

There were many an interesting stalls within Azurvale's markets. Though it was not exactly a hub of trade and commerce, the exotic aesthetic of the tree-city attracted all sorts of visitors, both tourists and business-oriented individuals. Merchants and traders from all over the world often passed through here, and none would pass up the opportunity to peddle their goods and services. The elves of the capital had something of a reputation for having more money than common sense, which meant even peddlers of bizarre merchandise could find plenty of customers.

This was, however, not the case for one particular stall. Which seemed odd considering it appeared to be a wooden caravan that unfolded into a place of business. One did not see this sort of thing around the Republic often, nor were any of the highly varied items on offer of domestic make. Yet despite all this, the merchandise was functional, high-quality, and priced enticingly. There was the odd curio or interesting toy, but for the most part the place was like a mobile general store. Tools and clothes were aplenty, both basic and advanced crafting materials were on display, and various imported arms and armor were lined up. There were also a few pieces of artwork and some carved souvenir-like statuettes, but nothing worth causing a fuss over. No matter how one looked at it, this wagon-store was set up to earn a steady income rather than make a quick coin, meaning its owner was just a regular traveling merchant.

Or at least that's what one might think until they actually saw the person in charge. He was a male raptor from the southern continent, with broad shoulders, dark green scales, almost no neck, and a head shaped loosely like that of a crocodile. However, though his kind was not normally considered handsome by 'smoothskin' standards, his face was especially bad. The right side of it was heavily scarred with bits of it outright missing, almost as if he got into an argument with a bladestorm and lost. Even the eye on that side was gone and had been replaced by an artificial one made of glowing white crystal, likely the handiwork of an Enchanter.

However, the reptilian yellow eye on his left was bright and attentive, and the tooth-filled snout was curved in a surprisingly friendly smile. In a way it seemed as if the horrible scarring was making the rest of him look far more approachable by comparison. His unique appearance also served to captivate people's attention, allowing him to invite them over to peruse his wares with a lively wave and a cheerful voice.

Attracted by the bizarre appearance and approachable attitude of the salesman, the pedestrians couldn't help but flock to his stall. Once there, their stares gradually turned away from his slightly gruesome visage and towards the excellent goods he had on offer. There was no doubt the man was an experienced merchant, as he made sure to leave his customers satisfied and happy about their purchase. He understood that repeat customers were where the real money was at, so he made sure to encourage people to visit him again, and soon. Which they did, partly because his imported goods were of a limited quantity, so there was no telling if that thing they had their eye on would still be here if they dawdled too long.

In short, this particular stall always seemed to have a small crowd in front of it, and this afternoon was no different. Yet as he went about his usual business, the scale-faced peddler

couldn't help but notice that there was a much bigger commotion going on elsewhere in the busy market. It was a mild storm of voices and footsteps that was easily audible over the general murmur of the crowd, but he unfortunately couldn't see what the fuss was about. The raptor was uncharacteristically short for an adult of his species, to the point where people would assume he had a dwarven or gnomish father. He didn't have a complex about his height or anything like that, but his lower point of view did make it hard to see over people's heads at times like this. He didn't necessarily need to leave his station to find out what was going on though, as the wall of people in front of him suddenly parted to make way to reveal the root cause of the disturbance.

Namely a construct of glimmering white mithril with smooth feminine curves and an extremely lifelike face.

"Excuse me, are you Corrai of Clan Daiei?" she asked matter of factly.

"Why yes, I am," he responded with a bow of his head. "And you must be the famous Rustblood Juggernaut. Or at least, I hope you are. I imagine there are not a lot of individuals with a countenance as radiant as yours."

"Damn right there aren't," she responded with a smug smile. "You should be thanking your lucky stars someone as glorious as myself came to see you personally."

"Quite so, quite so. Your noble form has been forever burned into my memory, and I am grateful for the opportunity, but I fear I must inquire as to what I owe the pleasure of your visit. I dare say you don't look to be a customer."

"Nope. Just the opposite in fact. I'm here to talk about the request you made at the guild."

"Ah... Oh my sweet Albert! Has **that** person sent you?!"

"If by 'that person' you mean Keira Morgana, then yes. She'll be waiting for you at your hotel in two hours, so make sure you don't keep us waiting."

"How glorious!" he exclaimed. "I shall make sure to be there at any cost!"

"Yeah, you do that."

The golem then left as abruptly as she showed up, leaving the raptor merchant to continue advertising his goods with renewed vigor.

"Haha! What a truly blessed day! One that simply must be marked with a celebration!" he shouted loudly and clearly. "Come one, come all, for Corrai's prices are now a quarter off, no questions asked! Make sure you grab these amazing deals while you can, for either I or yourself may not be here to enjoy them tomorrow!"

