Twenty-Fourth of Ninthmoon

Today was painful but ultimately satisfying. I have earned my first death, which was not an experience I would like to repeat, but one I sense I will be repeating regardless.

I did not go on the first mission of the day; Xitli told us that the ley-tap must be… sealed? settled? further tapped? I do not fully understand what happened. But Xitli said that it must happen today, preferably after we have dealt with as many shards as possible. Naturally, my party members decided to first deal with something that was not a shard.

To be fair to them, it did give them experience with unweaving and with magical objects, and it was a task that needed doing, but I find myself frustrated, given how curious I am about the shards and their unique biomes and ecologies, how often we spend our time elsewhere. The first mission was to deal with - unweave, or unmake, or unenchant - various magical items that had been twisted by the Arc. Xitli told us that this would not be as simple as doing a disenchantment ritual, because that direct opposition might cause the items to explode. She told us that it would be best to use some energies not directly opposed (such as stillness vs. teleportation) but to instead use something to redirect the energies (such as using flowing water, to change the teleportation to steady movement). I did not go on this mission, but I hear that many people died; as I was tending to my birds ([birdname]'s eggs have hatched; one died its first day, and the other two chicks live and have been successfully taking food from their parents; I have yet to decide what to name them) all in camp heard a great explosion, and many healers went running to tend to those wounded or killed. This, I hear, is because they picked up a cube. I hope this is not what my cube does, when I solve it. The yellow face has but three squares remaining, but I have not been able to determine how to include those squares, and I was not able to spend any time making progress on it today, as we were very busy.

Once all the items were disenchanted or broken, we were able to go deal with one of the shards. Over the month, most of the shards destabilized; only the green river shard, which we had put some effort into but not unwoven completely, remained stable. Because of this destabilization, when we go to a shard that has been too long mixed in energy, we will need to do further steps of the unweaving, balancing it on the mana scape (as we learned in the shard) before unweaving. We chose to go to the Fire Swamp first; the White Caverns, it was reasoned, would give us white mana rash, the hardest to cure, and at the end of the day we would still have to do the ley line ritual, which would worsen any rashes we had. The Black Savannah, we were not sure about at first; later we learned it was a red-mana savannah, but we were concerned at first about it being a white-mana savannah, and thus (due to the destabilization causing us to gain mana rashes of both the invasive and the native mana types) would still land us with white mana rash, but thankfully that would not have been the case.

I spent some time becoming acquainted with a new party member, Sybil Torres. She was a witness to the Arc, and has been left with a strange, glowing heart. I explained to her the current drama that is happening between Aeliana and Calix, since Calix had come on the mission with a piece of candy that Aeliana had given him.

On the way to the fire swamp - just outside of camp - we encountered a healer, one I believe I have seen around camp before, collapsed and covered in green mana rash. We carried them back into camp, and into safety, but they were so overcome by green mana rash that they could not even move. I hope they survived; now that I know more about mana rash, and how it eventually begins dissolving the body, and thus being unable to be removed from the body and untangled from the spirit, permanently kills a person, I believe I have not taken the threat of contracting an extreme case seriously enough.

We encountered more armored beasts, these ones fire-infused. Echo and Zet!Ubar took some of their crystalline-threaded boulders, and later used them to interest and distract the elemental we found at the shard. I am enjoying my new mercenary abilities. We then encountered slimes, both red and black, fighting each other, and a discussion began about whether it was necessary to attune black and red mana, or just red mana. I thought it would only be necessary to attune red mana, as the shard was a swamp that was overrun by red mana; I was wrong. I also did not attune, as I had already decided not to take part in the unweaving, so that I could defend outside the ritual, in the hopes this would save me the mana rash. I was successful in defending others during the ritual, but still contracted the mana rash.

When we got to the Fire Swamp, it was a very strange place. Pools of both mud and lava abounded, there were olgats and necrotic snails and fire-breathing snails, and the elemental called by the energy was a roiling mass of both red and black.

