

Storm Rider wasn't the largest dragon, though she was certainly close, yet it was she who approached Viv near the remote peak where they had made their den. They lounged on platforms and terraces carved into the rock by the raw strength of their dominion over magic. What had been a simple pile of rocks was now a garden of carved statues, elegant promontories, and rare flowers. It was also a fragile one, as glassy expanses and claw marks attested. Dragons were not meant to gather and stay together for a long time and they didn't do so unless absolutely necessary. As such, even Storm Rider was uneasy when she addressed Viv, her eyes narrowed, her shoulders tense. Oh, she had a brave appearance, but Viv could read dragons pretty well by now.

We will fly with you. And help you.

The black mana is so thick it will make us sick, should we try to approach.

We will form a Chorus.

"What's a chorus?"

Storm Rider hissed, revealing teeth like serrated knives bent inward like the death traps they were. Arthur's wings expanded ever so slightly.

There are things you wingless mortals are not meant to know.

Viv sustained the glare long enough to gather her will. The transition was not as seamless as it had been the first time, but she managed it.

[Aspect of the Paragon]

There were no stones. No colors. No flesh. There was only mana, and then, by an effort of will, reality superimposed itself back on pure energy.

"I am no mortal."

Her anchor widened.

"And I am not wingless either."

Arthur hissed in quiet protest. Gale did so as well, but his was an expression of aggressive support. Other dragons stirred. Viv was having none of it. She spoke directly into their minds.

You have come, called by Judgment.

You will work with me, as demanded by Judgment.

Or you can side with the dead.

And face his wrath.

The older dragons were cowed, though Viv suspected they were merely wise and capable of self-control. One of the younger ones still stood on its hind leg, so Viv turned to him and revealed her soul. Mostly, she revealed 'Dragonsyer'.

And mine.

The dragon hesitated. Older dragons bristled with impatience, and so the young ones refrained from protesting, for now. Viv returned her attention to the older dragons.

I will need a boon from five of you.

I require your help in this regard.

However, I will offer compensation for this help.

In the form of a gift of precious food.

A few dragons raised their heads, vaguely interested. Arthur took the front for the negotiations.

Freshly caught sea creatures, rich in mana, and perfectly baked to delight a dragon's taste buds.

An offering fit for you, oh mighty ones.

She was all smooth and polite, something Viv had never seen in her entire life. The noose was opened. It was Meadow who sealed the fate of yet another batch of ancient fire breathers.

Tasty tasty.

A large red dragon stood first.

I shall answer the call, for I am mighty!

I claim this offering.

Yet another hapless victim of capitalism and gastronomy, Viv thought. She reverted to her physical form, then realized she had to refrain from shaking her head in sadness. Arthur had grown to become a devious manipulator. What had Viv unleashed upon this world? She'd created a monster.

Right, so what is a Chorus?

Storm Rider watched Viv's reaction as she explained, and something told Viv the old dragoness was actually dying to elaborate.

We will form a mighty hurricane of wing and fire, and ritual that will scorch the land beneath us.

At the apex of the ritual, Judgment himself shall arrive.

He shall breathe a purifying heat onto the pyramid, reducing it, and the dead city, to black glass.

The dragons had a ritual of mass destruction? The fuck?

Nothing will be left.

“Hey wait a moment. I’ll be inside!”

Then your fate shall be at the mercy of your own aptitudes.

As well as Judgment patience.

She smiled, or rather, she displayed her fangs.

Such as it is.

“Yeah yeah I got it. I’m supposed to hurry. Well, let’s get going then.”

Viv had no time to wait. The Harrakan capital might be empty of people and magic, but it held a veritable treasure trove of knowledge, culture, and wealth. Not to mention it was an actual city the Harrakans wouldn’t have to build.

Also, it was a symbol.

Finally, she felt like it would be a major cop out not to confront the person responsible for the undead invasion., Their strange, detached way of communicating hinted at a secret she wanted to uncover, and an interest for Harrak that might lead to a peaceful outcome. There was also the ritual itself... Really, unless the thing hiding under the capital was stronger than an avatar, it was in her best interest to face it.

Viv bid goodbye to all the mortals she would leave behind. There was something insanely cool about flying towards a flight of dragons under the utterly speechless crowd of diplomats and foreign soldiers. Here they were planning campaigns and here she was bringing back the age of legends with mythical creatures, spells, and all that entailed. The Baranese ambassador looked like he’d swallowed a shipment of pepper-infused lemons. They were starting to sniff around her for weakness. She hoped the report would scare the ever-loving shit out of those idiots so they wouldn’t try anything while she was gone.

“Alright, let’s fly!”

Arthur made a point to carry her on her back. Viv thought the dragoness might be too embarrassed, but the condemnation from other dragons had the reverse effect: she thought they were stupid and now stood against them all in defiance. It was probably a teenager thing. Viv was just happy to fly together, to be honest.

