

I wasn't.

Well, at least I *thought* I wasn't.

In my highschool days I'd spent a year on the football team and had gotten used to communal showers. That carried into freshman year of college where every guy on the floor of my dorm had the same five shower stalls to use, and no one was very shy about 'grooming' themselves in full view of others. I'd also had a series of medical mishaps in my late twenties that had me see a variety of medical professionals while I was in various levels of undress and which required them to insert a number of digits into different...orifices of my body. On top of that, my family wasn't prudish growing up, and I couldn't count the number of times my parents would hit up the kitchen in the buff. It still grossed me out as a kid, but being naked was never weird to me the way it had been to some of my friends.

All that being said, I was definitely *not* prepared to take off all my clothes in front of a group of strangers in the middle of an upscale restaurant. The fact that they also had to take their own clothes off only made the matter a little more comfortable. Still, none of them seemed bothered by the act in the least, and I've always been good at adapting to new cultural norms. If anything, showing hesitance or discomfort when everyone else was treating this like a normal, everyday occurrence would make me stand out more than just stripping down and getting on with business. After all, if you're naked on a nude beach, it's only weird if you make it weird.

In any event I did my best not to take any inadvertent glances at Xim or Xorna, each of whom was as beautiful as the other, but they did not make the same effort. It's not that they leered at me or anything, they just looked from person to person as though we *weren't* naked, and I had to assume this was very common for them. Maybe they didn't wear clothes at all while they were in the Third Layer. If that were true, by joining their tribe I was about to get a crash course in being a nudist.

Still, I've been in far stranger—and more awkward—situations where my dick was out, so all things considered it didn't catch me off guard by much.

Nothing about Drel changed, though. Which meant that either he didn't have to disrobe for the ritual, or he'd been naked this whole time. The fact that his entire form was made up of the misty, night-time-sky substance seemed to support the latter conclusion. If he was wearing clothes, I couldn't tell, but he didn't have any manly bits hanging out.

The servants had brought out a large cloth that had a number of unfamiliar symbols drawn onto it. The ink looked fresh so I assumed this was something that they had only

just prepared. I sat on my knees in the center of the cloth, with Xim, Xorna, and a few of the servants kneeling in a semi-circle around me. Drel drifted over and hovered in front of me, holding a small, dark bowl. He ran a fingernail across his wrist, then held it over the bowl as his blood, pure white in color, ran out into it. It reminded me of the milky substance Synth's from the Alien series had within them.

Drel spent twenty minutes using the blood to draw runes and symbols over my body, from my forehead to the sole of my foot. It wasn't lost on me how often I'd had someone else's bodily fluids all up on me in the last twenty-four hours. Regardless, the process was unexpectedly relaxing. One of the servants had brought out a stringed instrument which they plucked in a shadowy corner, filling the room with dreamy tones. Xim, Xorna, and the servants hummed in different harmonies with the sound. Four censers smoldered, emitting a scent like honey and autumn leaves burning, and as Drel placed the last rune a sense of warmth and calm spread through me.

"We will invite you to our tribe," said Drel. "Your body may change. You may grow stronger. You may grow *stranger*. You may grow in ways you do not like. You may grow in ways that please you. Do you accept this?"

I hadn't been prepared for anything this elaborate, or for the idea that gaining citizenship might change me physically. I wondered how much his words were symbolic, and how much they reflected the potential for actual changes to my flesh. Still, I was digging the vibe of what was happening, so I decided to go with it.

"Yes."

"I will ask questions. You will answer them. You may decide to stay silent. You may walk away. If you do, you will not become part of the tribe. If you do, you will never again be invited. Do you accept this?"

"Yes."

"Are you Esquire Arlo of Earth?"

"I am."

"Do you wish to join the Third Layer?"

"I do."

"Do you wish to join the Xor'Drel tribe?"

"I do."

“Have you any family?”

“Not in this world.”

“Are there any others you wish to bring to the tribe?”

“No.”

[*Ahem.*]

“Well, I’m bringing Grotto,” I said. “If that needs to be expressly stated.”

Drel nodded, then continued.

“Are there any to sponsor you, Arlo?”

I hesitated, unsure how to reply.

“I will sponsor Arlo,” said Xim.

“On what grounds do you sponsor him?”

“He is brave and powerful,” said Xim. “If not for him, I would be dead.”

That praise made me more uncomfortable than the general nakedness did.

“You are well sponsored,” said Drel.

“He’s kind of funny too,” said Xim. “In his own way. Also, Grotto will fit in really well in the Third Layer.”

Drel looked to me, as though expecting some response.

*[I will not sabotage your workings with this Drel’gethed. Despite your failure to petition for my due consideration, I am eager to see how this ritual will grant us **power**. We will become the masters of many realms.]*

“Grotto is happy to join the tribe as well,” I said.