His eyes snapped to a curious-looking elf maiden, whose attention had been grabbed by the raptor's energetic voice and exotic appearance.

"You there, my fair lady! You strike me as a woman of refined taste and an eye for quality! I have with me a set of beautiful dresses from the Pearly Dunes that would make you look even more stunning than you already are! Never too early to start planning for the big Aurora Eve party, you know!"

Fizzy kept hearing Corrai's voice as she made her way back to where Keira was. She couldn't help but be impressed at how seamlessly and shamelessly he turned her disturbance into a chance to start a big sale. Then again, he wouldn't be much of a follower of Sean if he didn't take advantage of such opportunities. In fact, one could say he was almost too good at it.

Judging from the background check Boxy and Fizzy had done on him over the past few days, Corrai seemed to already be rather well known within the mercantile community. The raptor was pulling double duty as both adventurer and peddler, as evidenced by his well developed Monk and Merchant Jobs. The former gave him access to the Disciple of Chaos Skill, which worked as a sort of homing device for trouble. It was a unique type of clairvoyance that warned one of possible impending dangers, though on a much larger scale than the blow-by-blow prediction of Fizzy's Paladin equivalent. It was often said that followers of David always seemed to be around during times of great disaster and upheaval, but that man had turned it into an occupation.

A massive earthquake that demolished half the city? Corrai would be there selling construction materials. A region ravaged by an unnatural drought? Corrai could be seen offering barrels of fresh drinking water and prayer books to Zephyra, the Goddess of Rain. Reports of Blight spreading in the woods? Corrai would likely already be waiting there with disease-repelling equipment in one hand and holy water in the other. He was even reported to have been on hand to provide blankets, medicine and other supplies at the city of Dragunov following the freak snow storm caused by their weather control device.

These rumors made him out to be a profiteering scumbag who sought to reap immense profits off of people's suffering, a mentality that Boxy greatly respected. However, though he did indeed make a tidy sum from those ventures, he reportedly did not bleed the desperate people dry and kept his prices relatively fair. It was also undeniable that his preparedness to take advantage of those disastrous situations, while suspicious, had also been a great source of help and relief to the people he made into smiling customers.

It would therefore appear that Corrai was the sort of merchant who made precisely as much money as he could get away with without making himself look like a heartless scumbag. Which, considering the goodwill he fostered, probably earned him a lot of repeat business, thus potentially making him far more money in the long run than if he were to mercilessly exploit those in need. He was also reportedly quite the fighter, with a rather unique combat style that used everything around him as a weapon. Dirt, twigs, forks, shovels, tables - he even reportedly once killed a bandit by smashing him across the face with a whole salmon.

This was evidently made possible thanks to a Skill called Sink Warfare, which was exclusive to Monks that were Disciples of Chaos. The ability in question allowed them to infuse everyday objects with Ki, temporarily giving them an offensive, defensive and durability rating of at least grade B. The shapeshifter would have plenty of opportunity to confirm all of this information, as it had decided to answer Corrai's request for assistance with his relic-hunting Quest. However, the lizard-man's reaction upon seeing Boxy's perky crimson-haired Facade did not exactly fill the creature with a lot of confidence.

Upon meeting Keira in the Black Rose Hotel's lobby, Corrai immediately prostrated himself before the catgirl before they could even exchange greetings. He didn't even seem to mind getting his expensive-looking clothes dirty as he lay perfectly still with his hands, knees and forehead pressed against the ground. Well, almost perfectly still. The muscular green-scaled tail jutting out from his backside seemed beyond his control, as its tip frantically and repeatedly tapped against the carpeted floor, betraying his excitement.

"Ugh... Great, another fanatic," Keira grumbled. "Why is it that Shannon always gets the crazy ones?"

This was hardly the first time the Hero of Chaos had seen this sort of reaction. She had gotten about twenty of these devout followers of the Goddess of Instability do more or less the exact same thing in the last six months alone. The worst part was that this guy seemed to completely disregard Fizzy, though she seemed to be taking that surprisingly well.

"I think it's the other way around," the golem chimed in. "If you ask me, it's Virgil's influence that makes people go nuttier than a gnomish shortcake."

"Riiight. In any event, please cut that out, Corrai. It's not productive, warranted, nor appreciated."

"Ack! My apologies, my lady," the raptor exclaimed. "I did not mean to offend."

"Then get off the blasted floor so we can talk like people!"