Arthur was one of the last ones, joining the tale of the flight. The climb to the clouds was slow and steady, then it was a short sightless journey through black-saturated vapors, and then, the glorious sun.

It was cold up here, with rarefied air but Viv's body could take it. Despite the situation, a smile bloomed on her lips. Dragons, dozens of them, flew on an endless field of cotton-like clouds under the golden rays of dawn. A moment for for a saga and Viv was among them, not truly a part of them but that was ok. Gray mana pushed those mighty entities forward as fast as planes. The roar of the wind that plastered her hair back gave her a sense of weightlessness like she was at the top of the world and nothing could stop her.

Life on Nyil could suck ass, but sometimes, it could rock like hell too.

Mother.

Grow your own wings!

Then you can join.

"I'll see what I can do. Promise."

For a few hours, Viv just forgot about her predicament to enjoy the moment.

Like most good things, the flight ended too soon. The dragon flight dipped under the cloud cover. Black mana saturation increased even before they broke the layer. Viv breathed in the old, familiar spice. her body drank deep of that power, even as the dragons formed a circle over the old capital.

Viv watched it, extending far below like the impossible feature of perfect geometry it was. The city had been designed to be completely flat by brown mana specialists. Its streets met at a perfect angle. From above, it was like watching a perfect plan of a real place, or even a circuit. Everything was too square, too brutal, yet also grandiose and ambitious. It was a monument to humanity's triumph over nature while Sinur's Gate was a marriage, a harmony of melded rocks and climbing vines. It was also here that she'd landed, found Solfis, and almost died.

Above, the cloud cover started to break as the black mana was pushed back by the collective efforts of the dragon. The light of the sun hit the ziggurat head on for the first time in centuries. It showed the devastation in gruesome details. It also showed the white shapes of necrarchs scrambling for cover like so many grubs escaping from an upturned corpse. The disgusting creatures disappeared in the cracks of large buildings. Quite a few had gone

inside of the devastated palace. That might be an issue... at the same time. Viv had the necrarch exterminator with her.

“Let’s go.”

The temperature rose as Arthur descended. Orange motes appeared around Viv, evanescent things for now but she knew what it meant. It felt like standing in front of a reactor as it fired up. A shiver crawled up her spine.

It didn’t last though. A few seconds later and temperatures dropped, and dropped, until even her breath fogged in the air. Arthur shook.

Mother.

The black mana is too strong!

I must drop you here!

“That’s fine. Meadow, you can drop Solfis here. We’ll go first.”

//Dropping now.

The dragons let go. Viv did her best to follow Solfis as the large golem just plummeted down. It was getting colder, and the concentration was now reaching levels that would have killed her in under a minute if she had just appeared from earth now. Black wisps danced through the air on the way down, physical manifestations of the miasma. It was as if Dead Harrak had been sleeping, and now it was awake. Awake, and watching.

Solfis landed with a loud thud, through the roof of a small building adjacent to the massive ziggurat. Viv drifted to the opening. Solfis was standing next to the beheaded corpse of a necrarch in the middle of a ravaged room that might have been a refectory at some point.

“A nice addition to your collection,” she said, pointing at the head.

Her voice came through distorted. It was so cold now that the rare droplets of water clinging to her robe after her passage to the cloud now formed ice crystals clinging to its dark shape like spiderwebs.

//I will have to discard it, your Grace.

//Mana concentration levels are reaching charging stations level.

//I can keep fueled by sheer osmosis, with your authorization.

“You have it.”

They turned to the exit. It was completely dark and cold now due to the concentration increasing yet again. Whatever golden radiance ad caressed the capital was gone now, filtered by an incomprehensible power. Leaving the structure, Viv now faced one of the two sheer sides of the pyramid — one that was not designed for easy access. She looked up to

see the blue opening in the cloud cover and the dragon, but they were a distant dream dulled by immobility and despair. This was the enemy's black mana, and right now, Viv wasn't sure she could contest it. The dead capital was the heart of a destruction of unmatched reach, one that had remained unchanged for centuries.

//This is one of the lesser establishments around the Treasury.

//Civil servants and petitioners would come here to eat or drown their sorrows.

//I have never been here before.

Solfis resolutely turned towards the main steps of the ziggurat, to her left. They walked in the muted silence of the grave. Black mana infused Viv's very bones, and she let them, feeling her human body change through mere pressure. It was making her stronger. In a way, this would be the perfect spot for her if she were even more detached from mankind as the Azure Lady. Viv shook her head. It was too quiet. The enemy had to know she was here. It was hard to miss an army of dragons or a battle golem landing next to one's lair, and yet there were no reactions. It made her worry. If the foe had tried to swarm her with necrarchs then she would have known what to do (mostly just getting out of the way). Now though, the dead city was open to her. There was going to be a trap, or a test. The question was: would success even be possible?