“This is good,” said Drel. “To be part of the tribe, the tribe must be part of you. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“You will grant your strength to the tribe. The tribe will grant its strength to you. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“When the tribe is in need, you will aid the tribe. When you are in need, the tribe will aid you. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“The tribe is part of you for life. Your life will forever be part of the tribe. Do you accept this?”

“I do.”

“I am Drel’gethed, patriarch of the Xor’Drel tribe. I have authority to speak for the tribe. The tribe accepts you, Esquire Arlo. Do you accept the tribe?”

“I do.”

“You will be given a new name. You will be known by this name from now unto eternity. Rise, and you will become Esquire Arlo Xor’Drel, of the Third Layer.”

I stood, and Drel took me by the shoulders. The runes painted across my body became hot, and the heat began to spread out across my skin. I felt a familiar sensation as the warmth entered my veins, making its way through my mana matrix. It was similar to the energy that flooded me after eating the ruby chips, but far more gentle, almost pleasant.

I felt the warmth flow into my eyes, and it left me blinking away tears as the heat gathered. After a moment, I wiped the moisture from my eyes and cheeks, finding Drel smiling at me. It was the first time I’d seen him smile, and he drew me into an embrace. Despite his ephemeral form, his body was hard and muscled, though there was a fluttering feeling when touching the shadow that enveloped him. I returned the hug, though less enthusiastically. It felt a little strange how tightly he gripped me for being someone I’d just met. Also, I was still naked.

After Drel released me I was then embraced by each of the tribe members who’d gathered in the ritual circle, including Xora and Xim. Xim was last, and she squeezed me so tight that my back popped. I laughed when she let me go.

“I guess a Fortitude of twenty-two doesn’t stop my back from cracking.”

“I’m just that strong,” she said, flexing a bicep. I could tell from her muscle tone that she’d put some of her new points into Strength.

“That was an experience,” I said. “So what happens now?”

“Now, we drink!” she said, then ran off to grab a pitcher of wine from a servant. Another attendant handed me my clothes, which I accepted happily. Xorna and a couple of the attendants had thrown on some silky-looking robes, though several others were speaking to one another, still nude. I wasn’t sure what the culture was, but Xim quickly returned with two goblets and a flagon.

“Do I put my clothes back on now?”

She poured a goblet and handed it to me, then poured one for herself.

“Do whatever you like,” she said, then held the cup up and we toasted.

Whether or not I spent the rest of the night naked with Xim and her tribe, who were now my tribe, isn’t important. What is important is that they welcomed me into their fold with enthusiasm and celebration. I hadn’t been in this world for long, but I had already begun to feel a sense of isolation as I stumbled through the Delve and the alien culture afterward. The suspicion from Lito hadn’t helped.

If I hadn’t become part of the Xor’Drel tribe, I’m not sure how far I would have let myself fall into that spiral. I’d descended into a pattern of self-isolation more than once in my life, so I could easily see it having gone that way. But, for now, in this moment, I was with people who now saw me as one of them. I thought I was doing pretty well for my first official day in a new world.

Maybe living in hell part time wouldn’t be so bad.

New Achievement! Adopted Son of the Xor’Drel Tribe

You have been made a part of the Xor’Drel tribe, and through the ritual of adoption have been imbued with the tribe’s essence. The power of Xor’Drel is written onto your soul. You gain the *Strength of Xor’Drel*.

***Strength of Xor’Drel:* Your Wisdom score counts as double when resisting effects that cause fear, induce mental trauma, or otherwise have a negative impact on the health and wellness of your psyche.**

A piece of the Xor’Drel tribe’s knowledge is passed on to you through this ritual. You acquire fluency in reading and writing the language Third Layer Common.

You have experienced powerful ritual magic that has had a profound impact on your mana matrix. Combined with your previous experience detecting the flow of mana within your body, you have acquired familiarity with Mystical Magic. Mystical magic is an adjacent school to Dimensional magic, and you may now acquire the Mystical Magic intrinsic skill.

***Mystical Magic:* Detect the ebb and flow of mana within yourself, others, and the objects that surround you. Mystical magic allows you to harness and manipulate this mana with ease and precision, enabling you to wield the power to create a number of effects.**

You have chosen to acquire the Mystical Magic intrinsic skill! You are granted the active skill *Dispel*.

***Dispel:* Temporarily disrupt the flow of mana within a spell, object, or person. This can cause spells to weaken, or be negated entirely. This can be used to halt the flow of magic within a magical item for a period of time, or to eliminate the magic completely. This can be used to momentarily disrupt a magical effect imbued within an individual.**

Mana Cost: Variable (Proportional to the mana being disrupted. Initial cost: 50% of mana disrupted. Higher levels of Mystical Magic increase efficiency).

Cooldown: None

Requirements: Mystical Magic intrinsic skill

After dinner and the afterparty, Xorna and Drel were kind enough to pay for my room at the inn where they were staying. It was a nice gesture, especially since calling the place an inn was a fierce understatement. It was more like a large mansion that rented out rooms the size of luxury apartments. It even came with a personal attendant that I could summon at any hour of the day or night to bring me whatever it was my heart desired. As it turns out, I could now easily afford to stay in the place via the power of my new net worth, but I wasn't going to turn down free stuff.