It took a bit more urging and convincing but the scaly merchant finally agreed to treat Keira more casually. The three of them then relocated to Corrai's suite, so that they may discuss the matter at hand in private. The place was quite fancy as far as hotels went. Even had its own bathroom, bedroom and living room as separate sections, though it would appear the current resident was using the extra space mostly to store his excess stock.

"Please excuse the mess, my lady," he said remorsefully while glancing at the piles of crates, trunks and bags. "I was not expecting a response from you so soon."

"So soon? Didn't you submit it like two months ago?"

"I did not expect you to reply at all, so two months is nothing compared to the eternity that lies ahead of us."

"Ohhhhh-kay? So what's this Quest of yours about?"

"It is exactly as I stated, my lady. Sandra himself had given me a most holy task to perform, as a test of my faith, will and resolve. Though I suspect it may have been because I was relying on His wisdom too much."

"You tried asking that guy for advice?" Fizzy asked with a dubious expression. "You do realize he's shadier than the bottom of a well at midnight, right?"

The raptor did not take kindly to that remark, if the way his glare sharpened was any indication. Even his artificial right eye seemed to glow with a harsher intensity.

"Pardon me, my lady, but why is this one here?"

"Fizzy is a Paladin, and a Champion of Chaos," Keira said sternly. "She is one of my closest friends and most trusted comrades, and I expect you to treat her with the respect she deserves."

"... My apologies, fellow follower of chaos," Corrai said with a bow. "Please forgive me, but one does not run into others of our faith so easily, and your words were a bit... heretical."

"Don't sweat the small stuff," the golem brushed him off. "What's this about you relying on Alison?"

"Ah, yes. I used to be quite the lost individual as a youngster. But then a baby hydra bit me and gave me some rather interesting visions. At first I thought it was its hallucinogenic venom, but soon after I came back to my senses I realized I had become a Disciple of Chaos."

Well, something like that was to be expected. All of the 'pilgrims' that had shown up before Keira had a similar story. Even Fizzy, to a certain degree, had Guadalupe's faith forced upon her by circumstances outside her control. And she, like all the others, eventually grew to appreciate their newfound divine connection.

"I used to seek my new patron deity's advice regarding every aspect of my life," the raptor continued, "from what I would have for breakfast to whether I should put on underwear that day. The Quest I had been given forbade me from praying for guidance, and though I was upset at first, I now know the reason behind it. It was to help me realize I had grown too dependant on a higher power. As an old friend used to say, it is us mortals that control our fate, not the deities that watch over us. I just wish I recognized the truth of those words sooner."

Keira and Fizzy exchanged a few knowing looks. Having personally met the god in question on more than one occasion, both of them couldn't help but feel that Corrai was severely misunderstanding Cedric's intentions. It was far more likely that the Goddess of Chaos simply

had enough of his crap and wanted him to leave her alone, but they did not voice that thought. Discussing religious beliefs was not why they had gathered here in the first place.

“As for the task itself, I dare say I made some surprisingly solid progress,” the raptor claimed with a smile. “I had been given absolutely no information to go on, other than the names of six items and the hint that they will display an awesome power once brought together. It cost me an obscene amount of money, nearly a decade of my life, and the right side of my face, but I have managed to track down three of them.”

The raptor then reached into the Bag of Holding dangling off his waist and set out three items on the table that Keira was seated at. The first was a pure white porcelain plate that seemed to have been polished and cleaned with frightening regularity. The second was a tall drinking glass that was so extremely transparent that it was practically invisible. One wouldn't be able to tell it was even there if not for the circular indentation on the beige tablecloth or the faint fingerprints on its surface. The third object was far less fancy, however, as it appeared to be an orange ceramic brick.

“These are the Plate of Blue, the Glass of Purity, and the Knife of Regret,” he explained, pointing to each item in turn.

“Uhm... I think I get the Glass of Purity, but how come the dinner plate isn't blue?” Keira said in a confused tone. “Also that's a brick, not a knife.”

“I know, it sounds crazy, but allow me to demonstrate.”

Corrai rummaged through his stuff for a bit before producing a piece of salted jerky. He placed the strip of meat onto the plate, only to have it instantly turn a deep ocean-like blue. He then picked it back up and bit half of it off, demonstrating the unnatural coloration was permanent and did not affect its edibility or its flavor. The same couldn't be said about the ‘Knife’ of Regret, however, as placing the leftover preserved meat onto it caused it to transform into an unappetizing and foul smelling moldy pile of rot within seconds.

“So... this one's called the Plate of Blue because it turns things blue... and that's the Knife of Regret because you'll regret using it as a knife?”

“Exactly so, my lady!” Corrai stated, his eyes gleaming with respect and adoration. “To grasp these relics' quirks so easily, truly you are the Chosen of the God of Happenstance!”