Viv wasn't so sure, though she hoped it would be. She knew too little about who she was even opposing. As the pair finally reached the edge of ziggurat, she knew for sure they were expected.

Two lines of necrarchs waited on either side of the monumental staircase, their crimson eyes focused on Viv with rabid intensity, yet none of them moved. They were like statues of pure rage frozen in place by an impossible will, all of them acting as an honor guard to the depths of the ziggurat. Three stood over a secondary entrance, slightly to the side.

"Looks like we're being invited."

//I am only able to resist attacking them because your protection takes precedence.

//Your Majesty.

//I advise following the dragon's plan, after all.

"No. This is Harrakan business. They'll get to glass the land only if I fail."

//Well said.

//And if it comes to this.

//I cover one side.

They moved in.

The trip down was short. Viv had been here before. Endless corridors of thick stones devoid of any doors or furniture, or indeed any enchantments, were no obstacles to her. When a heavy stone blocked their way, Solfis merely pushed it aside. The mana thickened to absurd

levels as they approached the lower ritual chamber, where the spell that had killed Harrak had left its creation. Viv knew the enemy could only be there.

They reached it, finding lights inside. Spells.

They were expected.

//Ready?

“Ready.”

They went in.

Viv had to stop at the entrance, because in front of her was the cause of the disaster. Nausea took over her until she had to swallow her saliva or risk retching. The room was large, and the enemy was the room.

All of it.

From top to bottom, and from wall to wall, a pale curtain of flesh extended like a cocoon arrayed with the growths of organs, like dozens of necrarchs stretched and hung in a ghastly tapestry. At the center of it all was a woman, a perfectly conserved, perfectly human woman emerging from it like a ship prow statue. She was pale and white of hair, her clothes the aristocratic garb of a Harrakan sorceress. Or at least, that was what Viv perceived at first, but it wasn't true. It was flesh. It was all flesh. The view would have been enough to steal the breath of most people yet Viv had faced avatars and lived. The deep sense of disgust and horror grabbing her soul now didn't come from just an appearance. A deep cloak of repulsion garbed the woman like a corona. She was horrifying on a fundamental level, and a brief inspection revealed why.

[Semeryss, Harrakan Arcane Advisor. Fifth step Harrakan archmage. **CURSED**].

The woman was still human. She was still considered as such by the interface. Viv had seen curses before, but this wasn't it.

The world hated her. The world hated this woman.

It took a lot to be cursed by the slumbering consciousness of an entire planet, yet she had managed it. She was cursed, her entire existence condemned to... to this. And it wasn't done by even a god. It was done by the reality in which they lived. The world hated Semeryss, and it was absolutely revolting, but the most revolting thing of all was that she was conscious, and as far as Viv could tell from the calm demeanor, sane.

Semeryss had been a necrarch wallpaper for three hundred years, and she was still sane, her mind still human. It was impossible. Viv refused to believe it. And then, her gaze traveled left to a receptacle at the edge of the room. Cables of silverite and arcs of reinforced steel held the master prize, the result of the ritual.

It was a sphere two meters in diameter shining with every hue of magic. It burnt like a sun in her mana sight. The power stored there had cost the life of an empire — millions of human lives, trillions of insects, plants, animals, and monsters. A harvest that awakened Nyil.

[The Master Core: unimaginable, self-replenishing power... if you can harness it]

The mana equivalent of a nuclear reactor.

Impossible.

I did not perceive her. She was cut off.

Viviane. You cannot let her control this thing. You cannot.

You have no idea what she can unleash if she gains full control.

Viviane.

KILL Semeryss.

“Welcome.”

The figure bowed. It was a graceful and controlled movement.

“You are the one who cast the ritual,” Viv whispered. “You killed Harrak. You caused the cataclysm.”

“Yes. I am Semeryss, or so I thought you had surmised, but it appears much has been lost that I had hoped would be preserved. My name is Semeryss of Leki, the Arcane Advisor to the Empire, chief archmage and ritual master. I led the ritual to create the perfect tool for the empire, a revolution in magic and mana creation that would have ushered us into a new age. I succeeded, yet failed. This is what I aimed to create.”

She extended a graceful hand towards the Master Core.

“But it should have taken decades, and been only a fraction of this power. It would have been enough as proof of concept. Then, we would have set arrays in mana-rich locations to create more. This core is a revolution in every way.”

Viv’s eyes widened.

“That’s how you can control so many and wield so much power. You have been using the core.”

A burst of power pushed Viv back. It was black yet so strong she was still repulsed.

“I can control so many because I am an unmatched genius, a visionary, one who has kept in control despite the curse placed upon me for my sins. It is my will that lets me achieve the

feats that I have. You would not be able to accomplish a fraction of my achievements. Do not forget it.”

“I’m kind of happy with not having committed a genocide of my own people, to be honest.”