It was a trial assembling people safely enough to key to objects around the area, and I spent much of my time interrupting olgats, putting out burning party members, and distracting the elemental. In fact, once everybody doing the unweaving had keyed in, that became my and the others' main job: distracting the elemental. (There was a part of the ritual they did which I was not able to percieve, something in the manascape, where the different energies were fighting for territory, but I do not have the details of this occurence.) I and the other two who were not in the ritual, [Nick] and Harlow, had a brief moment to discuss strategies; [Nick] repeatedly suggested throwing weapons at it, which I did my best to dissuade, as it was a size 10 elemental both of necromantic and pyromantic energies and was fully capable of completely destroying us if it decided we were annoying enough. Instead, the three of us decided to ask it questions; [Nick] incessantly asked it about other elementals, with Harlow providing backup, and I asked it some questions which actually briefly brought it to a halt. I asked how it felt, being made up of two conflicting, disparate energy types, whether it was uncomfortable, whether it was an unharmonious existence; I told it that I sometimes felt that way, as if I came from two separate worlds, that of the forest, of nature, and that of people who move around in the world and craft things. It looked at me strangely, moving around in ways I might describe as confused in a being, but before it could do much more than that, the unweaving was finished. It was impressively quick. The unweaving done later in the Green River was also impressively quick; were I a superstitious being, I would start to wonder if it was my participation in the unweaving rituals that is somehow jinxing them or making them harder. Thankfully I am not a superstitious

person; as the party grows more able to defend ourselves, I expect I will continue participating in the unweaving rituals, trading out guard duty with others over time.

We all came away from that encounter with both black and red mana rash, given the concentration of enemies and the amount of time we spent preparing. This bodes poorly for the remaining two shards which we have not dealt with; they will be even stronger and less stable next month.

A brief break in the day allowed the healers to cure us, at least of one of our mana rashes; most of us chose the red mana rash to be cured, retaining the black mana rash. Of all the rashes, I must say that the red and the black *look* the most ominous, despite the white one being harder and more dangerous to treat; but on beings made of flesh, the more common diseases will manifest as reddened skin, and the deadliest may manifest as black, so those mana rashes lend flesh-beings an overall quite worrying visual effect.

We chose to deal with the Green River, then, as it was already stabilized, and we were running out of time in the day. We wanted one more shard dealt with before going to the ley-tap, yet did not want to run out of time to deal with the ley-tap, and so chose the one which could be considered already half-solved. On our way, we found more crystalline mudcrabs; Senor Gouda once again tried to harvest materials from them, and I believe was able to harvest some crystalline claws from them. We also came across a strange substance: shattered stones which looked to be purple crystalline, yet seemed completely inert to all magic. Valen, the head healer, says that he has heard of such a substance before, and that it may have alchemical uses, and that Xitli would be able to tell us more.

We came across more slimes, very energetic ones that seemed to be almost vibrating with the energy they had, and then we were at the Green River. It was much unchanged from last month, thankfully, though the plants had grown a bit more (as plants do) and there were now many bushes that shot thorns like arrows. There, too, I took it upon myself to distract the elemental, along with Senor Gouda, who can apparently swim. Once all were keyed, I started talking to the elemental, trying to ask it questions that would either interest or confuse it, but almost before I could begin the unweaving had already finished.

And thus it came time to go to the ley-tap and assist in the large ritual. Although I did not understand what exactly the mages in the center were doing, I understood the part that our party was to play. During heavy rainstorms, rivers may overflow, dragging down soil and trees and creatures, destroying the landscape around it. Yet if a wetland encompasses the riverbanks, the excess water flows through the wetland, draining away to places that have the capacity to hold it in their natural state, keeping the riverbanks as solid as they were before, destroying little. Our bodies, able to hold and direct mana, were as the wetlands, ensuring that the excess mana did not destroy the surrounding landscape as much as it otherwise would have - as it did during the Arc, I believe. Our abilities to shape mana, practiced during the unweaving of shards, added to this capacity, hence why it was a mistake for me to not attune to black or red mana earlier in the day.

