

Traveler's Amulet

This is an evolving item.

Current Level: Crumb-Cruncher

Effects:

1) It's Stylish

2) Soul-Sight

Make "Soul-Sight" your own to unlock this amulet's next effect.

"It's a pretty necklace," said Xim, "but I don't think it's pretty enough for you to stare at it as much as you do."

I held the amulet in my palm, gazing idly into its glittering black gem. The chain was a dark metal that I'd come to recognize as the material many of the Delves were constructed from, and it was speckled with red and silver flakes. The red, I theorized, was from ruby chips, and the gem at its center reminded me of the void sphere Grotto and I had drained, but without the massive mana charge. I wasn't sure about the silver, though. Could be some other Delve-related material, or it might just be plain old silver.

"It's just..." I said. "It's fuckin'... a fucking *fuck*, ya' know?"

"Eloquent," Xim replied.

We sat in a small clearing in the woods a few miles west of Ravvenblaq's main manor. It was the geographic equivalent of where Xim's tribe resided within the Third Layer, and the cleric was preparing to transition us over. Unlike Drel, who could invoke The Eye in moments, Xim required some ritual preparation. She'd just finished inscribing a large rune into the dirt with liberal amounts of black ink and was presently sprinkling it with what looked like dried flakes of blood. I didn't ask what half of the materials she was using were, because I didn't want to know.

"Maybe the whole thing's a joke," I said. "I can just imagine Fortune laughing his giant ass off at the idea of me agonizing over how to get this thing to move on to the third effect."

“Maybe it is,” said Xim, finishing her sprinkling with a flourish and dusting her hands off. “Or maybe you haven’t made soul-sight your own yet.”

“What does that even mean, though?”

“It *is* related to your divine gifts,” she said. “Maybe Sam’lia can jostle something loose.”

“You think she and Fortune are in on it together?”

“I don’t think anything,” she said, pulling out her scepter and giving it a twirl. “I stopped thinking about that amulet a long time ago. Ready?”

“Yeah,” I said, standing up and clapping some of the dirt from my pants. I was back in my feather boa, leather vest, and exposed manly chest combo. If I was going on vacation, I was going to do it in comfort and with style. “What do you think about *Siphon*?”

“Etja’s gravity spell?” she said as she raised her scepter to the air. It began to glow with crimson light. “What about it?”

“My two biggest problems with Tavio were that he catapulted me all over the place, and then he dodged everything I threw at him.”

The sun in the sky above began to dim, growing ever smaller until it was a modest orb. The radiant sphere floated down from on high and settled at the tip of Xim’s scepter. In the sky above, a massive blood-red eye opened.

“I thought you were trying to figure out how to do more damage,” she said.

We both stared up at The Eye as it branched out into an all-encompassing nautilus spiral, copying itself ten thousand times over until it dominated the entire expanse overhead.

“I can spam *Oblivion Orb*,” I said. “I just have to hit him with it. *Siphon* is a Mystical spell, so I can pick it up, and it could let me lock people down. I might also be able to make myself heavier with it to keep from getting...”

The trees around us began to melt, and I trailed off. I’d seen a lot of stuff since coming to Arzia, but the transition to the Third was one of the most impressive. As the flora around us deteriorated into shimmering puddles, they revealed a wall of black spires that jutted from the ground. Runes lit up along the spires, and a wave of multi-colored mana coursed over the pair of us. A shiver ran through my body.

“It’s a useful spell,” said Xim as the spires began to descend into the earth with a rumble, “but it takes a lot of mana to get it strong enough to use offensively. Etja mostly uses it for utility and zoning.”

When the spires no longer blocked our view, the Xor’Drel lands were revealed to me.

The soil, like so many things dealing with the Third Layer, was red. Not Martian rust n’ dust red, but the deep red of a Devil’s food cake, with all the moist and springy goodness that came along with it. It was soft beneath my boots, and the air was filled with the scent of pleasant sweetness.

From the ground grew elaborately twisting bushes, their stems the color of tar, their leaves a dark violet, and with flowering blooms that shifted and moved in the air. The flowers varied in color from orange to blue, and minute glittering particles drifted up and away from their petals.