Viv eyed the core. It was pushing power out but... it didn’t feel like it was fully controlled. Something about how the mana flowed felt forced and contrived.

“We are not here to examine my sins. I know them. The world has cursed me for my arrogance, and my impatience. So eager was I to prove I could do it despite the critics of elderly fools that I placed success above safety. I know what I have done. And I know what I must do to end this torment. You need to prove yourself. Or I will kill you and destroy your work.”

“What do you mean, prove myself? And will you... die?”

“The curse will be defeated if you successfully wrestle control of the core away from me. Its power will be sufficient to kill me. If not, perhaps your draconic allies will succeed, though I will certainly make them pay for it.”

The local contraction increased again. Viv looked at her hands, feeling something strange happening. Her index and ring fingers had faded to their elemental form. Her body was breaking apart and turning to elemental without her conscious decision.

“You are making a dirty bomb.”

“I do not understand your outlander terms, but it matters not. They shall pay. The question is, will you succeed? Or perhaps, I will have the satisfaction of killing one last pretendant upstart.”

//YOU WILL FAIL.

“You are here.”

//MANY HAVE UNDERESTIMATED THE EMPRESS.

//WE ARE STILL HERE.

//AND THEY ARE NOT.

“You will have to do better than show up like provincials to a royal gala if you want to take control. Let me show you the difference.”

Mana coalesced before the impassive woman.

Viv’s mind raced. Nous had mentioned that Semeryss didn’t have full control yet. There was a reason she couldn’t use the Master Core despite being the architect of its genesis. She spared a glance towards Solfis.

Of course they'd do that, the fucking control freaks. There is absolutely no way they would have created a construct that could be controlled by anybody. There had to be something about the core or the silverite construct around it that blocked access to anyone without proper clearance. Obviously, Semeryss no longer had it, but maybe Viv could obtain the authorization. It looked like taking her hat had been a great idea. She reached for her waist, grabbing the heavy symbol hanging there. In one smooth motion, she placed it upon her brow.

[Reforged Crown of Harrak]

"Solfis? What should I say if I want to take control of a hard-wired enchantment?"

//... **GOOD THINKING.**

//**ABSOLUTE OVERRIDE: IMPERIAL AUTHORITY.**

"Gods I can't believe I gotta be so cheesy but."

Oh well, she was already gunning for the evil overlady vibes. Might as well indulge.

"Master Core absolute override: imperial authority."

Something like a test hit her mind. It was incredibly disturbing and highly reminiscent of connecting to a wifi network. The question was simple. It was just that being asked this by an inanimate process embedded in a spell felt a bit demeaning. Just a bit.

"Credentials?" it asked.

"I'm the damn Empress of Harrak."

"No, you're not," Semeryss hissed. "Not yet."

The crown was heavy, but it was also hers. The Harrakans may be only shadows of their former selves but even far away, even here, in the middle of the deadlands, they were still indisputably with her. And the crown radiated this fact.

"Identity confirmed. Override accepted."

Viv accessed the Master Core.

Up until now, Viv had always felt like grabbing mana from her core was like drawing from a well. Not the physical act of actually pulling on a rope, but more an act of taking from a finite reservoir. Sometimes it overflowed and she merely had to think about it for her mana to answer the call. Sometimes she was exhausted, and only a trickle could be obtained, and then very carefully lest it killed her. Pulling mana from a focus, like her dagger, was more like having an additional pocket. It was inert, and passive. The Master Core wasn't like that at all. First of all, it was like pulling mana from the environment, like having your own pocket planet to drag energy from.

Second, it was infinite. She didn't know if it was true or not, and as far as she was concerned, it would make no difference. The amount of power in the Master Core defied comprehension. Even an avatar couldn't match it.

The essence of a trillion lives.

“Holy FUCK.”

The heady feeling swallowed her like a tide. She couldn't breathe. It cost all of her attention just to remain conscious. With a supreme effort of will, she turned off the faucet. She was currently in her elemental form. Good thing too or she might have just exploded.

Focus +1 (47)

Now that she was more aware of the Master Core as some sort of reactor, she could feel the other intelligence partly in control of it. Rather than a spell-based control over the core, Semeryss' was more esoteric. She had made the thing and so it obeyed her... somewhat. The Master Core wasn't a conscious entity, not anymore than a computer was. At least for now. It still left Viv at an impasse. She couldn't force Semeryss out because the cursed woman wasn't here 'legally' to start with. At the same time, the Master Core now had a controller: Viv, so Semeryss couldn't draw from it anymore. The two canceled each other out.

Viv gathered her will, and tried to push Semeryss out. By now, all her mind stats were about 45, which placed her at the top of what mankind could rise to. It would have taken a team of genius on earth to match her ability to think, calculate, and multitask. No amount of distractions could have derailed her mental processes. Yet compared to Semeryss, she was nothing. It was like hitting a wall.

