

At the heart of the world of Niyl stood a mountain of impossible height. Its sheer cliffs of permafrost were vertical walls gnawed by unceasing winds, and in it hid horrid creatures. From grumpy wyrms to ancient elementals, its fauna was the deadliest in the world, while outside, scathing magical gales could scour the flesh from the bones of even the hardest explorers. And yet, every year, some still tried to climb to its peak, for it harbored the city of the gods: Larrean.

Ah, Larrean, where strolls could last for moments or eons, where demiurges beat the pavement hand in hand with beings as old as time itself. Solemn temples of marble and gold rose next to eldritch constructs of shells and bones. Coral walls encircled crystal towers and obsidian keeps. The air smelled of spring, of brine, of a kiss by the sea, changing with every step. It was an impossible land where only the mightiest could tread and where one could sell a soul to buy a moment.

The only constant in this dizzying chaos of splendor occupied its highest hill. The Apex Palace held the throne of the ruling monarch of this flourishing metropolis and it guarded its spot with a ferocious zeal, for whoever controlled Larrean, controlled the world.

Within reason.

At the back of the palace, two divine guards in golden armor kept their vigil on either side of a stained glass window of epic proportions. The masterwork represented a decade of grueling effort from a legendary artist, each dye, each detail painstakingly placed to render the victory of the current pantheon over the primordial gods.

It suddenly exploded outward in a shower of broken shards.

The figure of a naked man slammed against the ground with a grunt, before rolling several times and crashing against a centennial oak, which cracked under the strain.

“ASSHOLE!” a voice screamed from inside.

The left guard sighed heavily.

On the ground, the King of the Gods stumbled to his feet and held his gorgeous head between two trembling hands. Wheat-colored ringlets adorned a face handsome enough to make angels weep. Right now, however, his charm was somehow diminished by the unfocused brown eyes, the grill chicken skin stuck to his chest hair, and the scratching of his left ass-cheek.

Maranor, the Goddess of War, stepped out from the remnants of the shattered pane. Fury turned her black eyes into pits. It furrowed her august brow with thunderous wrath and set her raven hair aflutter. It spoke of the desolation of nations.

“Not only do you cheat on me,” the deadly belle intoned, crossing her arms under her modest bosom, “but you do it morphed into a golden manatee? A manatee? Have you gone mad?”

The hem of her white dress slowly turned red with fresh blood, an ill omen if there were any. The king of gods, who looked no worse for the wear after his recent defenestration on account of being God of Luck as a side gig, ignored it. His overtaxed brain still tried to operate through the cataclysmic hangover harrying him.

The words 'golden manatee' somehow cut to the haze of immortal-grade alcohol.

Disaster struck.

The King of Gods, Emeric, smiled beatifically at the memory of his ravishing, plump-nosed shape.

"We were off our arses and thought it was funny," he replied.

A preternatural silence spread over the entire city. Entire legions of warriors and scholars stopped to a standstill. The dark clouds of fate on the march covered the midday sun like a swarm of locusts.

Somewhere in the depth of Emeric's mind, an ancient instinct awoke, one that dated back to an era when he was not quite as durable as he was now: his survival instinct.

"Oh SH-"

[Divine Killing Blow]

[Divine Uncanny Dodge]

Both skills fired at the exact same time. A ravine formed in the hallowed ground where Emeric used to stand, on a stone that was reputed to be indestructible.

Maranor now held a two-handed sword as tall as she was. The [Slayer] had ended many beings who had thought themselves beyond the reaper's reach. Her expression had gone beyond anger to emerge on the peaceful land of unadulterated violence.

She was going to kill him.

He was a dead god walking.

Emeric did the only wise thing he could. He ran, and she followed.

Maradoc sighed when his erstwhile brother-in-arms stumbled into the House of Many Gates, his locus of power in Larrean.

Alcoves occupied both walls which extended beyond the horizons. It was, as they said, bigger on the inside.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, Emeric's expression changed dramatically. Where a gibbering wreck of a coward bumbled before, now there was a mighty god. Golden energy rippled beneath his hale skin, and he stood without a hunch.

"Is it truly time?" the god of travels and mysteries asked his old friend.

"It could not have gone better if I had planned it," the other one replied with confidence, "your twin sacrificed a century of schemes with one act of anger."

"Do not be too confident now. We cannot afford it. I suppose you would like your exit?"

"If you please."

Maradoc waved a lazy arm and one of the alcoves was now host to a blue portal, which Emeric crossed without hesitation. It closed behind him.

The door banged open.

"Where is he?" his sister demanded.

Maradoc did not reply, even as she came to stand before him with her dread weapon and her even worse temper. They matched hair, eyes, and unyielding scowls.

"Be careful that I do not consider you an enemy as well, dear brother," the woman finally said.

The room darkened. From the alcoves now came whispers at the edge of hearing, fragments of languages long-forgotten that spoke of things best left alone. Maradoc matched Maranor.

"Remind yourself of who you are speaking to, dear sister, or I will."

They stood frozen, face to face, entrenched in an animosity that only defiled love could bring. It was the intruder who relented first.

"It's only a matter of time," she declared on her way out.

Maradoc's expression turned melancholic as he watched his last living relative go. They had shared so much, and now he had taken the last steps to unbind his fate from hers. Where she had chosen to go, he would not follow. The cost was not worth it.

He turned back to his books with the vain hope that they would dispel the pain. No one suffered like a god could.

Emeric's body disintegrated into its component atoms the moment he crossed the space between worlds, just as planned. A world came into view, a blue planet with plenty of land masses colored yellow and white and green. It was nice enough, and devoid of any planetoid-sized orbital squids or anything too unpleasant.

His soul activated a special spell prepared for the occasion, and a small grid flew towards the radiant orb of his psyche.

"No magic, as agreed. Hmm, good development level! How do these metal tubes fly I wonder? Technology? Incredible. Some of those nations are rich too. Excellent," the mighty soul told itself.

Now, to find a suitable host.

There was one thing that Emeric had always wanted to get, something that had been denied to him for ages, he who had drunk pure mana from the spring of eternal winter and suckled on the teat of the queen of dryads.

He wanted a female orgasm.

He heard it was quite nice.

And the polymorph spell could not get him one. It was too superficial a change to grant him this experience.

"That's right, I'm going to be a lass. Even if Maranor manages to track me to this world, she will never imagine that I would voluntarily incarnate myself in a womanly shell. This plan of mine is brilliant!"

So, yes, the host, a woman.

His net narrowed down to three billion individuals.

"That many?! Wow. At least I get to be picky."

She needed to be a young adult. None of that growing up nonsense. And not married, obviously.

She had to have peerless magical potential. Even if the world was devoid of magic, Emeric's soul could create its own. It would be a shame not to use it.

That still gave him almost six thousand hits!

Well she had to be hot, obviously.

Two thousand.

From a rich nation, from a connected family, and constantly surrounded by attractive people. A formal education. A loyal friend. A good sex drive.

There were still twenty entries and he was at a loss. He found one with mesmerizing green eyes and who was already asleep, which was convenient.

"You will do."

Instantly, he traveled down and to the body of the host. The mortal soul was torn off with a mighty swing and he held the tiny white orb in his own golden hand.

He was pretty sure the process was painless.

Probably.

He slid inside the now deserted mortal coil. As his essence expanded to fill its new container, he felt a pang of guilt stab his cold and desiccated heart.

"You were kind of shafted there, poor girl," said the man who had done the shafting, "I guess I could help you."

There was also the slight problem of soul imbalance between this realm and his own. Could he kill two manticores with one disintegration ray?

"I'll just send you back in my stead."

Emeric opened a minuscule portal to some power locus back home and shoved the soul through. As the gate closed, he breathed into it enough energy to reform a body. He left a tiny bit of himself as well, for good luck.

"Let it be known that I am a benevolent god," Emeric told himself with satisfaction.

He finished his integration.

January 2013. Mopti airport. Mali.

A tall woman in the beige uniform of the French special forces strode to the fortified entrance of the main concourse. She found her target sleeping peacefully against the sandbags, hands on her rifle. She kicked the thick body armor.

“Wake the fuck up, Cinderella!” she said.

“Naskay?”

The woman frowned, concern evident on her brown, handsome face.

“You got a stroke, Viv?”

The smaller woman blinked, emerald eyes drifting around with confusion. She recovered quickly enough.

“Sorry Mouq, errr, weird dream is all.”

“Well get your ass in gear, corporal, the beardies downed a Gazelle helicopter near Konna. We got to blow up the wreck.”

“Yeah, yeah...” the freshly reincarnated god answered.

The intruder stood up and inspected their surroundings. They checked their new host and pilfered memories for a hint on what had gone wrong.

Magical talent? There and waiting.

Interesting background? Back home.

Attractive? Yes, under the layers of Kevlar and ceramic plates.

Surrounded by hot people?

An armored transport rolled to the compound’s gates. All around, fit men and women loaded up and checked their weapons.

“Fuck me,” they said with feeling.

Niyl was a world of mighty continents and vast seas, not unlike earth. One of those was Param, a large circular mass linked to its only neighbor by an isthmus no broader than a city. A fertile land, it also boasted the dubious honor of being the location for the greatest magical catastrophe ever recorded. The Western part of Param still bore in its flesh the stigma of this awesome event.

Seen from up high, the scar looked like a spot of necrotic tissue on an otherwise healthy body. A closer look would reveal a massive valley surrounded on all sides by snow-capped mountainous ranges, with the exception of a tiny gap in the south. The area was darkest at its core, though shrubbery and enduring plants gave it a greenish tint the farther one goes from the epicenter. There, the Old Empire had made its seat of power, from which it had terrified the world. There, its elites reached summits of magical ability the world had never seen, and there, they weaved their own doom. The legacy of their might could now only be found in private collections and in the languages of kings. The Old Empire had died an ignominious death at the apex of its power.

Now, only the mindless undead treaded its sandy corpse.

A cautionary tale.

Only one expedition successfully explored the old capital of Harrakan where the fateful experiment took place, and they reported a cursed city, its empty street still dominated by the vertiginous form of the Imperial Ziggurat. A mighty cadaver, gutted by a cataclysmic explosion, as imposing as the remains of an ancient drake.

In the throne room of the emperor, a figure stirred. It shivered in pain. Arms and legs locked in a dead grip that left its muscle straining, until two green eyes opened.

The figure let out an ear-shattering scream of pure agony. The woman scratched her naked form with enough strength to draw blood in a vain effort to push back the aftershock of the terrible experience she had suffered. It was but a memory, a remnant of an ordeal she no longer possessed the means to understand, and yet just that little was enough to make her want to kill herself. The atrocious suffering could not be explained with the words she knew. Hell, she was not even sure it was her nerves flaring up. It felt more intimate than that, a deep malaise, as if her body did not quite fit. No matter what 'it' was that had caused her current condition, 'it' had been abominable.

She stayed there for a good thirty seconds, gulping air as if it were free.

Eventually, her nociceptors must have saturated or something, because enough neurons fired to make her realize her predicament.

“Fuck!”

She stood up in a rush, pain pushed to the back of her mind by her current condition. She was absolutely butt-naked. It was cold as hell, and she already had goosebump.

And there was a draft where there should be none.

“FUCK!”

She checked her forearms. Not one dark hair. She passed a hand on the glistening surface of her skull.

“FUUUUUUCK!”

Her hand trailed down to the smooth surface where her eyebrows used to be.

“What the hell?”

She quickly checked herself. No visible wounds. No sign of external trauma, though she was shaking from the cold and her fingertips were showing signs of cyanosis. They were already blue.

Only then did she check her surroundings.

“Aaaaaah what the...”

She was inside of a room as big as a hangar with walls of massive stones covered in the tattered remains of pennants and tapestries, their colors long faded. Debris covered the ground, seemingly made out of ossified wood and cracked bones. Human bones. A massive throne occupied the far wall with the ceiling collapsed behind it. A boulder the size of a bus had crashed through the ground to her left in some distant past. It now let in frigid air and a morose winter light.

On the throne sat a crowned skeleton with its ghastly skull resting on a bony hand.

And by its side were six mummified bodies clad in black, still holding the rusty hilts of broken weapons.

Either the skeletons were pygmies, or the dead king was fuckhuge.

The woman pinched herself, because what else could she do?