Rising up amidst the bushes were trees with curling branches, covered in bronze fronds that clinked and chimed in the light breeze. More of the dark spires were set into a regular pattern that followed along the dirt trail before us, their lengths thrumming with energy. The sigils upon them oriented themselves toward us, as though watching.

Further down the path, I could make out a few structures that I thought might be huts or houses, but each one was in a different style. One looked to be made of clay and straw, while another was constructed from gray stone with a tile roof. A third was made of some dark substance that soaked in the light, creating an omnipresent shadow all around it.

A man walked out from within the umbral building, his skin the same rosy shade as Xim’s, and he looked up the path toward us. He raised a hand in greeting, and I raised mine in return. Xim waved at him enthusiastically. Then, his body flickered, distorted, and he tore away through space like his physics engine had been designed by Todd Howard.

I let out a startled grunt, and Xim turned back to me with a broad grin.

“Get used to that one,” she said. I nodded, uncertain what to make of the sight, then returned to ogling the scenery. My eyes drifted up and over what was immediately in front of me.

The horizon was ruled by a tree the size of a skyscraper apartment complex.

Its limbs curled and meandered like the smaller plants around me, covered in great thorns and littered with dozens of stylistically diverse houses like the ones lining the

path. There were countless windows set into the trunk at irregular intervals and even a few doors that looked like they would deliver anyone traversing them to a three-hundred-foot plummet. Colorful cloth banners, chimes, and lanterns were strung up in many places, each of which must have been the size of a horse for me to make them out so clearly from this distance.

“Is that... the Irgriana tree?” I asked. Xim’s smile grew even broader and she nodded.

“You got it,” she said, then began skipping down the trail.

I hurried to follow after her, but she covered more ground than made sense for the strides she was taking. After a couple of skips, she paused and turned around, already a hundred feet ahead. She kept smiling like someone had just gifted her a bag full of her deepest wishes the entire time I trotted up to meet her.

“I should probably bind you,” she said.

“I didn’t know we had that kind of relationship,” I said, and she rolled her eyes.

“Until you get used to things here, travel will be confusing. The thing to remember is that, while the landscape and houses are all firmly rooted in the group consciousness, a person’s precise location is *not*.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “these words communicate concepts and ideas that make sense to me.”

“The Third Layer is a realm of mind and dream,” she said. “The world is as we decide for it to be. Areas with a lot of people are more concrete because reality bends toward consensus. For example,” she pointed to the horizon, “everyone knows that the Irgriana tree is at the center of the village, and so it is. But you and I,” she pointed between us, “don’t have a fixed location within the tribe’s mind.”

“Okay, I think I follow that some. How does that affect travel?”

“We can shape the world in limited ways,” she said. “Like we did when everyone Layer walked while traveling to the Calvani Caverns. So long as there is no will opposing us, we can imagine all sorts of things into existence. In Xor’Drel, the opposing will is the tribal consensus.”

“You’ve mentioned creating “easy visuals” and stuff before, but you’re saying that people can make things appear out of thin air? Not just illusions?”

“It’s not always easy, or simple,” she said, “but yeah. When it comes to moving around the village, we’re able to simply be where we want to be, since no one is thinking too hard about where we *ought* to be. The tribal mind will stop us from teleporting or anything like that, but we can still move pretty quick.”

“But if everyone got together and agreed that we were both, say, in the tavern...”

“Then we’d have to walk out of the tavern normally.”

“We wouldn’t be trapped there?”

“That would take a pretty strong belief,” she said. “People have legs. They walk places. Everyone would have to agree that wasn’t true, at least for us. It would be easier to tie us up and believe that the ropes are very, very strong.”

“Right. What does “binding” me do?”

“It tethers you to my beliefs. When I travel, you’ll travel with me. That sort of thing.”

“But it doesn’t make me your bonded servant or anything?”

She gave me a mischievous look.

“Only if you want it to.”

“That’s alright. I’ll stick with ‘fast-travel only’, please.”