The amount of wealth I'd left the Delve with was substantial. Before leaving the facility around the Creation Delve, which I discovered was called the Temple of Creation, I was

required to submit my Delver fee at a teller desk near the exit. The rate was a flat ten percent based on the number of chips I'd acquired. Loot and other materials weren't taxed.

"Why not tax the loot as well?" I asked the young woman at the desk. I say young, but she could have been well into her forties for all I knew. She was level twenty-three with mostly silver Delves under her belt, based on her aura. That gave her forty-six stats to play with after the eighteen granted on creation. I knew that now, since Xim and Varrin had given me some insight as to how the Delve rewards worked after we finished deciding on how to approach the issue of my citizenship. Copper delves rewarded one stat point per Delve, with silver giving two, gold giving four, and platinum giving an outstanding eight.

Unfortunately, while I was able to figure out *how many* stats someone had based on their level and the types of Delves they'd completed, neither my HUD nor my Soul-Sight was able to provide me with a breakdown of someone's stat *distribution*. So, I was left guessing as to how many the teller had invested into Fortitude. I expected that with experience I'd become better equipped at using context clues to figure out someone's build.

"You get taxed when you sell it," she said. "All Delver transactions are taxed at a rate of ten percent when paid in chips, or twelve percent if paid in notes. Place your hand on the tablet and I can view the chips you earned inside."

I placed my hand on one of the cool, black slates of stone, and text etched itself into existence, displaying the chips I'd been allocated. Sixteen ruby chips and six emerald chips. The two ruby chips I'd consumed inside the Delve weren't counted. I wondered what other kinds of information these tablets could display. I started to ask the woman, but decided to look into it later.

"Wow," she said. "That's a good haul for a Creation Delve. I don't know that I've ever seen one give out this many rewards." She looked up from the tablet. "I don't even make this much in a high level silver, just so you know."

"I guess platinum Delves are lucrative," I said. Especially ones that had been taken over by an overleveled Delver and a giant octopus monster.

"Risk and reward," she said, then did a quick bit of math. "Your fee will come out to seven-point-six ruby chips. You can pay the fraction with notes, or I can take eight rubies and provide change."

"How many notes is the fraction worth?"

“One ruby chip exchanges for fifty golden notes, so point six would be thirty.”

I only had sixteen golden notes on me, so I opted for change, handing over half of my ruby chips and receiving twenty golden notes in return.

“I can also exchange more chips for you if you like,” she said.

“I’m afraid that I’m not very familiar with the Hiward economy. How much is one of these golden notes worth?”

“One golden note is roughly equivalent to ten imperial gold coins at the moment,” she said, which was less than helpful. On Earth, a gold coin weighing one ounce was worth something like eighteen-hundred bucks. But gold hadn’t held that much value for a significant portion of earth history, and the weight of historical coins varied. Even if I assumed this world valued gold in a similar manner to earth, the buying power of an imperial gold coin could mean anything.

“How about this,” I said. “How many days could I feed myself with one golden note?”

“Hmm,” she said, running the numbers in her head. “One silver note can feed a peasant family of five for a day, so it varies based on the quality of food you’re talking about.”

“Peasant quality works as a baseline,” I said.

“Alright. One golden note is worth one hundred silver notes, so you could feed a peasant family for one hundred days.”

I had thirty-six golden notes, which meant that I could reasonably expect to stay fed with that for the next ten years, assuming I spent as much as a five person peasant family on myself. She’d also said that one ruby chip was worth fifty golden notes, which meant the least valuable chip could feed a small-to-medium family for something like fourteen years.

“Based on the tax, I’m assuming that an emerald chip is worth ten ruby chips?”

“You got it,” she said, smiling.

After tax, I had eight ruby chips and six emerald chips. So, the equivalent of sixty-eight ruby chips, or thirty-four-hundred golden notes which were the same as thirty-four-thousand golden coins. I didn’t know how many coins fit in a typical treasure chest, but I was betting I could fill at least one with that much booty. At that point, measuring wealth by the value of food lost its meaning. I needed a better measuring

stick, but I didn't think grilling this teller over Hiwardian economics would be the most efficient method of research.

"Thanks," I said. "Can the chips be used as currency themselves?"

"They can," she said. "Especially here in the Formation district. Most of the Delver economy functions on chips."

That meant Delver transactions dealt with fairly large sums of money on average.

"I think I'll trade one more ruby in for notes, then I'm good."

She made the exchange, and I was now walking around with eighty-six golden notes in my inventory, along with several hundred silver and copper notes that I'd gotten from killing Hognay.

I briefly considered how massive of a honeypot the Temple of Creation was after collecting a load of taxes like this. Since the *tellers* alone were experienced silver Delvers, calling the place well-defended seemed justified. After all, how tough would the *guards* be?