“What about the Glass of Purity?” the catgirl asked. “I doubt its named that just because it barely looks like it's there.”

“Ah yes, of course. Forgive me, but I will have to make a bit of a mess.”

The impromptu show and tell session continued with Corrai digging out a wine bottle from his stock. He picked up the borderline ethereal container and tried pouring the alcohol into it. When

the liquid hit the bottom of the glass, however, it suddenly became crystal clear water while some dirt-like residue fell out of its bottom.

“As you can see, it aggressively and thoroughly purifies any fluid that passes through it, leaving only the water behind. I’ve tried it with various alcohols, poisons, sauces, soups, even various types of blood, but the outcome is always the same.”

“Have you tried molten metals?” Fizzy inquired suddenly.

“Uh, no. The thought did cross my mind, but I fear I might damage the relic if I do that.”

“But if it’s really a divine relic then it should be practically indestructible, no?” Keira asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t know, my lady. All I know is that these items can crack and break if treated roughly. They do recover over time, but it takes a long time. The Plate of Blue, for instance, took about three months to mend itself after I accidentally chipped it while digging out of some ruins.”

It was a bit shameful to admit to such a thing, but Corrai was a Monk and a Merchant, neither of which were very good at archeology.

“Hmm... Fizzy, does any of this mean anything to you?”

“Sorry,” the golem shook her head. “I’ve been rooting through the divine lore I got from Holy Scripture Skill, but I can’t find a single reference to any... divine cutlery.”

“I see. Corrai, you mentioned there were three more of these, uh, relics, yes?”

“Ah, yes, of course. The missing pieces are the False Kettle, the Spoon of Speculation, and the Fork of Truth.”

“That settles it then, doesn’t it,” the catgirl said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry, settles what, my lady?”

“Your story. I’m starting to believe it. You see, I already have one of those in my possession.”

Keira moved a hand over to the diamond and mithril studded belt on her waist, the Artifact-grade item known as Aetherial Repository #3. She touched one of the faintly glowing white gems, causing a flash of light as she retrieved a small object from the belt’s Storage-like space. She placed it on the table in front of the stunned raptor, revealing it to be an mithril soup spoon with a flower-like pattern carved into the handle.

“C-c-could it be?! The Spoon of-?!”

“Nope,” the catgirl cut him off. “It’s the Fork of Truth.”

"It... what? Are you certain of that, my lady?"

"There is no doubt in my mind. The item's identity was revealed to me in a vision once I obtained it, almost as if recalling a long lost memory."

That was, of course, entirely facetious, though it wasn't like Keira could admit to the real reason she was so sure of this thing was because she was a dungeon owner. The crystal core seemed to hold an intimate knowledge of items and monsters, so its appraisals were far more accurate and reliable than a mortal Scribe's. It was therefore a bit concerning that it did not identify the Fork of Truth as a Divine-rank item, but as a Superior one. Then again, if what Corrais said was true - and Boxy had little reason to doubt him at this point - these items would only reveal their true power once brought together.

"Ahyahyaha! Today really is a blessed day!"

The raptor let out an excited voice while clapping his hands, indicating he bought Keira's cryptic nonsense of an excuse.

"Tell me, my lady, how in the world did you even find it?!"

"Came across it on my travels completely by chance. Kept it because it looked fancy."

A surprisingly honest answer, and also the best one Boxy could muster. It genuinely had forgotten where exactly it got this curious object, but there was no way it could forget it was in its possession. The whole reason it brought it here today was because it had a hunch it might be connected to Terence. That guy seemed to have a stake in every oddity, weirdo and bizarre event out there, so it was hardly a long shot. Especially considering this thing's inexplicable function.

"Be wary of touching it though," Keira warned Corrai. "Holding that thing for more than a few seconds makes you super angry for no reason."

"... May I try? I wish to experience it for myself."

"Okay, but I'm not gonna be held accountable for any damages."

The raptor nodded to show he understood and seized the mithril 'fork.' He held it for a solid three seconds without feeling anything other than the cool metal between his fingers. His vision was then taken over by a red haze, and the next he came to he found himself laying down on the ground. A Skirmisher Mode Fizzy was holding him down with a shiny foot to his chest and an arm cannon aimed at his head. He looked around, noting that the table where all the relics were placed had been smashed into splinters. The sharp pain in his right arm hit him in the next instant, informing him it was fractured and forcing a grunt of pain out of his throat.

"Back to your senses yet, meatbag?" the golem asked with an ice cold expression.

“Y-yes. Grhn. I apologize, I did not expect it to be so... overpowering. I do not even remember what transpired.”

“Told you so,” Keira called out from the side. “Don’t worry though, you’re the only one that got hurt.”

