

Not Groceries; A Side Quest

I am not a barista; I am a potion maker. Brewing and steaming energy, blending and freezing relief from the heat.

I do not drive an old pickup truck; I ride an adopted dragon. An accident with his previous owner causes him to breathe smoke out the wrong end, but we fly well above all the other beasts on the street. He only responds well to me at the reins, but he has plenty of space on his back to carry supplies, and on nights when my friends pile together to ride with me, they can spread their arms and feel like they can fly too.

Right now, I do not have groceries to purchase; I'm on a side quest. I must gather several magic ingredients, artifacts, and treasure. I will combine them, study them, and summon like-minded adventurers to host the Greatest Party of the Century.

First, I ride my dragon to the vast wastelands before the Walmart Dungeon. He's too big to accompany me in. The dungeon is a nexus of ordered chaos. Different realities converged under one massive roof, so now produce from Arcadia grows next to the glacial shelves of Antarctica, and the Enchanted Forest of Clothes blocks the easiest path between the Graveyard of Trees and a sliver of the Akashic Records.

The Gardens of Arcadia greet every quest follower at the entrance gate, but to approach it, I must confront the bewitching scent of the hag's bakery before it. Frosted pastries line the open fence, cutting through the lawn requires passing a flowerbed of cookies, and at the heart of the treachery houses a massive baking oven that permeates the grounds with its tempting aroma. No! I won't give in twice! Nothing here tastes as good as it smells.

Once I am past the baking hag's territory, the lands of Arcadia are verdant with fruits and vegetables. Here the only challenge is sensing the food for which one holds the most potent power and energy. Each plant has a different nature I must squeeze, measure, and sniff for. Each one is disarming traps that will later spring either inedibility or deliciousness.

Once I have gathered the proper magic ingredients, I have neared the chilly outskirts of Antarctica. Its glacial walls emanate a freezing aura that raises goosebumps on my arms and legs, and I know the most precious treasure, ice cream, lies beyond. But such treasure is delicate, and if I collect it too soon on my journey, it will deteriorate. If—

Heaven forbid—I get ensnared in the Forest of Clothes with it in tow, it could be fully corrupted into slimy-sweet soup. The very idea brings a shiver of disgust instead of cold, and I depart for the Graveyard of Trees.

The fastest way to the Graveyard of Trees is through the Forest of Clothes. I am unfortunately weak to its charms. Even as a child, it was my favorite air-conditioned playground. I would play hide-and-seek in the round weeping willow curtains of long pants, or race down groves of shoes as I tested which sneakers made me faster. Now with my own money, the Forest of Clothes holds a different allure: graphic t-shirts. I mentally repeat my mantra, “My closet is too full, my closet is too full.”

Just as I think I am out of the woods—literally and figuratively—a stray leaf of shirt is left draped over the children’s trees. Eye-catchingly tie-dye, not my style though the colors are familiar. It doesn’t belong there. I will return it to its rightful place, but as I turn it around, I am spellbound. The colors *are* familiar, they are the swirl of the portal from Rick and Morty, and the front had both characters jumping through. I could *be* the portal. Was it a t-shirt or an effortless Halloween costume? Should this really count as a t-shirt when it is so clever?

My closet is full, but I’m sure I have space in a drawer.

With an acceptable loss to the Forest of Clothes, I reach the Graveyard of Trees. Here the mausoleum shelves every sort of paper. Plastic mass graves of mummified cardboard tubes, stacked plates embalmed with wax, and cardboard coffins for masses of ghost-soft tissue. Truly, it is graverobbing and desecration that I must buy a package of mummies for nothing better than to wipe my butt, but the alternative is a bidet, and everything about that is unquestionably alien technology. The best I can do is thank the trees for their sacrifice.

From here there is a straight road around the Forest of Clothes that can take me to the Akashic Records. There is no siren song to lure me through this section of forest, as it is mostly for toddlers. Instead, I weave around other adventurers flocking to the sci-fi city of Electronics. Their prices alone dissuade me from detouring, though I do slow to look at the advertising screens.

Soon I reach the Akashic Records, or as I said, a sliver of it. As massive as the Walmart Dungeon is, it holds but a toenail clipping’s worth of humanity’s collective knowledge in book form. There is a much better curated collection of tomes at Words

and Whimsy, but here has the object of power to complete the Greatest Party of the Century. On my last dungeon dive, I had spotted it, a Star Wars themed cookbook, and to help me meditate on the subject, an adult galaxy-themed coloring book.

Finally, I can begin my journey into the frozen crevices of Antarctica. Even standing at the perimeter, the arctic breeze pricks my flesh. I never dress in preparation for this section, especially not when it is summer outside the dungeon. I war with myself to not hunch my shoulders as the temperature drops on entrance, and the best ice cream lies somewhere in the middle of the glacial freezers. I almost compromise the side quest with an inferior brand that I find faster when I see a fellow potion maker, a friend from work. I hesitate to talk long at first, but this presents an opportunity to confirm a future adventurer to the coming Party of the Century. They're interested! What's more, the warmth of their friendship and conversation helps me ignore the present cold. By the time we conclude our friendship summit, the lingering flame of excitement for the party helps me overcome the cold long enough to seize the right ice cream.

I return to my adopted dragon victorious, side quest complete. We ride back home while the ice cream is still cold, where I can plan my next adventure while I meditate on the spiral galaxy of a new coloring book. What side quests will you take on today?