It hurt.

Also, she was freezing her tits off.

Alright, alright, think. Her name was Vivane Saint-Lys. Twenty-four. Corporal and medic. Stationed inside of Mopti airport with the rest of her platoon to protect it from Jihadists.

This was not Mopti. Way too fucking cold.

The thought that she may have been captured and sent here was immediately dismissed. They had sentries, she would have been awake. No, she was clearly somewhere... Well...

She felt wind behind her. A massive opening in the wall let her see a sooty sky, the kind of nasty stuff they showed in dystopian movies.

She walked out into a frigid gale and her eyes widened in surprise.

She stood near the top of a pyramid of impossible size. The massive obsidian steps that started before her shrunk in the distance until they were humorously tiny. The pairs of statues lining it were the size of four men, but near the bottom they looked as small as toys. There were other entrances, many of them obstructed or collapsed and it was not difficult to see why.

In front of her, a city extended for kilometers upon kilometers with the exacting precision that only rigorous urban planning could achieve. There were estates and temples and churches and squares, all darkened and dead, all devoid of movement. A desert of basaltic sand extended beyond to mountains far, far into the distance. Pieces of rubble the size of apartment buildings dotted the land as if a titan had been playing weight throw. It only took a moment for her to realize that the origin of said rubble was not before her.

She turned around.

Where the top of the pyramid used to be, there was now a massive hole surrounded by the molten, ragged edges of vitrified stone. The size of the crater was not normal. It was not what she could associate with heavy ordinance, no. It was something she would have associated with asteroid craters, or the impact of a tactical nuclear warhead.

It had come from the inside.

It gave her vertigo.

She shivered violently and ran back into the relative shelter of the room, back hunched and arms held tightly. She recognized the telling signs of hypothermia.

“Right. I need to — GYAAAA”

She ducked back when white glyphs appeared in the air before her. The prompt retreat had been of no use: the floating symbols had simply followed her gaze. The only thing that calmed her down was the strange sensation that she understood their meaning, even if she knew it was impossible. They said ‘please wait’.

And then, the glyphs faded, only to be replaced by roman characters.

[INTEGRATION COMPLETE. ADAPTING USER INTERFACE]

“Err.”

This did not look good.

[ADAPTATION COMPLETE. PLEASE STAND BY...]

The font had changed to something vaguely futuristic. It was just weird.

Then a window appeared, still in the same font and with a transparent background of light blue. At least it was not in Comic fucking Sans.

Welcome to Nyil, Outlander. You have been transported to a new world!

Every sapient of this realm benefits from magic under the guidance of the god Nous, via the interface now granted to you.

Magic.

Magic magic magic. Really? That was... incredible? If it were true, of course, but magic? Despite her dire circumstances, a teeny-tiny part of her quivered with excitement.

Magic!

Like the stories she had read when she was young, before reality had become too heavy and she had grown too jaded.

Also, transported? That was decent news. Her first hypothesis was that she had been smeared by a mortar shell and her brain had been frozen by her rich family, before being plugged into some bullshit augmented reality thingie in the year 2326.

Transportation to another world was way better.

Viv realized that incoherence was one of the symptoms of hypothermia and started to jump from one leg to another like a drunk goose.

To help you on your journey, you have received the blessing of Maradoc, god of travels and mysteries. Additional features will unlock as your body adjusts to magic.

You have been granted the following benefits:

- [Old Imperial Language] at native level (local language)
- Vastly improved stats and skill acquisition speed
- Your digestive tract has been filled with nutrients

Good luck out there!

Her digestive... what the fuck?

Wait, hold on, that was not important.

Another world! Magic! She was still not over it.

But that world was not hers, and the squad depended on her.

“But why? Can’t you send me back?” she asked the air, feeling very silly.

“Hello? Anyone? Interface? Marasomething, wait, Maradoc? Nous? Oh great and magnificent gods Maradoc and Nous, I pray to thee. Answer mine... Ow!”

She reeled as the deep unease she had felt before came back with a vengeance.

“Right. Sorry if I offended.”

System update! Your physical condition has been assessed.

Current status:

- Hypothermia (mild)
- Mana poisoning (very mild)
- Soul trauma (serious)

“Ooookay?”

Soul trauma did not look good at all. It was probably due to having one’s soul tossed into a parallel universe or something. Maybe she had been smeared by a shell after all, tiny bits of Vivian sent up in the air. Maybe Mouq had seen her large intestine. That would be weird.

System update! Your magical condition has been assessed.

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 7%

Current attunement: 0.14%

Yeah yeah whatever, this meant nothing to her. Unless she could pop fireballs out of her ass, this was of limited use. Alright. Whatever. First things first.

Viv pushed back her fears and her questions as her training took over. It had taken her a long time but, to be fair, those were unusual circumstances.

Right. So.

Shelter, water, food. In that order.

The collapsed place she was in was shit, but the town below looked more promising. The only problem was that it would take hours to get down to find something and... she did not have hours.

Viv eyed the guards around the dead king.

They were still wearing some sort of black jumpsuit, the only thing still intact in this place. Even the colossal mummy's crown was all cracked and dull.

Hmm.

Problem was that this was a magic world and her limited experience of fantasy literature and Minecraft told her that disturbing them would be a Bad idea, capital B.

On the other hand, if they woke up and pulped her at least she would be warm before she died.

"Right. Right... Steady now."

She approached the group in light step, then screamed like a sissy when another window popped up.

"Fuck!"

Interface update! Your stats have been assessed. Adjustments will occur.

Physical		Mental	
Power	8	Focus	19
Finesse	16	Acuity	19
Endurance	15	Willpower	19

“Shhh! Ah, it’s all in my head...” she remembered.

She returned her attention to the still unmoving forms down the hall. Any time now, they were going to start moving and bash her head in with her own femur.

She moved forward, teeth chattering. Her eyes were fixed on the shapes with laser focus. If they started to reassemble, she would run in and grab one by the back then run like hell. The bodies were dessicated, so probably not too heavy.

Focus +1

You have reached a milestone! You have gained the inspect skill.

“How convenient,” Viv muttered to herself.

Alright then inspect that dead thing over there.

[Dead person]

“Wooooow,” the woman said, stumbling a bit. The skill activation had been... weird. And strangely painful. But not the soul-shattering painful of before, more like using a cramped muscle she did not know she had. Her chest, brain, and, she guessed, optic nerves had heated up a bit.

The imparted knowledge had appeared in her brain as if she had heard it and memorized before. It was peculiar.

Also, fucking useless.

“I can see that, you twat.”

But nay, hold on, she was being too hasty. If this thing was correct, then she was safe! It had not said 'Fucking Skeletor of short-tempered Fuckery, currently finishing his light nap.' It had said "dead person".

And this one wearing the black onesie?

[Dead person]

Those dead were dead! Hurray!

Viv abandoned any attempt at stealth after checking all six guards and rushed to the first one she saw, then to another since candidate number one had been a hulking bodybuilder. She found one her size and turned the body around.

"Sorry friend, I need it more than you do."

There were no zippers but there was a sort of pressure button on the shoulder that opened the suit to the waist. She remarked in passing that the body was perfectly conserved as she methodically took it out. The ancient Egyptians could not have done better. It was a stark contrast to the other bones at her back. As to why they had endured and the others had not, she had no idea.

She slid into the jump suit and closed it around her. It was smooth to the touch and very soft inside. She ignored the little voice in her head that told her that her crotch was currently where a pair of dead bollocks had been mashed for possibly years, and that if there was one way to catch fantasy ebola, that was it.

Viv stood up and started to shiver more violently as the heat got trapped between her skin and the blessed weird fabric.

Wait, she had forgotten to inspect the thing.

[Faded skinsuit (enchanted)]

Good. It would have been stupid to don it and realize too late it was some slumbering parasitic lifeform.

Now, there was the issue of shoes. Thankfully, the skin suit fit nicely up to and including her feet. That would help her but she would need some actual boots at some point. Only her head was uncovered. It was also blatantly obvious that she was not wearing a bra, but since the fabric was thicker on the chest, it worked out, somehow.

That thing was surprisingly comfy.

You are no longer suffering from Hypothermia.

Nice.

Viv inspected the room and considered bringing two things. The first was a rusty piece of weapon which was better than nothing, but she decided that if anything was going to jump at her, thirty centimeters of rusty metal were not going to do shit. The second was the crown on the king's head.

[Crown of the Old Empire]

It was dull and broken. Spires of metal were meant to rise up and back. Most were stumps now.

It looked massive.

In the end, Viv's decision was not motivated by the apparent weight, nor by the obvious lack of nearby markets to change this into coin. There was something sad and majestic about the seating figure of that ancient monarch, forever holding court where only gales and darkness could attend. It was, she realized, the only thing in the room that still had a smidgen of human dignity. And that mattered to her.

On a whim, she placed all guards side by side with their weapons on their chest and whispered a quick prayer.

"So, there are gods here. Whoever is listening, please grant peace to these long dead souls and allow them to reach the afterlife of their faith. Thank you."

Nothing happened but she felt better.

She left the throne without looking back

The wind outside was still howling and cold. It slapped against her naked head and she felt sorry for all those bald guys who forgot their hats at home. The descent went quickly and she realized that she had maintained the shape she was in when she had, well, left. Or died.

Deep in her heart, she had the nagging feeling that if one were to bring her body over, there were no reasons to leave the hair and stomach content. She also remembered her scream back when she woke up. It had been powerful stuff that had come from... somewhere deep.

Perhaps this body was brand new.

And would that not be weird.

In any case, it functioned well, and she was not feeling hungry or thirsty yet. Her path led her down, and down, and down, at a stable pace.

After ten minutes, she was only halfway to the ground. She turned again and again to see the apocalyptic hole that had devastated the ancient structure. It did not take a genius to guess that whatever event had done that was also responsible for the general state of, well, utter shit, that the rest of this place was in.

Viv shook her head. Shelter then water then food. A place this big was bound to have wells and perhaps some still held potable water. Maybe. She had to move forward now and panic later.

Another twenty minutes and she was down. She had used the elevation to get an idea of where to go. The entire city was arranged as a grid of regular massive squares with only a few structures extending further than one bloc. She was now on the main highway, one that would lead to gates and the city exit. There were no large walls that she had seen that separated the desert from the remnants of civilization.

She could spot the tall pillars marking the end of the town from here. They were kilometers away, but the city was impossibly flat.

She needed a shelter of sorts, one that preferably had water. That was her first priority. Her best hope for food and supplies and boots would be barracks. Soldier food was designed to last through two extinction events in a row and still be edible, for a certain definition of edible anyway. If there was anything left here, it would be in a place like that.

Right now, the buildings to her left and right were imposing edifices of columns and tall walls with slanted roofs, slightly elevated for maximal impact on the populace. Images of what looked like dragons and other fantastic creatures were engraved everywhere and present in massive statues, but they were now all darkened and defaced. Even then, she could recognize the heavy-handed paw of a public office when she saw one. Those were government buildings designed to inspire solemnity.

Viv thought quickly. Barracks would most likely be squat things with tiny openings so as to be defensible. She was not quite sure about the level of technology yet, but the presence of cold weapons probably meant that it was around the middle ages or something. She had no idea how much magic would impact the world, but squat defensible buildings seemed like a safe bet.

Viv moved faster now. It was getting a bit darker, she thought. A place like this without a speck of vegetation would be ass-freezing, eskimo-licking cold at night. She had to find a small space that she could close. And covers. She made sure to stay by the walls and made plenty of use of the [Inspection] skill.

[A large building.]

[A wall.]

[Sand.]

Did the skill think she was a toddler?

She turned left at the first intersection and went on. There were small structures in the distance and she felt more hopeful.

Come to think of it, there should be barracks by the city gates. That made sense, right?

Acuity +1

You have reached a milestone! You have gained an increase to your processing speed. You can now perceive the word at a faster pace for a limited time at the cost of increased fatigue.

Nifty.

Adjustments are still in progress.

Fair enough, she thought, dismissing the windows. She was still moving alongside the stupidly long public office. The gates were a good idea, but she was at least an hour away at a solid pace and the sky was definitely darkening now. Its gloominess was getting even more depressing. She could find somewhere for the night and—

A snort.

Viv smacked herself against the wall and stopped. She had definitely heard something.