Corrai shifted his eyesight to confirm that this did indeed seem to be the case. The catgirl had not even a scratch on her, and the relics she was cradling in her arms seemed to be equally unscathed. Except for the Fork of Truth, which had presumably been returned to her mystic belt-shaped container where it could do no harm.

“I see. Thank you for your timely intervention, Champion Fizzy.”

“Don’t sweat it. Even I go berserk if I try to hold that stupid spoon. Come on, up you go.”

The smaller golem then effortlessly lifted Corrai back to his feet. Noticing the odd angle his arm was bent at, she decided she might as well take care of it immediately.

“Holy Light!”

[window]Divine power has healed your wounds. HP +1,305.[/window]

The glowing warmth enveloped the raptor, making him sigh in relief as his injured limb snapped back into place. He was also impressed with the incredible potency of the golem’s healing magic. A Paladin pulling off four-digit heals like that would be impossible unless they had a rather absurd FTH Attribute, which was only obtainable by the most devout of the gods’ servants. He was about to praise the strength of Fizzy’s faith, but the words got stuck in his throat when he noticed the glowing blue runes that had appeared on her bulkier left shoulder.

“... Much obliged for the medical attention,” he eventually squeezed out, “but is that what I think it is?”

“You’re damn right it is,” the pint-sized Paladin declared proudly. “You’re not looking at any old mithril golem, but the world’s first and only Inscribed Mithril Dynamo Golem!”

“Hah-ha!” Corrai chuckled. “I see! I would expect nothing less from the companion of a Hero of Chaos!”

The ‘world’s first and only’ part was mostly her ego talking, but Fizzy had every right to act high and mighty. Inscribed golems were notoriously troublesome opponents, as they combined the exceptional durability of stone and metal golems with a magical aptitude similar to that of crystal golems. The variant was quite rare, but at the same time it was impossible to spot until combat had started, as the tell-tale runes that covered their bodies would only appear once they started flinging magic around. The exact function of said runes was an unknown, and one of the longest-standing mysteries in the field of monster biology.

That all changed when Fizzy reached Level 25 of her War Golem Job and underwent a Rank Up, at which point she happily sold the relevant information for fame and money.

[window]**Runic Feedback**

Description: A golem's mana-imbued hide can make for an exceptionally potent canvas.

Requirements: Be an Inscribed Golem variant

Type: Active

Activation Time: Instant

Cost: 50 MP

Range: Self

Effects: Consumes all Rune Charges upon activation, amplifying the effects of the next Spell by 5% per Rune Charge.

Automatically generates a Rune Charge upon casting a Spell.

All Rune Charges will dissipate if a new one has not been generated in the last 30 seconds.

Allows a maximum number of Rune Charges equal to 2 per Level of this Skill.[/window]

Essentially, it meant that, when fighting an inscribed golem, one needed to be wary of an extra powerful Spell should the glowing arcane sigils on their bodies suddenly disappear. This information was sure to save many lives in the future, and the one who had been able to provide it would surely go down in history as a great person. Even if said individual wasn't technically a person. That information could also potentially be used against Fizzy, but she wasn't worried about that.

After all, anyone stupid to challenge her would be facing not just an absurdly powerful golem, but also a very pissed off master shapeshifter and its three Ranker familiars.

"If you two are done messing around, how about we focus on the matter at hand?" suggested Keira. "Like figuring out how to find the last two pieces. Namely the Spoon of Speculation and the False Kettle, yes?"

"Ah, forgive me, my lady, but as I mentioned in my request, I truly have no options left," the raptor said with an apologetic bow of his head. "I have exhausted every possible lead, investigated every utterance of a mystical piece of dinnerware, braved a dozen dungeons and dug through countless ruins. I do not mean to boast, but the fact that I was able to find even these three was thanks to what I can only call a series of small miracles. Yet you yourself randomly stumbled upon one of the very objects I was pursuing completely by chance. I dare say our best option is to follow your insight and trust in your good fortune."

"Right, I suppose it can't be helped then. Hmm..."

Keira closed her eyes, furrowed her brows and tapped her foot against the floor as the monster within racked its brains.

“That’s it!” she suddenly exclaimed. “If what we’re looking for is a piece of history lost to time, then I know just what to do!”

“What would that be, my lady?”

“We gotta get to the Pearly Dunes. It’s a long way from here to there, but I know a guy in Emerald City who knows a guy who knows everything.”