She looked at me with exaggerated disappointment, then pulled a leather pouch from her inventory.

“Brand or blood?” she asked.

“Uh, which one’s more fun?”

“Fun for me, or fun for you?” she asked.

I gave her a flat stare.

“Brand it is, then,” she said and opened the pouch to pull out a small iron rod with a flat end. She summoned some divine fire and began roasting the tip, then gestured at my arm. “Your wrist, if you don’t mind.”

I looked warily at the literal brand she was heating, then held out my arm, gritting my teeth at what was about to happen. She pressed the end of the iron rod to my skin and... it tingled. There was no sharp burn, or delayed onset of icy pain, just a slight

buzzing sensation. When she pulled the brand back, there was a small crest burned into my skin.

“How long does this last?” I said, looking over the simple linework. It sort of looked like a hyena with wings.

“Until you decide you don’t want it.”

“Oh? That simple?”

“Welcome to the Third Layer,” she said in reply, then turned back to the path. “Now, try not to pass out!”

Xim once again began skipping, and the world blurred past. I didn’t even have to move my feet. When I tried to take a step, in fact, I didn’t go anywhere. Each hop from Xim sent a massive stretch of the path zipping past us, and the plants and houses that flew by looked more like impressions than real things.

Huts became expressionist paintings, the bushes, blotches of watercolor. When Xim’s skip landed, the world reasserted itself as a well-defined, three-dimensional space full of concrete structures, but her next prance would send it all back into vagary. It was jarring, but mesmerizing, and for the first time in a while I began to question whether any of this was really happening to me.

In a matter of seconds, we were at the base of the Irgriana tree, which had been more than a mile distant moments before. Standing at the base of the tree were Xim’s parents, Xorna and Drel’gethed.

Xim ran forward and leapt into Xorna’s arms. The ruby-skinned woman swept the cleric up and off her feet, onyx horns glinting in the day’s scarlet ‘eye’-light. Drel drifted over and gave me a Hiwardian bow, which was made a bit awkward given his shifting, gaseous lower half. I returned the gesture to the man with skin like a star-speckled midnight sky and he stared deep into me with purple irises.

“It has been too long, Esquire Arlo,” Drel said, voice like a whispered sonnet.

“I regret we couldn’t have come sooner,” I said. “It’s been a busy year.”

“I see that it has,” said Drel, gaze drifting up to my level indicator. “To think it has been *only* a year. You both grow powerful in such little time. I will need to contemplate Xim overtaking me, much sooner than I expected.

"I suspect that's the dream of many parents," I said. "That their kids do better than they did."

"'Better' may be too humble a word, Esquire Arlo. Xorna and I spent five years reaching level six." He drifted a bit closer, waving his nose through the air just above me. "Your scent is much richer than level six should be," he said.

It was then, for the first time, that I considered Drel might have a revelation of The Nose.

"I'm sure Xim is excited to tell you all about our training," I said, doing my best not to take a step back from the floating man in my personal bubble.

Xim ran over and gave her father a hug, though less exuberant than the one she'd given her mother. Xorna, now free of her daughter, walked up and wrapped her arms tight around my ribs, lifting me off the ground as well.

"It's good to see you, Arlo," she said in a polite, reserved tone that was wholly divorced from the enthusiasm of her hug. I hesitantly patted her on the back, worried that if I let any air escape my lungs that it would never be allowed to return.

"You too," I rasped.

She set me down and gave me a grin.

"We've made dinner," she said. "I selected several dishes that I am excited to watch you try."

"I'm sure they'll be delicious," I said.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I suppose." I wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Where is your bonded familiar, Esquire Arlo?" said Drel. "I am eager to speak with him once more."

"Of course, he's in the Closet. I'm interested to see if it opens from here. Er, probably should have checked before we came."

I focused on opening the Closet, mana shaping it to speed things along. The portal opened like normal, which I was very glad to see, and a little man in gray robes floated out of it, looking over us all with dark, imperious eyes.

"Yes," he said in a voice I'd only ever heard inside my head, "*I find that this realm suits me quite well.*"