She heard it again. It was definitely someone, or something, sniffing the air. She sneaked forward to a large side gate and took a quick glance.

The gate led to stairs up towards the main building. There was another column entrance maybe fifty meters away from her. It hosted the origin of the noise.

It was a massive, white horror born from the fiery depths of the some obscure circle of hell. Its pallid skin clung to stringy muscles and bony ridges with some horrible elongated humanoid head on top, with no nose and a jaw that could swallow a child in one gulp without chewing. It had a flat face with two slits, tiny red eyes, and enough teeth to shame a great white shark. As she watched, massive talons gouged the heavy stone as if they were made of biscuits. It was as if the Xenomorph had shagged Gollum and their spawn had grown to the size of a fucking elephant.

'Ohgodohshitohnofucketyfuckfuckfuck' Viv thought to herself. With feeling.

[Necrarch ravager]

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck.

Your [Inspection] General Skill has improved to rank 2/5!

[Necrarch ravager: an extremely dangerous undead creature]

No shit, Sherlock.

The abomination sniffed the air one last time and placed a limb outside. It then blinked and hissed in displeasure, before heading back in.

Ok.

Ok, that was bad.

That was really bad.

Because she was pretty sure that the only reason the thing had gone back in was because it preferred the shadows.

Night was coming pretty quickly and she had absolutely no way of getting out of here before it happened.

Ok, ok, focus. That thing was big. Maybe there were other things that were also big. Maybe she could find a small place where she could hole up from all the stupid big things. Ok.

She trotted, staying low and quiet under the dusky grey heaven. She walked past what seemed to be private residences and work places, all showing signs of that weird brutalist architecture with decorations on top. They all shared the same large entrances. Sometimes the gates were opened and she caught glimpses of inner courts with dried out fountains and blackened soil, none of which looked even remotely defensible.

It was not barracks that stopped her, but a light. It was now well on its way to twilight and the sky was reddening a bit, though she had no idea where the sun may be through the thick cover of clouds. She spotted the blue radiance from the corner of her eyes, to her right, in some empty plaza. She turned there and ran.

Memories of abyssal fishes luring their prey invaded her panic-stricken mind. She discarded them. Despair moved her legs.

The plaza was empty. It was circled on all sides by a covered promenade leading to low buildings. She spotted many large windows, now broken, and many entrances.

Restaurants?

Acuity +1

Adjustments are still in progress.

Yeah yeah. The only point of interest was at the center of the square. There was, ironically, a circle. It shimmered vaguely in white, in tune with a stone like a sharp pyramid covered with inscriptions.

It was magic! Pretty sure it was magic. And it was not the horrible kind of magic from a horror movie. It was shining in the dark like a lighthouse.

Viv shook her head. She realized that there was something wrong with her thought pattern. The difficulty would be to attribute it to a cause. Was it her soul trauma? Or the bizarre nature of her overall experience?

No, focus. Shelter. This did not look like shelter. Or did it?

She crossed the circle. There was a pop. She fell to her knees.

A curious thing, long-time discomfort. Sometimes you forgot it was there until it stopped. She felt like she had suddenly stepped out of a sauna and that a fever that had assailed her so far had now gone into remission. It was liberating. And worrying.

The notion of 'fallout' came to her mind, unbidden. There had been a big explosion at some point, and now nothing lived here. Maybe she was already irradiated beyond salvation and would start leaking blood from every orifice soon enough.

A distant part of Viv realized that she was staring at the remains of a camp, but the good kind of remains. Whoever had been there had left calmly, after piling unneeded supplies in a corner. There was indeed a pile of stuff that did not look as old and dried up as the rest of the entire town. There was even a small circle burnt into the dead earth in a corner.

[An expended teleportation circle]

Wow, so those people did indeed make it out. And they gated like characters from Stargate. How cool was that?

“Any chance that the circle could be reactivated?” she asked the notification.

Alas, it did not answer.

“Figures.”

And it was in the middle of this fascinating examination that a many-limbed creature crested the line of shops.

[Necrarch chimaera: an extremely dangerous undead creature]

Like its Ravager counterpart, the Chimaera had very pale skin stuck to lean muscle and far too many bone ridges, spines, and other pointy extremities. Its head was roughly similar: humanoid with an extended skull, flat face, nose slits, a dentist’s wet dream of a maw and two carmine, beady eyes shining in the dark.

Time slowed for Viv as her ‘oh shit’ mode activated with both increased acuity and adrenaline. She completely froze.

No moving.

No moving at all.

Willpower +1

Keep quiet.

You have reached a milestone! You have gained increased resistance to mental effects, including magical influence.

Not one noise.

Adjustments are still in progress.

The thing moved parallel to her in a lazy gait that sometimes turned into a lightning-fast rush for no reason she could discern.

She breathed extremely slowly, not moving a finger.

Willpower +1

Adjustments are still in progress.

Her reasoning was that whoever had made that camp had managed to leave peacefully, and the presence of tarp indicated tents, and tents indicated that they had slept there. Those things came out at night, or apparently close to it, so there was a chance that the circle was protecting her.

Acuity +1

Adjustments are still in progress.

There was also a chance that it was merely hiding her, or that the magic had weakened over time so she would not take one fucking chance.

The thing came and went, wiggling its many-legged butt and nightmarish claws over the roof.

Viv did not relax. For all she knew, they could smell a fart from three blocks away. She moved to the pile of supplies and inspected it while keeping an eye out.

The tarp was easy enough to remove. Those who had left it had weighted the sides with steel spikes.

[Quality steel spikes: used to stabilize structures such as tents]

The heavy weight of the metal comforted her. It was still solid. It was proof that someone was still alive out there, after escaping from this hellhole. She would do the same. She would get out of here alive. She just had to be smart about it. Smart, and careful.

She placed the spikes to the sides and removed the tarp. It was a treasure trove.

There were pots, including a small one she thought she could indeed carry, a trench shovel, covers, sleeping bags, some sort of log thing that was slightly darkened on top, and a pair of rolled up water flasks that were a bit cracked but still serviceable. They were completely dry though.

The real prize came under that. They looked like brown bricks wrapped in leaf-like material.

[Dry travel rations, good quality]

Jack fucking pot.

That was lucky.

Actually, she was really lucky in some ways and really unlucky in others. It was unlucky to end up in the ass end of some dead empire, in a city populated by creatures that could clearly trounce her in an instant. On the other hand, it was lucky to have found possibly the only place within ten square kilometers where she would not die.

She remembered something.

'Magic? Magic status?' she thought to herself.

Focus +1

Adjustments are still in progress.

The interface obliged.

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 11%

Current attunement: 0.22%

That thing. Divine spark: luck. She was not sure what it meant, but it had saved her bacon. Otherwise, she would only have moved here to end up as people skewers.

Something bumped into the distance and Viv squinted to see it. It was almost night now, and she could barely spot her own hands. There were no sources of light at all. No stars, no electricity. It was the first time in her life that she had been in such a dark place without being shut in an enclosed space. She could still feel the air move, carrying with it only the dry scent of windborne dust.

[Necrach tentacular horror: an extremely dangerous undead creature]

Your [Inspection] General Skill has improved to rank 3/5!

Come to think of it, she did not absolutely have to see the thing. It was enough to know that it existed and was walking away. Yep.

It was too dark to do anything anyway. Viv grabbed a sleeping bag and nestled her skinsuit-clad form into it, then she crawled under the tarp like a caterpillar and balled some of it to act like an improvised pillow.

The night was silent outside.

She thought that sleep would elude her. She was out in seconds.

Dawn came over the defunct metropolis.

Viv crawled from under the tarp and blinked at the strange sight.

That was not her barracks.

Then it all came back to her. The new world. The interface. The huge monsters.

The huge monsters.

She scanned her surroundings but there was nothing out of place. The morning light was pale and wan, and it made the surrounding stones look like ivory.

Instead of rushing up, she forced herself into breathing exercises. She had to think first. There were many questions and she had few answers. Some of her priorities were easier to determine than others.

Magic? Cool, but later because she had no idea where to begin.

Determining how she came here and going back to her squad, her friends and family, the world she had left behind and where she had spent so many efforts carving herself a place to hopefully find happiness?

Later.

The first priority was survival.

How would she achieve that?

She had to leave. She would die if she stayed. It was not just the monsters, but also the lack of food and water.

One thing was clear. Those who had made camp there had done it despite the lack of cover, and that meant that this place never saw rain. Rain would cool a body quickly. It was also unpleasant. She did not believe that magic would change that. She also did not believe that someone would bother with a rain-repulsive shield or something when there were so many buildings around.

This place was also dead as a doornail. She had not seen a single dried up patch of grass. No renewable food source.

So, she had to leave.

In order to do so safely, she needed to find a water source. Without water, she would die within two days.

That desert looked pretty empty. She had to find it here. It did not rain, but there could be an underground cistern.

In dark places.

She also needed boots. It was alright now that the ground was either flat or made of sands, but walking in the desert meant, perhaps, stones, and walking on that with the equivalent of heavy socks would be bad.

She also needed more food.

She took a brick of travel ration and removed the cover. The food was an unappetizing brown brick, and about as solid. She nibbled on it and managed to dislodge a few crumbs but it was going to be an uphill effort.

It tasted alright, to her surprise. It was like jerky but sweeter and more granulous. She immediately thought of Pemmican, a type of travel rations originally used by America natives like the Cree nation.

She had about three or four kilograms of food, give or take. The effort of hiking for hours meant about two thousand calories per day would be nice though she could probably stretch it. One hundred grams of Pemmican was a bit under a thousand calories so she had between fifteen and twenty days of food... actually that was not too bad. She would run out of water long before that became a problem.

Alright so, water and boots via underground cistern.

Yesterday's idea of finding barracks was looking more appealing by the moment. If they did have smaller doors, perhaps the big Necrarchs could not fit in and barracks would definitely have boots, food, and a water reserve. That was worth a shot.

Willpower +4

Acuity +6

Focus +3

Stats adjustment completed. Skills assessment in progress.

Ah, yes. The weird magic.

Come to think of it, she had been too dismissive once before. Perhaps there was a way for her to get an edge.

But first, she had to pee.

Viv walked out of the circle.

Immediately, a sense of fever overcame her again, though it was manageable. Her bones itched. It was rather disconcerting.

"What's going on?" she asked the interface, but it ignored her. Asshole.

Viv walked into the nearest building. It could have been a restaurant at some point, she thought. There was a large opening along the main room as well as a door. A long stone counter split it in two and she saw an open door to what could be a supply closet. All the furniture was ruined, but she found scraps of metal and ceramic that confirmed her hypothesis. She laughed when she entered the closet: there was a chair made of what looked like solidified sand with a circular hole where the ass should be, and another hole in the ground under that. The expedition members had had the same idea, it seemed; they had made a toilet.

Viv marveled at the smooth fabric of the skinsuit as she was closing it again. It was really good at keeping the heat in. The only problem was that she had to pool it around her ankle to denude her butt.

[Faded skinsuit of the Imperial Protector (enchanted): this is all that remains of the once legendary squad. Most of the enchantments were lost in the cataclysm, but the durability remained. It still possesses a minor self-repair function.]

Nifty.

Actually...

“Give me my stats,” she ordered.

Physical		Mental	
Power	8	Focus	24
Finesse	16	Acuity	28
Endurance	15	Willpower	24

She inspected the various elements.

[Power: your strength and defense, your impact on the physical world. Reaching multiple of tens grants you additional benefits. Current benefits: none]

How arbitrary.

[Finesse: your coordination, agility, speed, and precision. A measure of your control over your own body. Reaching multiple of tens grants you additional benefits. Current benefits: improved balance and precision]

Hmm.

[Endurance: the ability of your body to endure and recover from abuse. Current benefits: you can stay active for forty-eight hours at great cost]

Well that was weird. But helpful. She could already operate for long periods of time thanks to her training and a few tricks she had picked up along the way, but that would certainly help in a pinch. One thing that bothered her was the seeming overlap between power and endurance in terms of defenses. Was defense not one's ability to endure abuse? Bah, whatever. This line of thought would bring her nothing for now.

[Focus: the ability to shape your thoughts without getting distracted. Essential in casting complex spells. Current benefits: ability to cast spells, Inspect skill]

Looks like all those years spent studying were finally paying off. Or not. Maybe she was a retard and every human here had all their stats over thirty.