Technically that last one wasn’t so much a ‘guy’ as it was a grimoire, but Nao’s LIAR was without question the first thing that needed to be consulted. There was no telling what sort of price or cost would be involved and it was a fair assumption that it wasn’t going to be cheap, but it was the fastest and surest way to find the missing items. Knowing that wolf-boy’s personality he would probably be more than happy to help his first female friend track down some long-forgotten relic, even if he did have to cheat by using the LIAR. Keeping secrets was also a specialty of his, so it was unlikely he’d blab about it to anyone.

“Ugh, I hate the desert,” Fizzy groaned. “The sand gets in my joints and makes this awful screeching noise when I move around.”

“Don’t be like that. You wouldn’t want to miss out on this opportunity would you? Besides I’d really appreciate it if you helped me and Corrai out.”

“Wait, me?” the raptor asked dumbfounded. “I’m coming too?”

“Of course. You’re the one with the Quest from a god, right? Shouldn’t you see it through all the way to the end? Besides, you’ve been searching for these things for so long that your expertise and experience are sure to prove valuable.”

Boxxy also had a feeling Corrai wouldn’t mind bankrolling this trip, but that was more of a bonus than a must-have.

“Quite right, my lady, quite right. In that case I will begin making preparations for my- Ahem! **Our** departure immediately. We will need food, water, and clothing to brave the summer heat. I will also make sure to bring plenty of lubricant and metal polish for your companion.”

“See, Fizzy? All taken care of.”

“I don’t know, Keira. I kind of have that government project to finish. You sure this won’t take too long?”

“Pretty sure, yeah. I mean, we either find the thing we want, get it and come back, or we don’t, and come back anyway. I honestly don’t see us being gone for more than two weeks. Three tops.”

Three months later.

“Retuuuuuurn the spoooooon!”

A ghastly screeching voice echoed across the Pearly Dunes. It's source was a twenty meter long glass dragon that flew over the white desert. Directly underneath it was a gigantic wave-like sandstorm that threatened to swallow up entire nations.

“Retuuuuuurn the spoooooon!”

“You're not exactly giving us a chance to, dickface!” Keira screamed back.

The catgirl was running away from said unnatural disaster with all her might while riding on a camel. The flowing white robes that were supposed to protect her from the harsh midday sun were ripped to shreds and billowing behind her as if they were some sort of flag denoting surrender.

“Retuuuuuurn the spoooooon! Or suffer my cuuuuuurse!”

“I think we're suffering enough as it is!”

This time it was Fizzy's turn to complain. The dynamo golem was keeping up with Kiera's frightened steed on foot, though she had to transform to her Charger Mode to do that. This particular configuration gave her enormous arms and fists, a wide upper body, massive shoulders. It was rather troll-like in its shape, except for the sturdy set of legs that were designed to let her move quickly, but only in one direction - forward. A single blow from her enormous knuckles at full speed was enough to turn a person into red mist, but right now she was focused only on escaping. Which was why her elbows were tucked into her waist and her hands were pressed against her chest, otherwise they would throw her off balance.

The golem was also dragging along an old wooden cart, upon which sat a shriveled up Corrai and a Hero of Magic who deeply regretted allowing himself to be talked into going on this adventure.

“Are you idiots back there making any progress or what?!” Fizzy shouted over her shoulder.

“I'm deciphering half-destroyed records from an ancient Suna Empire scroll!” Nao snapped back. “Do you have any idea how difficult this is **without** being chased by a fucking dragon?!”

Admittedly it technically wasn't an actual dragon, but the terrifying might of that tomb guardian certainly made it seem like one.

“Ehehehe... The ocean is a lovely place isn't it...”

As for Corrai, he was ever so slightly delusional from extreme dehydration. To say he was not exactly contributing to the situation would be a gross understatement.

“Retuuuuuurn the spoooooon!”

“Just use that succubus of yours!” Keira yelled. “She has Versatile Tongue, right?”

“Yes, she does, but I seriously doubt she can stop that thing by orally pleasing it!”

“Not that, you moron! I mean the Skill! You know, the one that lets her speak all kinds of languages!?”

“It’s a moot point anyway! She already got sucked into that storm and I can’t summon her with all this shaking!”

As one would imagine, the sandstorm in question was anything but ordinary. Whatever magic that draconic construct was wielding made it so that anything caught up in its path would dry out and age rapidly until it became a pile of dust. This included both magical and metal constructs, such as demonic familiars or Fizzy’s Animated Armors. Even Spells and arrows would get caught up and evaporate instantly in those ridiculous sands.

“Now will you two shut up and let me focus!?”

That was easier said than done though. This chase had already been going on for ten hours, and it had been over three days since any of them had slept or even had a solid meal. They’d have already passed out from exhaustion if not for the various invigorating tonics in Nao’s Item Box and Keira’s Artifact-grade utility belt. They were all way past their limits, and there was no telling whether any of them would collapse on the spot.