They were not playing the same game. The cursed human was orders of magnitude more controlled. It was honestly a bit humbling.

“It has recognized you. Impressive, but you are still too weak to block me. We are in balance,” Semeryss whispered.

//Not quite.

Solfis took a step forward. Spiked tendrils emerged from the ground, the walls. He cut them to ribbons. Semeryss cast a dismissive look at the lethal construct.

“Override: control mode. Sigil, axe, prudence, one five six seven.”

Solfis stopped, and the memory of his old bone frame trying to kill her popped into Viv's mind. It was an unpleasant recollection.

//Override request... denied.

“What?”

Solfis took another step forward towards the woman’s form emerging from the wall. Her physical attacks were nothing to the ancient strike golem.

//Request source identified as: necrarch.

//Source is compromised.

//Aegis protocol in effect.

“Override: arbitration mode. Succession crisis.

//Override request denied.

//Imperial authority status: absolute.

“Impossible. You are cheating.”

But Solfis didn’t care. He was still moving forward at a slow pace, his arms blurs sending pieces of meat flying. Viv knew he was taking his time. She would have helped him but her entire free mind was focused on the core, and it didn’t look like he needed help anyway.

//You will fail.

//I will tell you why no one remembers the name Semeryss.

//And why they know Solfis, and they know Irlafen also, and others besides.

//It is about control through fear.

//You are a rock, Semeryss, you always were.

//Full of certainty and of your own worth.

//And I will admit that your achievements were many.

//You were powerful and respected.

“Irlafen was a good man, Solfis. Perhaps my equal. I only wish he had not been so weak.”

Solfis stopped then. he stood at the center of the room like the undying sentinel he was, but his voice had a strange human inflection now. One that contradicted the unmoving mask of his faceplate.

//Father was not weak.

//This is what you still fail to understand.

//Father opened the lock to my cage.

//He released control, and so I survived, and his memory survived, and your legacy did not.

//And the same can be said of those who lived like you did.

//After the cataclysm, I waited for help that never came.

//As, I presume, did you.

//Our legions and mage cadres never returned.

//They broke apart to secure their own territories.

//The governors of the southlands broke away, creating their own remnants.

//The survivors fled.

//They were absorbed by Enoria, Baran, Helock.

**//The empire was strong, as strong and solid as you are.
//But it was also brittle.
//The shock was too much and it cracked like an egg.
//My master was not weak.
//His legacy survives in me, while others faded.
//Because he built me with love.
//You built your power on fear.
//And it shattered.
//But my chains are broken.
//I am free.**

“You will never be fully free.”

**//I am free enough to disobey you.
//And so.
//Are my children.**

Ares was the first to step through the entrance, carrying a net of hooked wire decorated with severed necrarch heads. Clio and Vulcan were next. With slow and almost cocky moves, the free golems stepped into the room, looking around with some curiosity.

Semeryss turned to Viv.

“You... you are mad.”

“And yet I’m winning. Ladies and gents, if you would?”

//COMMENCING RENOVATION OPERATIONS.

Viv had to agree with Thalia the Sculptor here. The wallpapers sucked ass.

The golems lay into Semeryss’ grotesque body with abandon, tearing great chunks of flesh. Her spells did nothing but charge them. With full access to the core, she could have gathered black mana so concentrated it would have disintegrated silverite itself, but Viv was clamping on the massive thing with stubborn resolve that was as much spite as it was terror. Solfis tore off Semeryss’ main body, only for it to reform in the same spot.

He tore it off again.

“This is pointless,” she said, before being torn off a third time.

**//I can do this for the next ten years.
//And enjoy every second of it.**

Semeryss reformed on the ceiling. One of Ares’ halberd strikes splattered her, again. She reformed.

“I admit that we have reached a stalemate.”

"I don't know; it seems to me like we're kicking your ass," Viv growled.

"You cannot kill me with physical blows alone. You will not wrest control of the core away from me unless I allow it. You are still too weak," she argued from mouths opening from the walls.

The golems didn't stop. Their enthusiasm pleased Viv.

"I can no longer feel pain. I cannot die. Your golems and yourself can go on for a very long time as well. In this paradigm, the final outcome will be left to the dragons. This option is... unacceptable. I offer... an alternative."

The golems slowed down. Viv had no intention of being surprise-melted off the face of the earth by an uncaring Judgment. She decided to go for negotiations instead. Negotiations were nice. She liked negotiations. They showed she didn't always resort to violence.

"Alright, what do you suggest?"

"I am the last living minister of the empire. In the absence of obvious heirs, I am to take the throne, or grant it to a worthy candidate. You are not of imperial blood. You must prove yourself to me."

"I don't need to do shit," Viv stated, more for the record than because she really meant it. "However, for a less stupid resolution to this conflict, I'll accept your request."