She hoped that there were humans left. The bodies had been human, she thought. Except perhaps the king. The sleeping bags were also human-shaped.

Moving on.

[Acuity: the ability to think fast and accurately, and to infer and deduct. Essential in casting quickly. Current benefits: increased processing speed, temporary perceived time slow]

It was strange that her physical stats were so low compared to the mental ones. She suspected that it had something to do with how magic interacted with bodies here. The Necrarchs she had seen should have collapsed under their own weights, light bones or not, and the first one had pretty much cracked stone like eggshells. Their bodies were probably reinforced with magic while hers was not, or at least not yet. The interface had mentioned improved stat acquisition speed. That meant that they could be increased.

Alright.

[Willpower: the ability to maintain control of your thoughts. Essential in casting powerful spells. Current benefits: mana shaping, mild resistance to mental effects.]

Self-explanatory.

So, she could think faster for a limited time. That was useful to have. What else was there? Oh, yes, her magic thingie.

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 12%

Current attunement: 0.22%

Viv frowned.

That part had changed, had it not? The black mana thing.

[Mana distribution: between the eighth month of gestation and birth, the child's body adapts to the mana currents around him or herself. The distribution is fixed for life and offers different affinities for spellcasting. Someone born in a desert will show increased red mana distribution, while someone whose mother was at sea before birth will shift towards blue mana. Everyone receives some life mana from their mothers.]

Oh.

Oh no.

Ooooh shit.

She fucking knew it, this was a brand new body!

Wait, no. She could have been transported and her body was only now taking mana.

Ah fuck who was she kidding. This was a new body, made without hair.

She had died.

Then, everyone would know.

Mouq would be mad, and the rest of her unit would be majorly pissed off. Her brother Damien would be inconsolable. Dad would not give a shit and capitalize on the tragedy while Mom would start drinking again. Laure and Rachida would probably feel guilty for a long time. Fraise and Gevaudan would never find out why she never went online anymore.

Viv felt tears well for the first time in a year. She pushed them back. She could not even afford to lose the fucking moisture.

Ok.

She was not dead.

This was a world of magic, she would find a way back and return, and maybe come back again if they had dragons. Who knows? But nothing would matter if she could not find water and get the fuck out.

Ok, what else?

[Mana channels (budding): metaphysical organs used to channel magic. Their development is essential to spellcasting and skill use)]

“And how do I even do that?”

Silence.

Ah, well. Next.

[Extreme compatibility: represents your latent ability for magic]

Nice. And not a short-term benefit just like the rest.

[Divine spark: luck. You have received a spark of divine essence from Emeric, the God of Luck. It has integrated with your soul. You are lucky!]

Viv's gaze traveled to her black skinsuit, which a corpse had been wearing a day ago. It then settled on claw marks in the nearby walls, the dead city, the calamitous pyramid. She still felt the feverish haze that permeated this place from inside the protective circle. She stared at her meager belongings.

You are mildly dehydrated.

“Get fucked.”

Rather than walking in a random direction, Viv started making expanding circles from her home base, making sure to always know where it was. She also changed her approach. The danger did not come from being spotted from the streets or from the air — that she knew of — it came from inside the buildings. She was still not sure how the creatures might perceive her, so she kept to the middle of the road and made no noise.

Most of this district was occupied by smaller, official-looking buildings. Peering through the gaping holes where windows used to be, she could spot halls and smaller rooms that could have been workrooms or personal quarters. There were large signs carved into the walls by each gate, damaged but still readable. She saw scrolls, pens, wands and other things like a weird thing that could have been a sort of cereal. She guessed that she might be in the administrative quarter.

She stopped to rest at midday by a dried fountain. She did find a water outlet, or at least she thought it was one, and that made the possibility of underground cistern more real if the local population had been unable to materialize potable water out of thin air.

The lack of water was making itself felt now. She could barely munch on the brick of food she had brought with her. Not enough saliva.

The early afternoon brought more of the same, but soon, she noticed something good between two smaller buildings.

“Well, would you look at that...”

[Old Empire war golem (destroyed): the remnant of an extremely dangerous war machine. War golems were one of the most powerful tools in the Old Empire’s arsenal.]

It was fucking power armor! No, a humanoid robot. It must have been as tall as three men when active and, well, vertical.

The architecture might have been brutalist and squarish, but this thing was a work of deadly art. Its legs were heavily armored at the front, its arms were powerful and far apart and its chest had been protected by a formidable plate that slightly protruded in the middle. A bit like a conquistador cuirass. One of its arms ended in sharpened claws and the other was a normal hand.

Viv remembered the first time she had seen a Mirage fighter jet in a base in Kandahar, two years before. She had been fresh from training then. The jet was not moving and it was not armed, and yet there had been no doubt in her mind that this was a tool of death. It was a visceral impression that she could not fully explain and she had been unable to fully relax until she was back at her camp.

This was happening again. The Golem might be deactivated now but it still bore the marks of the hands that had designed it to destroy things.

She came closer to inspect it. She had to. It was not just magical, it was not just one of the only remaining things still intact in this dusty grave of a city, it was something that her own civilization had not achieved. Earth did not have the safe and portable power sources required to move autonomous robots of this size. Magic could, apparently.

It was even more impressive from up close.

The few exposed mechanisms she could see looked well-designed and very-well made. All the protective plates were decorated with fine engravings that could have been decorative or part of something magical. There were notches next to the gladiator-like metal head. The two most notable features, besides the thing being badass, were the claw marks covering the armored parts, and the cause of death.

The claw marks were consistent with what the Necrarchs had, at least the two models she had seen. They did not reach the golem’s back, nor did she see nicks on the articulations. It was possible that the war golem had fought similar creatures to a standstill. Or even Necrarchs. She had noticed the absence of human bones in the streets. There were too many inconsistencies to be sure, but she thought that the lack of bodies was connected to the Necrarchs. They could have come from them, or they could have consumed them or a bit of both.

As for why the golem was still mostly intact, she did not know. It was clearly old. Older than the expedition camp had been.

“Hmm.”

She climbed on the chest and confirmed what she had thought. The war golem had not been destroyed in battle. Someone had unlocked its chest cavity and then forcefully removed components with enough strength to tear off the delicate metallic framework. She inspected the strange parts that were left. They had...

They had letters...

Viv stumbled. She could read it. She could read the parts as if they were in her native language. She was absolutely certain that she had never seen those glyphs before.

Or had she?

She had. Several times. When the interface had started and here and there around town, half-faded.

She could have read if she had stopped and focused.

Gnnnnnn of course! The interface had said it! She had been granted Old Imperial as part of her bullshit welcome gift!

Skills assessment in progress.

She could not even show it. In any case, this could work. She bent and read.

‘Processing Unit’ one of those said. It was large, made of a strange cracked material, and surrounded by faded crystals.

‘Communication Module’

‘Mana shield and blast shield Modules’

Ah, the thing was shielded. Perhaps it had protected it from the fateful event. She had the distinct feeling that being inorganic to start with could have given one an edge in a catastrophe that had killed all life in a fifty kilometer radius.

More interesting though, was the fact that someone had removed what was obviously missing: the power source.

And that made her curious. Salvaged power sources could mean a great many things. In any case, the presence of a war golem meant war golem facilities and those had to be close to barracks of sorts. She would finally return to her natural habitat as a grunt if only she could find where that thing had come from.

She looked around and found nothing specific.

It was too soon to give up. She jumped down and circled the golem until she found something promising. Under the thick layer of dust was the mark of heavy impact, as if something ponderous had been dropped from some height. A ridge in the stone road led further into the city, away from the pyramid.

She decided to follow the general direction. Two street intersections later, she found another war golem. It was sitting against the wall of a sort of gazebo in a strangely human gesture. Its heavy helmet hung limply on its empty chest. It was similarly deactivated and showed traces of heavy combat.

This time, the processing unit and the power source were both missing and she struck gold. The entity responsible for the dismantling had left tracks in a nearby dried up bed of flowers. They were footsteps, and they were deep and golem-sized. Viv followed them.

Administrative buildings gave way to habitation blocs surrounded by tall walls. The large structures were guarded by imposing gates left open. Empty guard booths stood a silent vigil to those living quarters turned graveyards. The silence was oppressive. There was nothing but the wind and the ever-increasing feverish sensation that pervaded her body.

One day of solitude was fine. Too much had happened to give her time to settle anyway. It could change, though. How long would it take to escape this death trap? How long without talking to anyone?

She pushed the thought away to a dark recess of her mind, where the other things she could do nothing about lingered. Survival first. Mental health afterward.

More golems appeared, in various states of disrepair. One of them was missing an arm and parts of a leg. She also found her first power source, which was a large crystal with cylinders at the top and bottom, but the one she found was clearly damaged. The two parts were missing every time they were not ruined in every carcass she came across.

Her steps finally led her past one last bloc and in front of a large enclosure.

She immediately recognized a military installation.

“Finally.”

The only problem was the time. She could make it back to the circle alright, but it would be a close call if she started exploring right now, assuming the days were about as long as on earth.

Water was a tempting prospect.

She gazed up at a double set of open gates with miradors, and the two perimeter walls occasionally dotted with guard towers. The arch above the main gate showed two crossed swords over a large crystal and two dragon wings. Or bat wings, but she was hoping for dragons. What would be the point of magic without dragons anyway?

The entrance was large enough to accommodate four heavy trucks side by side and still have room for a bike or two.

She crossed them and the reason became immediately clear.

The interior of the base had hangars on one side and human-sized, one story buildings on the other. A massive opening led underground right in front of her.

Destroyed war golems laid and sat around haphazardly, gutted. They looked like a med student after-party. She counted at least thirty.

It was an imposing sight.

She turned to the right where the hangars lined up. They were imposing structures of steel sheet with a curved roof that reached to the earth on both sides. Hangars probably meant warehouses, bays, and large spaces where snoozing Necrachs could come to gather so, fuck that. The smaller structures to the left were promising, though.

Her gaze returned to the opening in front of her.

Possibly water.

She walked, inspecting golems on her way in case one of them was merely playing at being dead. They were not.

She ended up facing a slope down to an underground bunker, with a blast door as thick as a bank vault hanging open.

[Faded Old Empire secured gate (enchanted): this gate was meant to stop artillery spells and arcane siege weaponry. Many of its enchantments were destroyed in the cataclysm.]

She made her way down, staying low and to the side, ready to fall back at the first sign of a white limb. The ground showed signs of passage. There was dust at the corner but none in the middle. None of those were clawed feet.

So far so good.

She stepped on the landing and peered in.

The bunker was a single room as large as one of the other hangars with concrete walls and floors and man-sized openings at the far end. It held many squarish bays with frames obviously designed to maintain golems in position. Most of them were empty, and the few that were not had their guests gutted like the others.

There was something in the center of the room. She had to make a double take to understand what was going on.

A single golem stood in the center of the room. Its chest was open like that of the others, but that was where the similarities ended. It was to them what a timber wolf is to a border collie, and it was not just the size. The armor was immensely more elaborate, and covered in gems and runes now faded. The hands of the construct were extremely elaborate and looked strangely human, as did its face mask, which represented a handsome man.

The power source was exposed, but it still shone feebly with a pale blue light. Three small crystals were hooked to it via a set of cables, and a pile of darkened ones sat further away. All the processing units lay in neat rows to one side, lain on a tarp.

[Old Empire experimental war golem: one of the secret weapons of the empire and a dedicated mage and monster killer, this unique work by the grand engineer Irleven has not been equalled since its creation. Extremely dangerous.]

It did look extremely dangerous. It also looked kind of dead.

The eyes of the thing flashed yellow.

//ORGANIC LIFEFORM DETECTED.

Nevermiiiiiiiiind.

Time slowed as Viv turned to run.

//P-P-P-PLEASE. WAIT. PLEASE.

And stopped.

She took a few step backs to the entrance and looked again. The thing had not moved. Its eyes were a dim yellow, and she was not sure but they appeared to be sweeping across the room.

It was the voice that had stopped her. It was both mechanical and so very alive, a bit like a human voice gone through a synthesizer. She did not perceive despair in the tone but there was urgency in the rhythm, and the curious dichotomy had touched her. It had been a cry for help.