“Retuuuuuurn the spoooooon!” the voice repeated itself. “Or suffer my cuuuuuurse!”

“I think I have it!” Nao suddenly declared. “I’m going to have to improvise a bit, but I think it’s our best shot!”

The wolfkin rummaged through the various items and treasures rolling around the cart and grasped a lavishly decorated scepter carved out of ivory and inlaid with dozens of gemstones. The regal-looking stick was pilfered from that ancient tomb the glass dragon was so pissed off about, but also seemed to be the key to stopping its rampage. Having secured the object, Nao rose to his feet, pointed the thing at the flying menace in the distance, and began chanting the code phrase.

“In brightest day! In blackest night! No evil shall escape my sight!”

The jeweled cane in his hand responded to the words of power by shaking fiercely, its many gemstones letting out a multicolored spectrum of light.

“Let those who worship evil’s might beware my power! Uh, something something’s light!”

The item in his hands let out a rainbow-like beam that curved towards the glass dragon, striking it dead on. Various rays of light began pouring out of the thing, but the strain proved to be too

much for the ancient rod in Nao's hands, which shattered into a million pieces after just two seconds.

"Something something's light?!" Keira let out an incredulous scream. "Are you freaking kidding me?!"

"No! Look! The storm's dissipating!"

Indeed, just as the Hero of Magic had declared, the wall of sand was slowly getting smaller while the construct that was maintaining it was having trouble keeping itself in the air.

"Hit it Keira! Hit it now!"

The catgirl leapt off the camel that kept speeding off and rolled across the hot white sands. She then took out the Winter's Bite longbow from her waist-mounted storage device and aimed it straight at the beast.

"Snipe!"

The conjured ice arrow flew off into the distance while draped in a bright green light. Unlike the hundreds of shots she had tried before, this one actually managed to reach its target and strike it in its center of mass. A powerful screech washed over the desert as the terror that had been hounding the four of them cracked up and burst into a rain of sparkling shards that mixed in with the pearly sands, never to be seen again.

The victorious party let out a triumphant cheer and stopped to catch their breath. Now that the magical anomaly was no longer forcing Nao to be on the move, he was finally able to make a stable Gate Spell. It took a few 'jumps' but they were able to make it back to the last town they'd visited within the hour. It was a quaint little settlement built around a small oasis, which was a welcome sight for Corrai. His kind was far more used to the humid jungle than the arid desert, so the heat had hit him hardest of all. Thankfully he returned to his former self surprisingly quickly once he got some fresh water and a quick meal.

The group took a quick vote and unanimously decided to put off sleeping for a while longer so they can finally see the fruits of their labor. The LIAR had guided them to the missing two pieces of Robin's ancient cutlery set for the low low price of a few equally ancient artifacts. This started a scavenger hunt across the southern reaches of the continent that got way out of hand and somehow culminated in that desert chase, but that was now all in the past.

"Come on! Let's see it, then!" Nao beckoned eagerly.

He, Keira, Fizzy and the revived Corrai were currently huddled around under the shade of a palm tree just outside of town.

"Alright. Here we go," the catgirl stated. "First, the Fork of Truth."

The mithril spoon was taken out of the Aetherial Repository and placed on the small blanket between the four of them.

“Then, the False Kettle.”

As the name implied, it was not a kettle at all. It was actually a steel fork, one that seemed to make whoever was holding it incredibly hungry.

“The Knife of Regret, and the Plate of Blue, and the Glass of Purity.”

Corrai’s items were brought out one after the other and arranged in a loose circle.

“And finally... the Spoon of Speculation.”

Said ‘spoon’ was actually a wooden beer mug with a stick glued to it. It was more like a ladle, really. As for its special property, any food or item put in it would instantly lose all flavor. Fitting that such a despicable thing would have given them the most trouble. Nevertheless, the instant the last object was placed on the ground, all six items began to rattle and shake. They suddenly flew towards each other, clashing in the center with a clacking noise.

They rapidly assembled what could only be described as a silverware golem. The dinner plate and brick made up its turtle-like torso, the glass was the head and the fork and spoon acted as its stubby legs. The ‘Spoon’ of Speculation gave it a long twig-arm with a mug on the end of it in lieu of a hand. The thing spun around once as if taking in its surroundings, then seemed to face Keira. It took a few steps towards the kneeling catgirl, then beckoned her to get closer with its upper limb.

