill-suited for raw combat, but I have developed a method that can augment any mind-affecting abilities used by a party member.]*

“Hmm. Take little fear and make it big fear?”

“Works for me,” said Xim.

“I also have something I can try,” said Varrin. “If it doesn’t work, I can punch people instead of cutting them in half.”

“I’ll probably be focused on countering the ward,” said Etja.

“And I will... block things, I guess,” I said. I really didn’t have a great CC ability. I could knock people around with Gravity Anchor, but that wasn’t ideal for the upcoming scenario.

After discussing things a little further, we quickly settled into vigilant silence as we waited for Nuralie to return. After about an hour, the loson reappeared, and we were ready to start moving.

The camp itself was like a scar in the middle of the swamp. The Littans had clear cut all of the trees and burned away the brush and vegetation, the edges of the clearing covered in char and soot. Hundreds of tons of earth had been moved, raising the camp a foot above ground level and filling in any standing pools of water. It was packed down and firm, the excess moisture within the dirt burned away in the same manner as the greenery, evidenced by its dark, scorched surface. The smell of ash filled my nostrils as we watched a hundred Littan Delvers prepare for war.

Most were level 10 and under, equal parts silver and copper, but there were a handful of golds around level 15. Two groups near the edges of the camp worked on large siege weapons—what looked like massive, mobile ballistas, covered in runes and thrumming with power. There were a variety of other mana-enhanced and mechanical devices sitting on racks around the groups that I suspected to be advanced or experimental weaponry. A few looked uncomfortably close to rifles. The other Delvers were scattered between orderly campsites and training grounds arrayed around a large central command tent.

The entrance to the Delve was supposed to be at the center of the camp. Since we couldn’t see any obvious Delve entrance, I assumed it was *inside* the command tent, which was wonderful.

Outside of the command tent stood an unfamiliar level 17 with lustrous amber fur, wearing ornate armor of white and gold. The way she directed the other Littans and how they kowtowed to her told me she was someone important; more important than her level might suggest. She also had an incredible presence to her that practically

saturated the air. Even from hundreds of feet away, I could feel the pull of a massive Charisma score on my mind.

“That is without a doubt the most beautiful Littan I’ve ever seen,” whispered Xim. I raised an eyebrow at her but chose not to comment.

“I’m stealing that hair color,” whispered Etja.

“I believe that is the duchess Tavio mentioned,” said Varrin. “That armor bears the royal crest of Seqaria, along with what looks like an important Littan house.” I saw his jaw work a bit as he thought something over. “Perhaps there’s a political solution to this matter. I could try and speak with her—”

“Guys,” I whispered harshly. “Snap out of it. She hasn’t even made a social attack yet.”

Varrin frowned but nodded, and Xim shrugged. Etja’s hair had already begun changing to a golden hue.

Before we had time to become more enamored by the distant Littan, the first of our distractions went off.

The launchers that Nuralie had designed weren’t just for hurtling glow stones at the walls and ceilings of pitch-dark Delves. They also worked for launching all sorts of other things. She’d even been able to develop a rudimentary mechanical timer to allow them to fire after a set period.

The first set of launchers fired half a dozen of the Dazzlers developed and sold by Seinnador. These were not normal Dazzlers, however, these were Nuralie-modified *Super Dazzlers*.

Six payloads shot out of the canopy and into the air, arcing toward the Littan camp. The shots themselves were fairly silent, no louder than a powerful crossbow, so only a scant few of the enemy Delves noticed the mystery objects sailing toward their camp. Of those, only one had the presence of mind to shout out a warning.

As several more Delves looked around to find the source of their comrade’s concern, each of the Super Dazzlers broke into six regular Dazzlers, which spread out as they descended onto the camp. A couple of spells intercepted the individual projectiles, but most of them landed throughout the northwestern quarter of the camp, and then exploded into bursts of sound and light.

I averted my eyes as the cluster of Dazzlers rocked the Littan Delves, the cacophonous blasts overlapping one another and making it sound like an airstrike had just landed on

the camp. The Dazzlers were non-lethal—to Delvers, at least—but they were enough to blind and deafen anyone with low Fortitude, while seriously disorienting hardier individuals if they were close enough. Needless to say, that got the Littan camp stirred up.

Dozens of Littan Delvers clutched at their eyes and ears, with several on the ground, some unconscious. The rest of the camp burst into action, with defensive skills flaring and buffs being cast. The flap of the command tent was practically torn away as a scarred, broad-shouldered Littan in military regalia burst through and appraised the situation. It was the level 34.

In Hiward, there was only a handful of Delvers over level 30. Delvers who pursued a full career delving gold generally made it to level 26. To reach higher required one to tackle at least some levels at platinum. A 'normal' platinum progression went through the first 30 levels at platinum, then dropped down to gold because the escalating difficulty of the Delves made it too dangerous to continue. So, to reach level 34, a Hiwardian Delver would conquer 30 platinum Delves and then 8 gold Delves. The most powerful Delvers in all of Hiward had followed that path.

This Littan had *not* followed that path.