It was both a terrifying and frustrating endeavor. My party held down but one small part of the ritual, and still the energy was overwhelming; merely standing in the area it felt like my leaves were shriveling, as if I had baked in direct sunlight for far too long. Sparks of energy drifted through the air, and some had coalesced into… not quite elementals, but something perhaps akin to them; swirls of energy that were shocking and stunning us as we attempted to unweave. The mana ebbed and flowed like nothing I have ever sensed before, moving into and through us. There were times when, I could tell, the whole party at once was hit by a burst of energy, filling us with mana that we had to rapidly spend in order to not become overfilled. As with the river analogy before, even a wetland can drown, if too much water becomes trapped within.

The unweaving… we struggled with the unweaving. We needed an almost unprecedented number of us, all in one knot, and once, twice, thrice, we discovered that the threads we had tied ourselves to were too disordered, too interlocked, to be untangled - at least in the order that we had begun. Our third attempt was the most frustrating, as we had spent much time at it, only to discover we were in two interlocking rings, never to be separated unless the strings of mana themselves were torn in two. Voices grew heated; arguments simmered, about strategy and knot theory and what kinds of twists had been involved in each undertaking.

But eventually, as we knew we must, we came together for our fourth attempt. Two of our number stood out of the circle, this time, leaving us at the minimum twelve bodies required for this monumental unweaving. [Mary Rose], a healer, to medicine ball us back up if we fell from a mana drain or a stun ray; and Aeliana, to distract and disperse the energies that focused on us - and also because she had the shortest arms of any of us.

This unweaving was successful; but we had to not only unweave the tangled strands, but to hold them in that unwoven state while the mages at the center did the greater part of the ritual, which took a full ten minutes. The waves of mana ebbed and flowed, filling and draining us in turn, and it was all we could do to stay together. The flows of energy that had been our bane during the unweaving became in some ways our salvation during the holding - as being shocked and frozen for a moment in time meant that the overflowing mana could not fill the frozen one to and beyond their brink. The energies shifted, and some began turning us into trees, and that was nearly our doom, as many were still being stunned, and a stunned tree cannot revert itself - and yet a stunned tree still absorbed the mana. At that point we were all practiced in spending mana to disbelieve random things around the area - I disbelieved Calix, and someone's bracelets, and the sky, and multiple trees, simply to push the mana out of my body.

There came a tone, a rumbling, deep and worrying, and the energy around us surged like nothing before. The motes of power become frantic, frenzied, and it was like the previous storm of magic had been nothing but an afternoon drizzle, and this a monsoon. I lost my focus on all our party but those directly next to me, and this nearly proved our doom, but there was nothing else I could do but ensure that I was not overwhelmed by the energy and mana flowing into me.

Thankfully that was the last of it; but as I said before it would have been our doom save for two points of luck. Two people had been stunned at the time, and not able to spend the excess mana. One of those was Aeliana. She stood outside the circle, and in the explosion as her body was overwhelmed by the power flowing into it, only she was killed. The other being unable to spend the excess mana was one I had seen, over the course of the day, but not had the chance to introduce myself to: a golem, made of wood and crystalline, and thus the only being capable of actually absorbing that much mana without exploding and disrupting the circle.

And thus the ritual, or at least our part of it, was a success.

I died, then, as I had already been afflicted by the black mana rash, and the toll the energy took on my body was severe; but the healers were prepared, and were able to revive me - not with ease, but without undue difficulty considering the circumstances. Now, of course, I and the entire rest of the party who participated in the ritual are still greatly sickened by the five-colored mana rashes we have all been struck with, and the healers have expanded their already-large tents to give practically the entire camp a space to rest and recover.

I find myself restless, not knowing the overall outcome of the ritual, but at the same time I know that if we, on the outskirts of the spell, were so greatly affected, then the mages at the center must be doing much more poorly. I am grateful that I thought to arrange care for my birds in advance, with one of the ostrich-keepers, so that they may be adequately tended in my convalesence; although I know intellectually that mana rash cannot spread from being to being, I worry that in my fatigue and pain I might cause them some harm by tending to them. So that is another point of restlessness, as I cannot spend time with them. Perhaps I will spend this month working on my puzzle-box, which has sat neglected for the last turning of the moon.