The language was Old Empire. It was a beautiful tongue, she thought, with many soft consonants and a tone that went up and down like a song. Perhaps loneliness was getting to her, but she had liked listening to it.

And finally, there was someone to talk to. Someone who may have answers.

A part of Viv wondered if the thing would stand up and try to kill her if she came too close, but she dismissed it. The experimental war golem was clearly on its last leg. It was also strapped to many heavy-looking pieces of metal that would hang from it and slow its movements.

She had to take risks.

“Hello?” she tried.

The yellow eyes swivelled towards her.

//GREETINGS CITIZEN, HAVE YOU NEWS OF COMING REINFORCEMENTS? Imperial FAMILY STATUS-US? COMBAT OPERATIONS IN PROGRESS?

“Errrrr.”

//ERROR DETECTED. DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS.

//PLEASE STAND BY.

//DECISION CENTER COMPROMISED.

//PURGING MAINFRAME.

//ATTRIBUTING PRIORITY QUEUE TO SECONDARY MODULES.

//GREETINGS CITIZEN, HAVE YOU NEWS OF REINFORCEMENT, ALSO, HAVE YOU NEWS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY, ALSO, HAVE YOU NEWS OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE HARRAKAN DEFENSE DIRECTOR—

“Alright alright, slow down!”

//—EEEEECTOOOOORAAAAATE, AAAALS0000

“Oi! Hold on a minute!”

Was the thing mocking her?

//REQUEST GRANTED. HOLDING ON.

It held on.

“Hmm. Ok. Huh, as far as I can tell this city is empty and has been empty for many years. It’s completely dead. There are no reinforcements coming, as far as I know. There is nothing to come back to. I am sorry.”

Silence.

“As for the imperial family, I saw a man in the pyramid’s throne room. He was quite dead, I’m afraid.”

Silence. The golem looked... dejected. She stepped closer inside of the bunker. Just like the outside, it only smelled vaguely dusty.

“As for the directorate, I don’t know. What is Harrak?”

For a moment, she thought she was being ignored. Then...

**//MINUTE ENDED. THIS UNIT IS NO LONGER HANGING.
//HARRAK IS THE CITY WE STAND IN, THE CAPITAL OF THE HARRAKAN EMPIRE AND
THE SEAT OF THE EMPEROR, LONG MAY HE LIVE!**

It was definitely being a bit weird there.

**//WHAT ABOUT THE OUTER PROVINCES? ARE REINFORCEMENTS COMING FROM
THERE?**

She did not know how much she should state. She wanted answers to her questions as well, and there was a risk that informing the golem of the state of the place could lead it to blow a fuse, or whatever arcane equivalent it had.

“Hmm, can you help me?”

//PLEASE, CITIZEN.

“Alright, fine. As far as I know, your empire has collapsed. The inspect skill calls it “Old Empire” not ‘Harrakan empire’. There could be inheritors left, maybe?”

//COLLAPSED?

“I am sorry.”

//SO LONG AS THE PEOPLE OF HARRAK LIVES, WE WILL NEVER FALL!

Aaaaand now Viv felt like shit. The worst memory of her short career had been once, during an operation around Kandahar. One of the men had received a piece of shrapnel in the back and she had managed to stabilize him, but one look at the wound and she knew he would never walk again. He had been conscious and he had guessed. She always had a shit poker face, one of the reasons why she and her dad never got along.

She had been in a fantasy necropolis for less than a full day and the flaw was already biting her in the ass again.

//CITIZEN, ARE YOU NOT A CITIZEN OF HARRAK?

“I... I’m sorry, I just got here. Everyone is dead. The land is dead.”

//THERE IS NO ONE LEFT?

It was almost plaintive. Again, the tone was neutral and perhaps even a bit cheerful, but it felt forced. The rhythm was off too. Instead of revolting her, it made her feel sympathy. The golem was obviously quite smart. Perhaps it simply lacked the tools to express itself.

“Maybe... maybe far from here?”

//THE CITIZEN OF THE HARRAKAN EMPIRE WOULD NEVER LET THE CAPITAL FALL.

“I am sorry.”

The yellow eyes flashed once. The golem was still not moving. It was also getting a bit late and Viv considered going back. She could still return tomorrow and be fine, as long as there was water here.

The fear of dying of dehydration further dampened her mood. This world was a strange mix of the wonderful and the horrible. There was magic, but also monsters. There was a smart golem but she had to inform it of the destruction of his world. And she was a day away from horrible suffering. If she did not find the precious liquid.

“Are you alright?”

//CURRENT STATUS: ENERGY LEVELS CRITICAL.

//REPAIRS NEEDED.

//MAINTENANCE NEEDED.

//CURRENT DIRECTIVES CANNOT BE ATTAINED.

//THIS UNIT REQUIRES HELP.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know where I can find more of those power sources you use, and I don’t think the city can be saved. There is nothing but Necrarchs here.”

//THIS UNIT CANNOT ALTER PRIMARY DIRECTIVES ON ITS OWN.

“I don’t know how to help you. As I said, I just arrived here. I literally appeared in the throne room and I need some help. Would you mind answering a few questions?”

//PLEASE STAND BY.

“Aw, come on, it’s getting late!”

//PLEASE ELABORATE: APPEAR.

Viv stopped and thought. Perhaps outlanders were hunted for sports in those parts?

That was unlikely.

And the golem would not do any hunting. She decided to go for broke.

“I’m an outlander. I think my body reformed in the throne room. That was yesterday.”

//YOUR BODY DID NOT EXIST BEFORE YESTERDAY?

“Well, not in this plane of existence.”

//ANSWER DETERMINED AS: NO.

“Yeah ok whatever. Can you answer my questions? I’m on a schedule. Night falling. Monsters coming. The horrible nausea and headache that come with dehydration. That sort of thing?”

//PLEASE CONFIRM: YOU STARTED TO EXIST YESTERDAY WITHIN THE THRONE ROOM OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE.

“What the hell? Yes! Now tell me where I can find some water!”

//THIS UNIT HAS A REQUEST.

“Ok but later!” Viv said with increasing frustration, “Water first!”

//PROCESSING.

//REQUEST GRANTED. TAKE THE SECOND DOOR FROM THE LEFT AND GO DOWN TWO FLIGHTS OF STAIRS TO THE GENERAL CISTERN.

“No Necrarchs downstairs, right?”

//THERE ARE NO HOSTILES IN THIS FACILITY.

Viv did not wait, she took off and struggled to open the sealed door leading down. It was heavily damaged, and she was forced to kick the hinge until it broke. The stairs were also metal and she slowed down lest they crumbled under her feet and she ended up with a rusty steel bar poking out of her chest. The place she ended up in was the lowest, which, she thought, was not very low. The light was minimal and it came from an open aeration shaft to the outside. She could barely see where she was walking.

The second door moved with little effort.

Inside, she found racks upon racks of supplies of one sort or another extending into the darkness. Only the words of the strange golem gave her the confidence to search the room. Fortunately, the massive shape of the water reservoirs were easy to discern. There were three of them. Her skin suit-covered hands searched the surface and found no opening. There were none below either.

Her panicked mind conjured images of magic dispensers but she dismissed them soon enough. This was the army. The army would never use complicated or expensive stuff when a simple tap would do. She circled around and found it on the other side.

She switched it and liquid came out. It was water, stale and tepid and with a vague iron taste. It was one of the best drinks she had ever had.

You are no longer dehydrated.

“Fuck yes. One less immediate cause of death.”

The tank had been hermetically closed and a tap on its smooth surface had confirmed that it was still full. She had enough there to last her a long time. Things were looking up.

Viv felt, once again, weird about the entire thing. She was caught in a death trap but it had only taken her one day to find food, water, and shelter. She had almost died to a weird monster, had found a somewhat friendly war machine, and now she was rummaging through a magical armory. And that was without even considering the existence of magic and gods and how she could interact with them via the interface. She wanted to share this with Mouq and her friends back home. Mouq would probably tell her to shut the fuck up and to fill the flasks because night was in the way.

Right.

Pouring water in the rigid flasks proved to be an annoying endeavor, not least because the neck was slightly too small and she was wasting water. She filled two and headed back up.

The big war golem was in the middle of some intense discussion with itself.

**//CONSENSUS NOT REACHED.
//ALTERING PROCESS MODULES 17,19,43,51,52.
//ERROR.
//TERMINATING PROCESS MODULES 19,52.
//MEMORY PURGED.
//CONSENSUS REACHED.
//AWAITING CITIZEN.**

“Hm, hello, I am here.”

//GREETINGS CITIZEN, WAS YOUR QUEST FOR ITEM: ‘WATER’ SUCCESSFUL?

“Oh, yes, thank you.

**//EMPATHY EXPRESSED, RETURNING TO MAIN OBJECTIVE.
//CITIZEN, THIS UNIT HAS A REQUEST.**

“Ok but quickly, I really need to go for the night.”

//REQUEST: THIS UNIT DOES NOT WISH TO DIE.

...

That was something she could definitely sympathise with.

“You need my help?”

//DOES THE CITIZEN AGREE WITH THE REQUEST?

“I need to know more.”

//THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING MY REQUEST, CITIZEN.

“Sure.”

**//EMPATHY EXPRESSED, RETURNING TO MAIN OBJECTIVE.
//CITIZEN, PLEASE CONFIRM THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS.
//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, THE EMPIRE HAS COLLAPSED.
//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, THE PEOPLE HAVE FALLEN.
//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, THE EMPEROR AND HIS FAMILY HAVE PERISHED.**

//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, YOU BECAME ALIVE WITHIN THE WALLS OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE.

“Hmm. Yes, yes, yes, and yes?”

//CONSENSUS CONDITION: THE CITIZEN WILL BIND WITH THE GOLEM CORE TO VERIFY THIS INFORMATION.

//THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT REQUEST, CITIZEN. YOU WILL BE COMPENSATED FOR YOUR SACRIFICE.

“What? What sacrifice?”

//THIS UNIT WILL GAIN FULL ACCESS TO YOUR INTERFACE DATA AND MAGIC FIELD DATA. THIS UNIT APOLOGIZES FOR THE BREACH OF PRIVACY. YOUR PERSONAL DATA WILL BE KEPT SECRET UNDER IMPERIAL LAW. YOUR PERSONAL DATA WILL ONLY BE ACCESSIBLE BY A DULY APPOINTED STATE-LEVEL INQUISITOR IN CASE OF LEVEL FIVE INVESTIGATION OR ABOVE.

“You’ll get to see my interface? And personal data?”

//YES. THIS UNIT REALIZES THAT THIS IS A SERIOUS REQUEST.

“Hmm.”

It would have shocked her more if her preference in underwear was not stored on at least seventeen different servers back on earth to be sold to advertisers. People here apparently took the interface very seriously.

“Alright then, how do we proceed? And hurry, I need to be back before the Necrarchs come out to play.”

//THIS PLACE IS SECURED AGAINST NECRARCHS. THIS UNIT HAS HUNTED MANY NECRARCHS.

“And how long since you last went out and killed one?”

//SEVENTEEN YEARS, EIGHT MONTHS...

“Yeah so there could be one in the hangar and you would not know. How long till nightfall?”

//ONE AND A THIRD OF A PERIOD.

“...”

It took Viv one minute, counting seconds in front of the golem then doing a bit of arithmetic to realize that this planet was rotating slightly slower on itself than earth. A day here was about twenty-six to thirty hours long depending on how much she had fucked up beating seconds for the golem to count. She still had three hours before it got dark enough for the creatures to come out. One hour and a half should be more than enough to head back as she had wasted quite some time finding her way around.

The strict geometry of Harrak made orientation easy. She was six blocks left and three up from the pyramid entrance. That was a long stroll if one wanted to be careful, but nothing insurmountable.

“Ok, how do we do this?”

//PLACE A DROPLET OF BLOOD IN THE PROCESSING UNIT’S BINDING NODE.

Viv had no problem finding the cute little rectangle set in the massive crystal and metal cylinder. The difficulty arose when she realized she had no tool to draw blood. In the end, she had to open her skinsuit to free an arm, and use the claw of an old golem that had not seen combat in forever and hope that it was more or less sterile. It was the best she could do.

//WHY NOT USE MY RAVAGER BLADE? ITS SHARPNESS IS WITHOUT EQUAL.