The Hero of Chaos leaned in feeling both nervous and excited, eager to see the results of all that effort. The silverware golem then raised its ‘arm’ up as high as it would go, hopped up into the air and, for lack of a better word, booped Keira on the nose. It let out a high pitched noise resembling a cackle, then shot off into the sky, leaving behind a trail of yellow-green light. It burst upon reaching a certain altitude, sending six streaks of light scattering in every direction as it scattered its parts across the globe.

“... What... just happened?” the catgirl muttered.

“You tell us, my lady,” Corrai said. “Do you feel any different? Did it unlock your potential or something?”

“I don’t... feel any different...”

“... Hey, Keira,” Nao chimed in. “Bit of a weird thought but... do you think this was just a prank?”

“Don’t be silly... That can’t be... Right?”

However, neither the raptor nor the golem could reject the wolfkin's theory. It was difficult to say whether that collection of cutlery had some ulterior function but given Frederick's track record, a cruel prank seemed to be the most obvious conclusion.

"Hah!" Corrai laughed. "Hyahyahya! A bloody prank! Aaaaahyahyahya!"

The raptor was the only one enjoying himself though. Over the course of his life, he had adopted a rather unique philosophy which could only be described as 'joyful nihilism.' The type of guy who would go to great lengths to point out how utterly pointless and meaningless life was, then used that as an excuse to do whatever he pleased. Only someone with a twisted way of thinking like that would be able to find joy in this indescribably frustrating situation.

"Ah, well, I guess it wasn't all bad."

Aside from Nao, that was.

"We dug up a lot of ancient texts and treasures. They might not have a lot of value, but I had fun uncovering the long forgotten past."

"Well said, chosen of Lunar!" the jovial lizard cheered. "The journey is just as pointless as the destination, after all! Hyahyahya!"

"Mmm, quite. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go sleep for a week."

"Ah, me as well. I shall take my leave for now, my lady."

The wolfkin and the raptor left while waving goodbye. Keira and Fizzy waved back at them, but they didn't move from their spots. In fact, they continued waving at nothing in particular for a solid ten minutes, long after both of their companions had disappeared from sight.

And then, it happened.

The two of them finally lost it.

"FUUUUUUUUCK!" Fizzy shrieked. "We almost died like three times! I mean look at me! I'm all dirty and with sand in places! Private places! Why did we do this?! Why?!"

"I don't fucking know!" the shapeshifter snapped back. "I just wanted a shiny! It wasn't too much to ask for! So how the shit did we end up wading through the desert for weeks on end only to wake up some ancient evil thing?! I was not in control of that situation at all!"

"Next time you hear about some ancient treasure I say you just let it stay buried and forgotten! Philip-damn it! I'm going to be making screeching noises for months! Just look at my hands! My fingers won't extend all the way! You seeing this shit!?"

"Look! Let's just... just calm down here Fizzy! Need to calm down and think this through!"

“Calm? THIS IS ME BEING CALM! THIS RIGHT NOW IS AS CALM AS I CAN GOLEMPLY GET IN THIS FUCKING SITUATION!”

“Don’t take that tone with me, rust bucket! I haven’t slept right in almost a week! The last time I had a solid meal was when we came across that cactus field! You wanna know how cacti taste? NOT! VERY! GOOD!”

“Is that why you blew up the fucking tomb?! I could’ve just lifted the damn door out of the way, but you had to go and make it be ‘pretty’ and ‘shiny!’ We wouldn’t have been in this mess if you just kept your bombs in your pants!”

“WELL! EXCUUUUSE ME! FOR BEING! STRESSED!”

The catgirl kept hyperventilating for a solid ten minutes after that last outburst. Fizzy, on the other hand, kept staring at her sand filled hands that made awkward grinding and rattling noises with every little move she made. It was the first time since becoming a golem that she wished she was physically capable of crying.

“... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to call you a rust bucket,” Boxyx apologized. “You’re the shiniest of shinies, and implying anything less than that is lunacy.”

“And I shouldn’t be pointing the finger at you,” Fizzy responded. “There’s only one asshole to blame in all this, and he’s been suspiciously quiet all this while..”

“Right, screw this archaeological treasure hunting nonsense. Go tell that ridiculous lizard I’m going ahead first, then wait for me back in Azurvale. I’ll do everything in my power to get all that sand out of you when I get there.”

“Yeah. Okay. Where will you be though?”

“I’m going to take a vacation from my vacation.”

And it was at that moment that Jermaine, the God of Misfortune, sent a message to Teresa, the Goddess of Truth and Justice, and Mortimer, the God of Death and Commerce. The contents of his missives were a pair of formal preemptive apologies for all the trouble Boxyx was about to cause those two, and an explanation detailing how he was solely to blame for what was about to happen.

For over the next two weeks, a total of six human villages would find themselves without any residents, living or otherwise.