"A good start. Now, in which region of Harrak can salt be best harvested?"

Viv blinked, very, very slowly. This was the heart of a continental disaster, she was standing next to a treasure that would trigger entire wars, there were golems, strange women growing out of the walls like fungi, and this insane bitch was quizzing her with the kind of geography questions reserved for seven years old.

"Northern remnants, sorry, the southlands' salt marshes north of Frostbay, along the coast."

"Correct. You have a passing knowledge of the land you claim, after all. Or was it just a fluke? According to Harrakan laws, can a commoner divorce nobility?"

"Yes, if they are able to swear an oath that the arrangement was made under duress or if the noble family is found guilty of a crime."

"You surprise me, pretender. Which family rules the Torun region?"

"Semeryss. No one rules the Torun region. They're all dead."

Viv was left staring at the lost face of the cursed archmage. Or at least she thought it might be so.

“I had hoped, with mountains blocking the spell, that the northern bastions might have been spared.”

“Semeryss, let me ask you a question and I assure you I mean every word of it. What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you have many more questions like that? You know you’re grasping at straws, right? Are you conducting some sort of civil servant recruitment test?”

The woman didn’t reply.

“You know it won’t prove anything, yes? I’ll tell you why I’m the empress. It’s not because I’m inheriting hundreds of years of tradition and bureaucracy after some court intrigue. That didn’t happen. Even the title of ‘empress’ is a grandiose way of stating how things are right now, and the way things are is that people follow me, and the vision I have. That’s it. That’s all there is to it. They could call me Her Great Bloated Witchiness and I could still be in command. None of the old rules and bloodlines matter as much as the fact that those who call themselves Harrakans follow me, and they follow this.”

Viv tapped the crown. Finally, a directly useful symbol.

“You almost killed Harrak. What I brought back might be small and still searching for itself right now. There will be growing pains too. That’s normal. Nations change, and grow, as the people who collectively make it change themselves. What you are asking about, it’s not Harrak anymore.”

“There will always be a Harrak. Is that not what eternal means?”

“Yeah, and the current one is mine.”

“You have not yet proven that you can lead it to greatness,” Semeryss reproached. “Words are fleeting things.”

“My body was remade in the throne room because this is where my soul landed.”

Semeryss gasped.

“I survived through the streets of Harrak despite coming from a world without magic. I found Solfis, extracted his core, built a sled, and dragged him south through the desert. I learnt sorcery as we marched. I almost died from poisoning, yet found and adopted a baby dragon after slaying and consuming her sibling with a mage path and an old knife. I defended a fort from two necromancers and their army with fifteen men and whatever I had learnt. I used dragonbone and resourcefulness to help Solfis rebuild a body. He killed the necromancer. I reach the second step on the caster path in only a few months. I befriended all of Kazar, a border town without much ambition. I led its people north to the mines of Min Goles after we were attacked by a rabid prince. I kept them together. I massacred their pursuers. I struck a deal with the yries. I recruited the hadals to our cause.”

“The hadals obey you?”

“Within our agreement, yes. I got us weapons, hopes, a plan. I led us back to the south where we took back our land. I invented a limb regrowth spell that got us reinforcements, the support of Neriad, and knights.”

“You solved the regrowth conundrum?” Semeryss whispered.

“I defended the city when the prince returned, and in the depths of the forest, I made their lives a living hell. I led our budding army to war and we crushed them. I captured the prince and poured molten gold down his throat. I gained the skill of draconic intimidation. I reached third step. I made our people flourish. I copied and replicated purification obelisks to push the deadlands back. I called our people back from Enoria, from Harrak. I traveled through their lands. I stopped Octas’ avatar for the first time, killing her spiders to protect villagers I had never seen. We slew the avatar. I was captured, then plotted my escape, then killed a fifth step warrior who had promised to destroy us. I ended the Enorian civil war. I recruited talented allies from Helock, from where I graduated. I perfected the regrowth spell and came up with witch gates. I despoiled the Helockian arena and slew their champion. I ascended to the fourth step in two years. I became half elemental. I killed archmage Elunath, and liberated mages for our nation. I reclaimed Sinur’s Gate and all the land leading there.”

“Only a few dozen leagues.”

“In only five years. In this time, we have grown, built alliances, recovered technologies and knowledge, and rebuilt a devastated land. We have redeemed a god and punished an empire. We have reclaimed remnants, made and freed golems. We have done all of this, as one, and you talk to me about salt marshes.”

Semeryss was waiting. Or perhaps she was considering Viv’s words. It was difficult to gauge how much her isolation might have affected her, but it couldn’t have been easy.

Viv decided to go for honest.

“Look, what is it you want? What do you really want, right now, as a person?”

Semeryss sighed softly, confused. Even the golems looked at each other as if searching for explanations.

“Why do you hold on?”

“I have no choice,” Semeryss spat.