“How many times did it end inside a Necrarch though?”

//SIX HUNDRED AND TWENTY SEVEN TIMES! THIS UNIT IS A GLORIOUS SERVANT OF THE EMPEROR, LONG MAY HE LIVE!

“That was a rhetorical question, buddy. I don’t want dry Necrarch juice under my skin, thank you very much.”

You are about to allow a foreign entity full access to your interface. This process cannot be reverted. Are you sure you want to proceed?

Wow, way to make it scary.

“Hold on, you will have access to the content of my interface all the time?” she asked with a bit of anger.

//UNTIL THE BOND IS BROKEN. YOU MAY MANUALLY BREAK THE BOND.

“Is this the only way to save your life?”

//IF YOUR STATEMENTS ARE CORRECT, YES.

She stopped.

She was going to do something special for a perfect stranger. To her, the weird golem was quite obviously sapient and sentient so she would help it if she could, but her own life was also important.

“Can I trust you?”

//THIS UNIT’S EMPATHY MODULE WAS NOT CREATED WITH THE ABILITY TO DECEIVE.

That was totally what someone with a deceit module would say. Ah, the feverish sensation she was feeling was messing up with her mind.

“You got to help me afterward, I want to live as well.”

//IF THIS WORKS, I WILL DO MY BEST TO ASSIST YOU. IF THIS DOES NOT WORK, I WILL DO MY BEST TO ASSIST YOU. MY ASSISTANCE WILL BE OVERWHELMINGLY MORE USEFUL IF THIS WORKS.

Ah, what the hell.

Yes.

**//DATA RECEIVED. ANALYSIS. ANALYSIS COMPLETE.
//TIME OF EXISTENCE OF THE BODY: ONE DAY.
//STATED PLACE OF ORIGIN CONSISTENT WITH CURRENT MANA DISTRIBUTION
//CONSENSUS CONDITION CONFIRMED.
//CITIZEN REDESIGNED AS HEIR TO THE THRONE.**

“Excuse your pardon what?”

**//ONLY MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY MAY GIVE BIRTH IN THE IMPERIAL PALACE.
//CITIZEN WAS BORN WITHIN THE IMPERIAL PALACE.
//CITIZEN IS A MEMBER OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY.
//ALL OTHER MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY HAVE PERISHED
//CITIZEN IS HEIR TO THE THRONE OF THE EMPIRE, LONG MAY SHE LIVE!
//PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME, YOUR GRACE.**

“What? But...”

She wanted to protest but stopped. It did not matter if he called her citizen or heir or auntie Suzette, what mattered was getting out of the city, and she assumed that giving her a big status related to how he could survive and assist.

“Call me Viv, I guess.”

//BEEB

“No, Viv, as in Viviane. Viv.

//BEEB, AS IN BIBIANE. BEEB.

Viv thought that the golem was fucking with her, but she scoured her newly acquired knowledge of his language and realized that they never, ever, used the sound v.

And boy did that piss her off.

“Viv.”

//BEEB.

“Seriously, can’t you recreate the sound, at all?”

//THIS UNIT HAS NO NEED TO USE THE LANGUAGES OF THE BARBARIANS AND INFERIOR CULTURES. THE TONGUE OF THE HARRAKAN EMPIRE WILL ALWAYS SUFFICE, GLORY TO THE HEIR! LONG MAY SHE LIVE!

“Just fucking call me Bob, why don’t you.”

//REQUEST GRANTED, YOUR GRACE, PRINCESS BOB. THIS UNIT PLEDGES ITSELF TO YOU.

You have received the allegiance of [HX-013 Experimental Strike Golem, designation: Solfis].

Ah, fuck.

//SET NEW CURRENT DIRECTIVE, YOUR GRACE.

“Keep us both alive.”

//NEW DIRECTIVE ACCEPTED.

There was silence for a moment. The golem’s yellow glare stopped flashing and turning around and seemed to land on her with a singular intensity. It was strange to see this mighty war machine unmoving on the ground. The golem must have been an incredible force in the distant

past. Now, it was the only thinking being left in this horrible place besides her, comrades in misfortune brought together by their distinct tragedies.

//THANK YOU, PRINCESS BOB.

And it was already being a jerk.

Solfis the sassy war golem of ultimate mispronunciation sent her on her way after determining the location of her camp and the best path to it. Apparently, it had waged war against the Necrarchs for three centuries, the time that had elapsed since the fall of the Harrakan empire. It and its brethren had not died like everyone else during the cataclysm, and they had fought the undead that had come to populate the place until they ran out of power.

The idea of undead was not new to her. They had been a pain in her backside in Minecraft already. She was curious about them but Solfis had informed her that there would be ample time to discuss this later.

In the meanwhile, Solfis still knew where most Necrarchs concentration had gone and he shared the details with her. Apparently, they rarely moved at all. Her arrival must have kicked the hornet's nest. The upside was that Necrarch had haunts (haha), and they would often dwell in the same place. That made them mostly predictable.

She found the circle with time to spare. The feverish feeling decreased as soon as she stepped in gave her a sensation of intense relief, and she realized that the strange radiation was affecting her mind. Not that she had much choice, and not that befriending Solfis had been a mistake. It was her ticket out of here.

She also realized that while she had the basic necessities, she had nothing else.

She had a small pot, but no way to light a fire. A thorough search of the supplies yielded no obvious lighter, matches, or wand-of-press-here-to-solve-all-your-problems. There were no books either.

After quickly mounting the tent, she realized that she had nothing left to do but to twiddle her thumbs until night came.

A quick inspection of her interface revealed nothing new or exciting.

[Maradoc: God of Travels and Mysteries]

Yeah you already said that.

[Nous: strange god of magic and granter of the interface, which allows sentients to understand and interact with the forces of magic.]

She wondered if Solfis had an interface as well. Probably, if he was able to see hers.

She needed a backpack to carry stuff around. She had fabric, but no needle or anything. The sleeping bag would do if she was desperate.

And that was it, that was all she could think about.

She was left with her thoughts as the invisible sun (she was pretty sure there was just the one) continued its course behind the thick curtain of dreary cloud. The shadows could not even lengthen as there were none.

Why did she even end up in this place?

Did she really die? Or was her soul somehow transported? What had happened to everyone once they had found her corpse? Would they bury her in Nice with the rest of her family, or would the military take care of it. She did not know. She had not checked. Her will was made and she had even written messages to be sent to people she liked in case of her demise, since life as a soldier had its risks. The minutiae of burial were not something she had cared about.

She hoped everyone would deal, but she knew that a mysterious death on the battlefield would bring questions and concern. It was one thing to be killed in combat, another one to fall mysteriously.

She hoped she would see her family and friends again.

Her eyes grew embarrassingly wet, with nothing to distract her from her predicament.

Ah, fuck it.

In the heart of the metropolis, a small voice rose in defiance. It did not reach past the small square where the outlander hid, and yet the spirit of it crossed through space and time to convey its priceless message. It was in bastardized English, with a horrible mix of French and Cockney accent.

“Soooooome things in life are bad, they can reaaaaaally make you mad,

Other things will make you swear and cuuuuuurse!

When you're chewing on life's gristle...

Don't grumble.

Give a whistle!

And this'll help things turn out for the beeeeeeeest.

Aaaaaaaaynd

Always look on the bright side of life. Tudu. Tudu tudu tudu..."

Viv, or the newly minted Princess Bob depending on whom you asked, woke up to a notification and a headache.

You are suffering from mild mana poisoning.

"Well, good morning to you too, twat."

The fever was back with a vengeance. She used a little bit of water to clean her face and armpits, visited the women's room (it really was), and managed to force down some of the travel rations by holding water in her mouth and suckling on a brick like a baby cow. She was not feeling hungry yet. Mostly because of nausea.

It did not take long to retrace her steps. There had been no roaming Necrarchs yesterday, but that was no reason to lower her guard. She made sure to look at nearby passages even if Solfis had said they were clear. The Necrarchs might only come out to play at night but perhaps a snack was worth a minor sunburn.

The return to the base happened without incident. With a clear goal, everything became smoother.

//GOOD MORNING, YOUR GRACE!

"And to you too, Solfis."

The mighty construct was still standing. The yellow eyes turned to her.

//THIS UNIT HAS CALCULATED THE BEST WAY FOR US TO SURVIVE. THIS UNIT IS ECSTATIC TO INFORM YOU THAT THE ODDS SURPASS 37%!

“Yeah I’m ecstatic alright.”

//YOUR ELATION PLEASES THIS UNIT.

//EMPATHY EXPRESSED, RETURNING TO MAIN OBJECTIVE.

//YOUR GRACE, THE CITY OF HARRAKAN IS CURRENTLY SATURATED WITH BLACK MANA TO THE EXCLUSION OF EVERY OTHER TYPE.

//THE MANA CONCENTRATION WILL KILL YOU WITHIN FOUR DAYS.

//YOU WILL BE RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS WITHIN THREE DAYS AND A HALF.

“What?!”

She brought up her interface.

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 26%

Current attunement: 0.31%

“Is it related to my mana distribution?”

//YES. THIS UNIT WILL EXPLAIN LATER.

//FOR NOW, YOU MUST GATHER SUPPLIES AND LEAVE THE SITE OF THE CATACLYSM TO SLOW DOWN YOUR IMPENDING DOOM.

“Okay.”

//THERE SHOULD BE EVERYTHING YOU NEED IN THE BARRACKS AND ARMORY OF THE ENGINEERS’ QUARTERS.

“Would that be on the right when I exit?”

//CORRECT.

Solfis gave her a few more indications before she left.

The engineers' quarters used to house the many crews responsible for golem assembly, repair, and maintenance. They were squat stone blocks stuck together with a low ceiling and a reinforced armature which was visible from the outside. There used to be a blue and red subsection. The distinction could no longer be seen.

Viv wondered if the city was once filled with vibrant colors and if the black mana had devoured dyes with the same gluttony it had demonstrated for lives, or if the dust and frigid wind had done it.

The main door was locked tight and would not budge, but she easily found a shattered window with bars that crumbled under her fingers on the side facing the pyramid. She had a way in.

The first room she found herself in had been some sort of office. The friable husk of a wooden desk sat in a miserable pile and bone crumbled under her feet, the lack of soles making the experience that much more macabre. The doors on the inside had been wood as well. They fell apart in her hands.

Light proved an issue once again when she made her way through the tight, empty corridors. Solfis had been unable to provide her with a light source. There were portable lamps inside his bunker, but they had all been mana-powered and the enchantments had long faded. The same was true for torches, not that there was an overabundance of flammable material to start with. Rotten wood would not help her there.

Her solution was to circle around and open all the doors she could find. There were a surprising amount of openings and the visibility finally improved. She found a mess hall with upper windows covered in too much dust to afford proper visibility. She also found her first bodies.

The base had been host to golems from the get-go, so the undead infesting the city had not managed to get their filthy claws on the remains of the garrison. The bodies were laid where they had been working or resting, still well conserved after so many years. They looked like mummies, some of them still having hair stuck to their dry scalps. A good portion of them were women, she thought, from the body structures. The engineers wore uniforms like flight suits while tatters still clung to officers, nurses, and cooks.

The dormitory was a graveyard.

She silently moved from chest to chest, finding half of them unlocked. There were bodies on the beds and others sitting around tables. A few were on the very ground, struck as they were moving.

The presence of so many remains affected her and she stopped and clasped her hands.

“Gods of this world, please welcome these poor souls in the afterlife of their faith, because they sure as hell did not deserve this. Thank you.”

There was no response this time either. That was fine. The simple gesture would preserve her and the dead person’s humanity, despite the indignity of it all.

At least, her treasure hunt was bearing fruits.

[Old Empire Home Guard backpack: this herma backpack used to have a resistance enchantment, now faded. The Home Guard consisted of citizens and non-combat personnel, trained to hold the line against surprise monster incursions, until dedicated troops could join the fray.]

Herma evoked the image of cotton in her mind, though she knew that it was an equivalent, not the same plant. One more weird thing to add to the pile.

The chest and the multiple layers of walls had left this one mostly intact. It was a bit dry, but still serviceable. She also found a thin rope, a fancy lighter made of silver that could only produce sparks and — marvel of marvels — a pair of boots her size. Those were just a bit too dry and she had to use some twine she had found to tie them properly around her ankles.