He was level 34, and his soul held violet-streaked platinum without a *hint* of gold.

A wave of mana erupted from the man's body and flooded the battlefield. It rippled out over the entire northwestern quadrant of the camp and cascaded into the woods. At first, I couldn't tell what it had done, but then a simple, worn longbow appeared in the man's grip, and ten arrows fired out into the forest toward a single point. The world was rocked with explosions that put the Dazzlers to shame.

Trees fell as rocks and dirt were thrown a hundred feet into the air under the onslaught. All ten arrows homed in on one spot at an unseen target, laying waste to a significant chunk of wild swampland. As the debris fell back to Arzia, clattering and splashing through mist and dust, a figure blasted out into the camp.

The Operator's arms were blades, his legs and feet were elongated like a mutated cheetah, and his passage was so fast that it shattered the bodies of Delvers in his path. As he rushed the platinum Littan, the man fired another dozen arrows, but the Operator knocked them aside with his blades in a flurry of strikes too fast to see. The arrows ricocheted across the camp, striking the ground with the force of mortar shells and sending Delvers flying. A look of consternation briefly crossed the Littan's face, and then he disappeared.

A massive pair of wings made of bone and flesh erupted from The Operator's back, and it rose into the air, kicking up a storm of wind in its wake. I looked up to see the Littan a hundred feet in the air, wielding a large pair of scimitars. The Operator rose to meet him, and a shockwave heralded their clash.

As the titans fought, two familiar figures emerged from the tent. Tavio stumbled out wearing his full plate armor and holding his radiant spear, but he looked worse for wear. He leaned on his spear for support, and I noticed that his soul was infected by sinister, dark lines. Gharifon followed soon after and looked up at the fight above with a scowl. He quickly turned to survey the treeline, however, ignoring the epic duel.

As the rest of the Littan Delver camp gaped at the spectacle above, part two of our distraction began.

Another series of launchers fired payloads of a modified edition of Nuralie's Night-Rush Potion. It was the potion Varrin used when he wanted a little extra spunk during combat, giving him a massive boost to damage at the cost of going a bit bananas. This version had been brewed with less of a focus on the damage while leaning more heavily into the herbaceous fruit portion of the concoction.

In other words, it was a berserker potion.

It had also been formulated to vaporize on contact with air, allowing it to be delivered via a lovely cloud of rage-inducing mist.

Six bottles of Nuralie's Bad-Night Potion entered the fray. The Littan's were on the lookout for surprises by this point, and half of the bottles were destroyed by spells and techniques before making it close. The other three either detonated in the air over the camp or made it to the ground where they billowed out into angry fog. While the potion wasn't strong enough to make the Littans begin tearing each other to pieces, it put them into an acutely agitated mindset, which primed them for part 3 of the distraction.

Shog had many tentacles, and we'd given him bags full of many offensive potions. This made the c'thon an automatic turret of bad news, which he began spreading throughout the Littan camp.

Glass vials flew out from the forest at a rate of at least five a second, creating effects ranging from disabling gas, to smoke screens, to mundane infernos. A few exploded into bursts of sparkling, multi-colored sand that stuck to skin and fur. That was something Nuralie devised after I explained to her the concept of glitter bombs. They didn't have any true combat utility, other than keeping the Littans on their toes and making bath time a fucking nightmare.

Once random bursts of inconvenience began raining from the woods, the score of Littans affected by the Bad Night began rushing out of the camp and toward the hidden c'thon, slinging long-range spells and techniques with abandon.

While the devastation was centered on the unfortunate souls in the northwestern quarter, many of the Delvers spread throughout the rest of the camp began moving toward the attack. None were so foolish as to walk into the area plagued by Nuralie's chemical genius, but many spread out to flank the enemy from the north and south.

Ideally, *all* of the Littans would have been fixated on the madness, but the group had enough discipline to watch for other potential avenues of attack. Squad commanders held their members back and barked orders, keeping a token watch on the rest of the camp's borders. We'd done a lot to thin out the herd between ourselves and the command tent, but there were still a substantial number of Littans in the way of our objective.

We'd planned for this, however, and so long as the big daddy platinum stayed occupied with The Operator, we were prepared to (non-lethally) carve a path to the Delve's entrance.

"Figured the ward out yet?" I asked.

"It's an alarm and a mana-dampener," said Etja. "Alarm part doesn't matter, since they clearly know we're here. The mana-dampener will make our spells bad. It will also keep you from teleporting."

"Can you handle it?"

She nodded with determination.

"Good. Time to roll."

We all stood. Etja held her staff in her upper pair of hands while blue mana danced in her lower pair. She used Nullify to create a sphere of ward-breaching energy around our group.

Xim cracked her knuckles as Grotto floated over to land on her shoulder. The cleric led the group in front, crimson flames smoldering across her body. She jumped out from the trees with the rest of us in tow, landing heavily in the middle of one of the remaining squads.

"Wanna see something cool?" she asked, then raised a hand to the sky.



The icon of a beating heart appeared above us, wrapped in divine fire and emitting a wave of dread with every pulse.