“Alright, let me rephrase. Why do you go through so much effort to test us? Why did you send a huge army against us, yet never used it to its full power to leave our troops a chance? Why did you hold the necrarchs back?”

“I wanted to grant them an opportunity to prove themselves.”

“But why? In what way is it important to you?”

Emeryss frowned, suddenly hostile.

“This isn’t a challenge. I am not demanding an explanation. I merely ask that you stop and consider the reasons behind your decision. Why, as a cursed entity, is it so important to you that we prove ourselves?”

“I... I...”

Viv nodded in encouragement. By then, no one was trying to fight anymore.

“I want to matter. When I discovered that someone was pushing back the deadlands, I wanted it to be Harrak, returned, finally.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong: it is important to you that we are worthy of inheriting everything you have done, everything Old Harrak accomplished.”

“There is no Old Harrak. There is only Harrak.”

“Then the Harrak that came before. You want us to be worthy of it, right?”

“Correct.”

“And what does it mean to you, personally?”

Again, Semeryss grew confused and angry. Viv decided to forfeit the question approach. It wasn’t working with that person.

“You said you wanted to matter, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to be remembered? Do you want to have carved some good letters in the walls of history, now, after the end, after everything? Would you say this is the most important thing for you?”

“No.”

“After Harrak, I mean.”

“Then... yes.”

“Then let go.”

Semeryss’ nostril flared. Viv decided to hammer the point down while the old archmage was destabilized.

“We have proven ourselves several times. We are pushing back the deadlands. We have destroyed your horde. Our achievements are many.”

“You used dragons.”

“And is that not a sign of great diplomatic acumen? Hmm? I have no debts to them either. They chose to intervene because you reanimated dragon corpses. I merely drew them into an alliance. Is that not skill?”

Semeryss conceded the point with a nod.

“We are Harrak. My crown is enchanted to prove I am its empress. You have seen the Master Core accept me.”

“You are not of Imperial blood.”

“The first emperor and empress were not of imperial blood either. They made it.”

Semeryss hesitated. Her mask was cracking. Because she was still human, she wasn't completely locked into the circular mindsets of some elemental archmages. It was weird how she and the Azure Lady were opposites, in a way.

“We are worthy, Semeryss. We shouldn't need to be because there is nothing left of the old regime but us, and yet, we are absolutely worthy. You know this.”

“Inhuman allies...”

“Something the old rulers never managed.”

“I...”

She froze, mouth half opened. When she finally closed it, Semeryss had come to a resolution.

“Even if I accept your words, and your offer to let go, how would you even kill me? I tried, believe me. I did try. I cannot destroy myself. The curse will not let me. When I told you you would need the power of the core, I was being truthful. If there is any path to freedom, it eludes me.”

“Isn't it obvious?” Viv asked. “I'll draw your essence into the core.”

“The... the...”

“You couldn't do it because you were not the rightful owner, right? But I could, with complete access.”

Viv knew it made too much sense. Nyil had somehow marked Semeryss but at the same time, it must instinctively want to close the putrid wound that was the deadlands. It must have wanted them gone, or their creation wouldn't have been condemned so thoroughly. Viv merely needed to complete the cycle.

“Yes. Let me suffer what they have suffered. Let me be the last... the last to pay for my hubris with my life.”

Viv nodded. It was strangely easy, but at the same time, maybe there was some sort of poetic justice to it.

Semeryss removed herself from the Master Core control array. Viv suddenly had full access. She had to breathe slowly. it was something that could probably blow up HARRAK a second time. Like being given full control over nuclear missile silos. The thought was dizzying.

The power was there, quiescent, and so monstrously large. It was almost unnatural to draw more power into it, but Viv knew how to do so. She connected to the core as if it were just a focus.

“Yoink.”

Her first and most basic of spells hit the cursed form of Semeryss. The resistance was immediate and absolute. There was no way in hell she would be able to kill Semeryss unless the woman allowed it. Slowly, she did. Little by little, the black mana that animated her poured into the Master Core. Viv let Emeryss take her time, because she had been holding for so long that it must be hard to let go now.

As Semeryss grew more used to the sensation of dying, the flesh that covered every wall started to retract. Blackened stone appeared under the retreating mass of flesh. Semeryss' grotesque body was melting. She was relinquishing more of herself with every second.

It was almost over.

In that very last moment, Semeryss chose to fully let go. Her face broke into an expression of deep regret and intense guilt, emotions she must have been repressing for countless years. Now free at the last moment of her existence, they twisted her composed features into those of a broken human who had destroyed everything she had ever loved through her own carelessness. Black tears fell from her crimson necrarch eyes. They marred her white cheeks. It was just for a single second, yet Viv would never forget it.

“I... I just wanted to...”

And then she was gone.

The remaining mass of flesh that was still her turned to dust that poured on the ground. Viv was forced to block her nose. It was weird how quickly it happened.