The best find was a nice dagger with a blade that still shone. It had been in a sheath on the desk of a larger office at the back of the structure, next to a corpse wearing a cape.

[Faded Old Empire Veteran Dagger (enchanted): those weapons were badges of office granted to career officers after a life of service. They were proof of competence and dedication, and their owners were held in high regard.]

“Sorry friend, I need it more than you do. Rest in peace.”

Viv, tomb raider extraordinaire. Exploring empty cities. Apologizing to mummies.

Well, at least things were better now.

Her last stop was the armory. It was set in the deepest part of the structure behind a protective layer of metal bars. She found the keys on the desk of a dead woman, her hand still clutching two metal needles and a ratty scarf. The signs of humanity were starting to get to Viv again, so she hurried inside.

Wow.

There were weapon racks, armor stands, various shelves filled with stuff as well. Most of the gear was dry and unusable but her attention zeroed on a few notable exceptions with intense greed.

[Faded cloak of camouflage of the Old Empire (enchanted)]

The fabric was light and it came with a hood and scarf that covered up her face and nose. The city was only mildly dusty, and she still had to silence a few sneezes during her exploration. The desert was bound to be worse. The cloak would help, even if the camouflage function no longer worked and the thing was now stuck to the same shade of grey and beige as everything else.

Actually, that would be camouflage. Huh.

More importantly, the thing had pockets. It was worth it just for that.

[Faded Elite Scout armor of the Old Empire (enchanted): lightweight armor worn by Elite Scout squad leaders in the heydays of the Old Empire. It still offers decent protection even though most of the enchantments focused on sneaking and aura camouflage.]

She hesitated for that one. She did not technically need protection. The Necrarchs could simply pull her head off. In the end, it was a deeply embedded notion of decency that motivated her to try it on. The skinsuit was very, very form-fitting. PG-13 at the very least.

She tried the armor on and that was it.

“I have never looked so cool in my entire life...” she whispered. Armani did not have a thing on whoever had designed that masterpiece. There was even a little skirt thing to cover her butt.

Unfortunately, there were no bracers or chin guards so she could not accessorize. Most of the armors had been basic and functional anyway. It was lucky that she found something not meant for the corps of engineers. Possibly some other unit passing by,

“Oooh, and what’s this?”

She found one last thing of interest. She did not need a sword, but there was a silvery staff hanging against the wall.

She grabbed it and pulled.

“Fuck!”

She dodged to the side as the thing fell on the ground with a thunderous clang. It was so freaking heavy, what?

[Faded infantry modular polearm shaft of the Old Empire (enchanted): this piece of equipment was reserved for the elite of the heavy infantry, and could accommodate a variety of heads depending on the type of foes faced]

What was it made of, depleted uranium?

Something shifted near the entrance.

Viv froze in her tracks. She had definitely heard something. Something had moved. Something heavy and solid had dragged itself against the wall or the floor. There was something moving around.

She packed all her stuff as silently as she could and stepped out of the armory. She was now facing towards the entrance of the base. The pyramid was forward and right. The barracks entrance, the bunker, and the hangar behind it were all directly to her left.

So was the source of the noise.

She peered into the darkness. There was nothing there. Only a straight corridor directly to the entrance hall which she had bypassed, passed a pair of ruined doors.

She squinted. Her eyes were not good enough, but she had another tool now.

[Ruined door of the Old Empire: a ruined door from—

Yeah I don't need an in-depth explanation every time, take a hint, she thought.

[Broken glass]

[Dead person]

[Broken door handle]

[Necrarch millipede]

Fuck!

Ok ok, calm down. It was not moving. It was not moving now but it definitely reacted.

Need to get out.

Ok, retracing her steps may not be the best idea now that the thing possibly knew there was an intruder. She retreated into the armory and checked the windows, but they were narrow and very high.

With slow purpose, Viv moved to a nearby office with openings, keeping an eye on the empty corridor behind her.

She stepped and approached the most damaged bars. The mortar crumbled under her strength and the opening widened.

Something moved again.

Time slowed down. She moved with the strength of despair.

Two bars joined their brethren on the ground. She jumped through.

Behind, something moved like a freight train. Dust fell from the ceiling.

She stayed close to the wall and crawled away in silence. The thing passed by and she heard a distant hiss. It must have found the light. Silence returned to the facility.

Her heart finished playing a Metallica drum solo.

Fucking hell, she needed out. She continued along the wall and away from the creature. She sprinted to the entrance of the bunker.

She turned around. Through a gutted window, a myriad of beady red eyes watched her retreat.

//YOU HAVE RETURNED, YOUR GRACE.

“There is a fucking Necrarch in the barracks!”

//TAKE A DEEP BREATH, YOUR GRACE. YOU ARE UNHARMED AND I SEE THAT YOUR FORAY WAS SUCCESSFUL. WE WILL BE LONG GONE BY THE TIME IT COMES OUT TO HUNT.

“Yeah, yeah, ok.”

//EMPATHY EXPRESSED, RETURNING TO MAIN OBJECTIVE.

//YOU WILL NEED TO MAKE ME TRANSPORTABLE SO THAT WE CAN BOTH DEPART THIS PLACE.

Viv frowned a bit at that whole empathy thing. It sounded a bit condescending, as if the golem did it because it was indulging her weakness.

“How do I do that?”

//YOU MUST REMOVE MY PROCESSING CORE FROM THE GOLEM FRAME, THEN YOU NEED TO ATTACH A PORTABLE SENSOR SUIT TO IT SO I CAN PERCEIVE THE WORLD AND INTERACT WITH YOU.

//THIS UNIT IS VOLUMINOUS. YOU WILL PROBABLY NEED A SEPARATE BAG.

That could be done. She could carry the unit in her hands and back to camp, then shove it into a sleeping bag and carry the thing over her shoulder, maybe. That would be slow-going.

She went to unplug the core.

//WAIT.

“Hmm?”

To her surprise, the golem remained unexpectedly silent. It took it a while to continue.

//ONCE YOU REMOVE THIS UNIT FROM ITS FRAME, IT WILL LOSE ITS ABILITY TO PERCEIVE BUT NOT TO PROCESS.

“You mean, you will be stuck in there? Conscious?”

//THAT IS CORRECT.

Fucking hell that sounded awful.

“For how long?”

//UNTIL THE INTEGRATED POWER SOURCE RUNS OUT OF ENERGY. SEVENTEEN DAYS, THREE PERIODS.

//WHEN THE POWER SOURCE RUNS OUT, THIS UNIT WILL DEACTIVATE AND ITS MEMORY BANK CONTENTS WILL BE LOST. THE CORE WILL BE WIPED CLEAN.

“So, you will die? Forever?”

//YES.

“Hey. Don’t worry. I’ll plug you out, plug a sensor suit in and we will leave, ok? I’ve carried forty kilograms of gear before, this is nothing.

//I UNDERSTAND.

“No need to worry.”

//THIS UNIT WAS NOT EQUIPPED WITH A WORRY MODULE.

“Then what are you bitching about? Let’s do this.

//DO NOT DROP ME.

“...”

//...YOUR GRACE. DO NOT DROP ME, YOUR GRACE.

“I’m doing it.”

She eyed her prize. It was a thing of metal and crystal and it did look quite heavy. It was also exquisitely made and engraved, reflecting the pallid light on its polished surface. It represented someone’s lifework.

“Alright.”

Viv found and unplugged the power cable, and another one that linked the golem’s processing unit to the different systems. There were many braces and locks to uncouple before she could pull the core out. Apparently, core and processing unit were synonymous.

It all went without a hitch. The parts were intact and most were made out of a smooth silvery metal that had survived the passage of time remarkably well. She suspected that binding Solfis had given her some sort of access level, because she never had any need for a key.

Soon, it was done. She grabbed her backpack, crouched and straightened her back properly, then deadlifted the core.

“FUCK!”

She took two stumbling steps and put the core down.

It was heavy as fuck.

It was... too heavy.

At least fifty kilograms.

There was no way in hell she would be able to carry it through the streets, much less through a full desert. It was not just the weight. The core was cumbersome as hell.

“Damn.”

That was bad.

“Ok, ok. Think. First, the sensor suite.”

She grabbed it from the ground. It looked like a tiny robot head with huge eyes, the kind she would expect from the comic relief droid in some-budget sci-fi flick. It looked pathetic compared to the bling core.

Clicking it on and fastening it was a matter of seconds.

//Well done. Shall we depart?

Its voice now was distinctly male and only slightly synthetic. It was a far cry from the booming voice of before. It made the golem more human.

“I... I can't. You're too heavy.”

//Processing.

//Your power stands at eight.

“It's very low, right?”

//Yes. Most children reach ten by the age of twelve, even those who are not... were not, in a warrior curriculum.

“I'm sorry.”

//Do not apologize, Your Grace. After all, you were only born yesterday.

//This unit should have taken this parameter into consideration.

//...

//After taking your current power into account, your best chance of survival will be to leave me behind.

//Please acquire a notebook so that this unit can give you direction.

“No.”

//Your grace. Bob. Beebiane. You will die if you stay.

//It comforts me to know that, at the end of my life, I was able to help someone survive.

//I am... skirting the limits of my hard-coded directives by naming you heir to the throne, but the relief I feel knowing that my help will help you survive is genuine.

“Wait.”

//You need directions and you need instructions. There is little time.

“Solfis, shut up. I did not escape my fate as one my dad’s pawn and some asshole’s trophy wife by giving up at the first sign of problem, ok? I’m special fucking forces. Hang on.”

Solfis did not reply. She looked around the bay.

Engineers were efficient. Even if someone had an anti-gravity spell of some equivalent bullshit, there was no way that they would cast it if they could roll heavy stuff around instead.

“Is that a trolley? Under that tarp?”

//Yes.

She removed a dusty cover and revealed a cart. It had two layers, one that was waist-high and another one closer to the ground. It worked on wheels.

“Where are the tools?”

She checked the cart.

“Wrench, Something adhesive.”

//Your grace, do you wish to carry me on the cart?

“I’ll drag you and the supplies.”

//The noise of the wheels might give us away, and the roads may not permit it.

“We won’t use the wheels. I got an idea.”

Viv got to work with manic energy and the singular drive that had pushed her through many ordeals. It was part desire to succeed, and part desire to prove the world wrong, to go against the odds. It was a stubborn seed in a shell of positivity. Within minutes, the wheels were off. The second level was next, as well as the side walls. She was left with a flat surface and four posts at the corners, as well as the hooks on which the wheels had been attached.

“Alright.”

She turned the cart around and grabbed two thin bars of the silvery metal used inside of the golems from one of the shelves. They were curved at the end.

She was going to use them as skis.

//This is silverite, the star-metal.

//Each one of those bars costs over eighty gold talents.

“Good, we can sell them afterward.”

She grabbed inside of the tool box and removed a very familiar roll of black fabric.

“Fantasy fucking duct tape.”

Maybe some engineers were linked across the multiverse by a hive mind that fed on coffee and sarcasm.

She used half of the roll, all of her remaining twine and two dozen swear words to fix the silverite to the cart’s bottom, with the ends pointing up. Those bitches were going nowhere.

“Alright. Here we go.”

A huff, a puff, and a deadlift later, the core was placed in the middle of the cart. She moved it a little bit more towards the ass end and gave it the bondage treatment. That was not going anywhere either.

She placed her backpack at the front and grabbed the rope from it. One end was firmly attached to the two front posters. With the other, she made a harness that she placed around her shoulders. It would make dragging the thing much easier.

“Here goes nothing.”

She moved forward, and the cart followed with a raspy noise of metal sliding on concrete.

And now was the difficult part. The slope up to the surface.

//Your efforts are appreciated, Your Grace.

//This unit did not consider this solution.

//Please, do not tire yourself overmuch draggin me up.

“Aha! But this is where my genius is — ngh — made all the more manifest.”

Viv dragged the cart to the side where dust had accumulated. The skis slid on it without resistance.

It was still a bitch to pull it all the way up.

When she reached the top, she was rewarded by sunlight and a cool breeze on her sweaty face.

Power +1

“Damn right.”

//Your Grace?

“Yes?”

//Thank you.