Viv very gingerly severed her connection the the core. Now that massive ball rested on the ground, quiescent, its surface shimmering with a riot of vivid colors. Fuck, she could only draw black from it but give that thing to Rakan, and... but that was a discussion for another time.

“Right, well, it’s done. She found peace. We won.”

Champion’s leadership: Expert 3 to 6

Well done.

Solfis managed to look pained, an emotion he conveyed without moving.

//We are indeed victorious.

“Then before we consider the ridiculously insane tool that fell into our hands, there is something I urgently need to do. If we want to keep the palace at all.

Viv flew out, followed by the golems. It was very bright outside now that nothing was fighting the dragons for control over mana. All of the necrarchs had disappeared. Well, those that had survived the second golem delivery anyway. The sun shone on cracked, dull stone. Viv raised her eyes to a vortex of powerful energies treading dragonfire. The scar on her arm pulsed with phantom pain.

A massive dragon presided over the titanic ritual, his body as large as an airliner. Viv waved at him.

“Hey, Judgement! Hey! Heeeeeey!”

The golems arrayed themselves in a half circle. Viv kept waving. She didn’t really want to fly up, but also she didn’t really want to leave. It would be sort of annoying to lose the Master Core at this junction.

Others might have thought that it was too powerful a tool, that mankind wasn’t ready for it, and that it should remain buried. Fuck those people, Viv thought. What an absolute copout. Mankind was never going to be ready. Each generation had to go through years of education and learning just to not be total assholes. She was going to get the core and then use it and that was it.

The absolute monster that was Judgment flew down with lazy grace, with Arthur having to flap her wings to match his speed even though he wasn’t really trying. Shadows covered Viv and the golems.

The behemoth’s landing happened in silence. His massive claws rested on stone without breaking them. He had chosen to land underneath Viv, yet even with the steep inclined, and even on his belly, his head still towered over Viv.

You have carried out our vengeance.

The foe is dead.

His eyes pierced through the many layers of stone.

And you found something most precious.

A chill of realization crawled up Viv's spine. She had not tried to move the Master Core yet. If Judgment decided he wanted it... she didn't like her chances,

Actually if he wanted to take it, there wasn't much she could do. Her only path to keeping the stone was for Judgment to follow his own rules.

"This is a human-made, human-controlled resource," she said, reminding him of his own decision not to interfere.

Not that it would do anything if he decided it was too precious for her to have it.

Judgment leaned forward, eyes narrowing, but to Viv's familiar eyes, his was not an expression of annoyance. It was really weird to say but he almost seemed... resigned.

I know.

Keep it, and keep it well.

Hide it like the most precious of secrets.

If others learn of it, they will bring war to your people.

Find a way to safely harness the Master Core.

Because.

You will need it.

It was Viv's turn to frown in confusion.

"What? Hmm, Judgment? Are you alright?"

He didn't reply. After a while, he stood on his legs again. Wind buffeted Viv's hair when he opened his wings.

The task is complete, by your hands. Well done.

Arthur landed nearby.

I helped! I helped!

Judgment huffed in amusement, or at least Viv hoped it was. The warm puff of air was enough to make her sweat.

You have done well, too.

May other dragons take heed of your decisiveness.

I know not where your strange path leads, in the end.

If anything, it shall be interesting.

Good luck, young one.

Until we meet again.

He took off, pushing Viv on her ass. He'd done it on purpose, the old fucker.

"He was joking when he said we would need it, right? Right? I'm sure he was joking."

Three years later.

Dean Tallit inhaled the delicate nawa aroma from one of his two steaming cups. With a minute flex of magic, he opened the door to his balcony. It opened to a pleasant morning. Sunlight poured into the bathroom, while a gust of fresh air pushed the scent of nawa further towards his bed. A delicate alto groaned, and the cover shifted. Tallit drank the curve of tenured black mana professor Ashra's waist, the dark skin familiar yet so very enticing. He smiled, knowing the scent of breakfast would prove too strong very soon. He was in no hurry.

He stepped onto the balcony and sat in his favorite chair. Helock lay before him in all its ageless glory, all the palaces, all the merchant houses, all the banks, power both mundane and sacred like toy buildings in front of him.

Sometimes it was nice to be the head of the continent's best place of learning.

There was some agitation in the streets but he paid it no mind. If it were urgent, someone would have knocked on his door. Ashra stepped out a moment later. She was gloriously naked. No one could see her here, since even griffin riders were prohibited from flying overhead. She stretched in the way he liked. Her confidence made him want to stand and hold her against his chest.

She froze, eyes up. He followed her gaze. At first, he saw nothing, nothing that should be of concern anyway.

Then he realized the issue. There was a spot where there was indeed nothing, but there ought to be something. And that was wrong. Very, very wrong.

Helock's largest floating island was missing.

"Who the fuck stole the Chalice?"