The trekk back to camp went once more without incidents. She had to walk closer to the side of the street where dust had accumulated and that placed her in more danger if there were Nocrarchs waiting to nab her. The millipede had shown an unwillingness to come out during the day, but she was not sure if she could really count on that. Nocrarchs looked different. Perhaps they acted differently as well.

Fortunately, nothing happened. They made their way in relative silence. It was past noon when she reached the camp and sat down, sweaty and already a bit tired. The inside of the circle lightened her strange fever, but it no longer removed it entirely.

“Is this mana poisoning I am feeling?”

//One of my memories confirms that your symptoms are consistent with mild mana poisoning.

“Memories, plural?”

The implication of his systematic removal of the fallen golems’ processing units suddenly made more sense.

//You saw the other cores, back in the vault.

“Did you...”

//They were going to fade, so I hooked them to my unit and took their memories as my own. The others were... not quite as smart as me, but I just did not want to see them disappear.

“Is that why you were so confused when we first met?”

//Yes. The different 'us' could not function properly. This unit had to purge their directives from my decision-making center, then prioritize them.

//Each golem carried the mark of its engineering team.

//Each had... something of value that should not have disappeared.

//A consensus was reached and we became one.

//A few parts had to be discarded.

“You are a fusion of many golems?”

//Yes, under the dominion of Solfis, my true self.

“A *Gestalt*. A whole that is more than the sum of its parts.”

//Term “Gestalt” accepted as accurate.

//One day, you must tell me about your previous world, Your Grace.

//Long may you reign! But that will be later.

//For now, we must use this time of rest to start working on your salvation.

Viv sat down with water and her now slightly chewed brick for a quick lunch as she listened to the golem. She regretted not drinking her fill back at the bunker before leaving. The millipede and the fever must have fucked with her mind.

//Mana poisoning occurs when high mana concentration overloads the fleshy mortal's conduits.

//In order not to die, you must improve your conduits so that they can accumulate more mana.

//This will improve your resistance.

//You must also learn how to manipulate mana and use it.

//This will lower the load on your conduits.

//Your mana distribution is heavily skewed towards black and the source of poisoning is black. Success is assured!

“How does the distribution affect poisoning?”

//The higher the attunement to an element is, the easier it is to channel.

//Attunement over thirty percent in any type is enough to cast most specialized spells.

//Expectant mothers of imperial scions would often spend time in attuned chambers inside of the palace to give their child the potential to reach the pinnacle of casting in specific alignments.

//Attunement remains the most important parameter.

//Attunement is the measure of one's control over their magical abilities.

“Ok, ok. Does that mean.... that you are going to teach me magic?”

//Yes.

“Yayyyy! Oh hell yes, magic! Yeah!”

//I will teach you a few simple exercises as recorded in one of the manuals in my databank.

//Those manuals were granted to me by my creator.

//They contain the method taught to the imperial family, which needs to be studied very early in life.

“Hm, I’m not exactly a toddler.”

//Magically speaking, you are.

“Fair enough.”

//We will start with breathing.

Viv took a breather in both senses of the world. As she rested a bit, Solfis guided her through the most basic steps of how to feel her own conduits. It was made extremely easy by the circumstances.

Focus +1

//Excellent progress, Your Grace, as expected of the heir to the throne.

//Do you feel your core?

“Is this the place behind my sternum that feels like it’s being slow-cooked?”

//Yes. Mana overload is making your task easier.

“Do people overload their conduit on purpose if it helps them find their magic?”

//It would amount to child torture and is generally frowned upon.

//Mages are taught during childhood, in painless but demanding studies.

//This unit is merely making the best of a difficult situation, Your Grace.

//This unit is impressed by your pain tolerance.

“Maybe I have a skill for that.”

//We will be certain when the interface finishes adjusting to your fleshy container, Your Grace, long may it endure.

“Right. What then?”

Solfis guided her through basic movement exercises. That part was complicated. She was supposed to focus on her core and sort of press on it. She was reminded of how the [Inspect] skill worked on her ocular nerves and brain and tried to recreate the feeling, but it was delicate. It was like trying to flex a third hand. She did not know how to make it happen.

Soon, she had to leave again. The longer days on this new planet were fucking with her sense of time. She felt that it should have been past noon, but they were still a bit before midday.

She packed the tent, two bedrolls, her food and four of the steel spikes, then moved back toward the main thoroughfare and the pyramid entrance. She avoided that big building where she had seen the necrarch ravager and passed silently behind another monumental complex. One of the faded letters above a side-entrance said ‘Treasury - Bureau of Taxes.’

It was heavily fortified.

Some things never changed.

Curiously, the breathing exercises and her strange attempt to push on her core sent her into a state of meditative attention. The awareness of branching paths came and went, sometimes strong enough that she could almost trace them, sometimes diffuse and nebulous. They did not correspond to any organ, not even her heart. The streets also came and went in silence as she followed beds of dust on her way out of the city. The unnaturally flat ground made the activity easy.

The main avenue to the city gate was just as majestic and dead as the first time she had seen it. The wind picked up then, but it still only carried with it the scent of dust. The lack of smell diversity was yet another strange experience to add to the pile.

The gates appeared deceptively close. Viv kept walking at a brisk space. As she went by palaces and temples, Solfis would sometimes tell her in a few hushed words the purpose they had served. Living Harrak must have been quite a sight. The mix of solemnity and interesting anecdotes gave her regular breaks from the exercise, forcing her to refocus every time. It also gave her exit the lighter mood of a touristic excursion, with the ‘do not enter’ signs replaced by undead horrors.

It was the middle of the afternoon when they reached the northern gates of Harrak.

Two statues stood on either side of the highway and beyond, she could see the desert dotted by the odd wind-swept ruin. One of the statues was a man in armor holding a greatsword, while the other was a woman in a fancy apparel that looked halfway between a luxury dress and a gambeson. She held an orb on a hand, while the other stood open and empty. The walls

surrounding the city were much lower than she expected, barely three times her height. The pair of guardians, however, was massive. They towered over the surrounding buildings with immortal prestance.

//The first imperial couple.

Solfis' voice was soft and reverential. Viv cared little, though she agreed that the pair was imposing. The colors had faded, but the statues were as beautiful as renaissance masterpieces. They were still mostly intact.

She felt an unnatural weight on her shoulder as she passed under their extended arms. It made her shiver.

"What now?"

//The wretched desert before us used to be the Imperial Reserve.

//There should be a path to your left.

"There is nothing to my left."

//The flat expanse before the walls, Your Grace.

//It will allow us to move around the Capital and head south, towards the Baleran Gorge and the subjugated lands.

//This is the most direct path out of the Harrakan Heartlands.

"And you think that we will find life out there?"

//This unit has stored the locations of a great many supply caches.

//Many of those caches were buried.

//With the distance and the depth, you will have regular access to food and water.

"That sounds good."

//You need to move fast, while simultaneously practicing to keep your mana poisoning to a manageable level.

"Got it. Say, you said my odds of success were 37% right?"

//This unit estimated that the odds were at 37%.

//However, your power score and extreme mana affinity have changed that value.

//This unit judges that informing you of the current odds would have a negative impact on your chances.

"... You serious?"

//This unit was not equipped with a casual module.

“Fuck.”

//Please keep practicing your breathing until tonight.

//This unit will answer further questions then.

For the next hours, Viv followed the exterior of the wall. The absolute complete monotony of the wall on one side and dreary dunes on the outside really helped her with her meditation as there was absolutely nothing else to do. Solfis would initiate conversation twice per period only. He would also politely insist that she focused on practicing when she tried to ask questions outside of his regularly scheduled pauses.

//Given your current speed, we should leave the city behind tomorrow in the early afternoon.

//We will make camp before nightfall and continue your practice for a period.

“At least there are no necrarchs this side of the wall.”

//Correction. There are necrarchs this side of the wall.

Viv stumbled.

“What?!”

//They burrow during the day.

//I monitored the topography of the dunes to your right.

//We only came across one pit during the whole evening.

//Necrarchs no longer roam unless they smell mortal flesh.

“I AM mortal flesh!”

//You do not feel like mortal flesh, Your Grace.

//Due to your pure black alignment, Necrachs will have significant difficulties in finding you.

//You now emit black mana through the breathing exercise.

//This further masks your presence to their senses.

“So they would need to be very close? Do necrarchs roam?”

//Necrarchs here are the remaining turned citizens after centuries of absorbing high density black mana.

//Black mana used to be even more concentrated than it is now.

//You would have died instantly two centuries ago.
//Local necrarchs are artificially bloated.
//Necrarchs are normally millenia-old and quite cunning.
//These necrarchs are intellectually stunted.
//They will not move unless something makes them move.

“Normal Necrarchs are even more dangerous than those?!”

//Correct, Your Grace.
//They are cunning and devious opponents with access to powerful black magic.
//This unit faced their kind before and slew two.
//This unit is a powerful servant to the heir, long may she live!
//Necrarchs had a danger rating of seven.

“How high is a danger rating of seven?”

//There is no danger rating of eight.

“Okay.”

//But there is a ‘disaster’ danger rating.

“Oh, goodie.”

//You need to concern yourself, Your Grace. Right now, a creature with a danger rating of 3 could kill you easily.

“Perfect. You can stop comforting me now.”

//I exist to serve, Your Grace.

They rounded the corner of the wall by late afternoon and she managed to walk a bit more before night came. The skinsuit and armor proved their worth. Her shoulders were not particularly sore, as the weight was well-balanced across her body.

She found a circle of dirt by the road and dug a small hole. The dust lacked any sort of resistance, so her task was quickly done and she deployed the tent so that it was hidden from the dunes, or at least less visible. The entrance faced the wall in the hope that she would get less dust in her face throughout the night. Solfis had insisted that she should not make efforts to carry it closer so she had left the core on its homemade sled and she now sat before it for dinner.

Dinner sucked. It was pemmican brick dipped in lukewarm water then munched slowly. She had to drink the water as well. It was not exactly vile, but it was getting old pretty fast.

//It appears that you can reliably activate your core, Your Grace.

“Yeah yeah, I suppose that six-year old children can do it around these parts?”

//Only those destined for greatness, Your Grace.

//The youngest record is two years old, and may have been a fabrication.

//It is part of the legend of the archmage Arkal of Three Rings.

//There are no records of anyone achieving it in one day.

//Truly, you are destined to return the empire to greatness.

“Pretty sure that mana overload helps. Speaking of which...”

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 39%

Current attunement: 0.87%

“My mana distribution is 39% black. That’s pretty high, right?”

//Correct. Children are born with fully-formed mana distribution channels.

//This is the case for everyone.

//Although, most people only have enough attunement to cast the most simple of tricks

//Mana distributions over 50% in a single category are almost unheard of.

//Black mana distribution over 20% for a living person is almost impossible to achieve.

//By all accounts, you should be dead.

“...”

//Now, this unit will teach you the basics of mana expression.

//There is a sliding panel on my left side, around the middle, open it.

It took a bit of rummaging in the dying light of the day, but Viv eventually slid an almost perfectly smooth panel. Inside, she found some sort of metal cable with a crystal at the end. The cable itself weirdly reminded her of her shower hose.

//This is a manual energy input extension.

//Place three fingers against the cable, and your index and thumb against your crystal.

//There is no need to remove your grave-robbled skinsuit, Your Grace.

“Hey!”

//The mana can exude from your fleshy appendage into the perfect, unfailing form of the mana crystal.

Viv obtemperated. Solfis was merely trying to help her and the fever was only getting worse. It was high time to stop dicking around and do some actual magic.

She felt a connection form between her core and the crystal, using the same brand new immaterial organ sense she had worked on since lunch. It was like holding hands with someone else, if her arm were covered in seventeen layers of stockings and made of marshmallow. It was, frankly, almost itchy.

//Connection established.

//Now, push on your core.

//Do not worry about efficiency or technique.

//Focus on the sensation.

Viv did as she was told and almost dropped the crystal with a yelp. For the entire day, working on her core had felt like kneading dough. The mana in her conduits had deformed and moved a bit, but it had always been there. Now, she felt like she had opened the spout as the mana left her immaterial body through the crystal between her fingers. It was dragged there by an imbalance between herself and it. She was too full, and the item was too empty.

She knew instinctively that the exchange was inefficient. Her focus was all over the place. She was working with senses that she never knew she had, fumbling about like an awkward toddler with a new toy.

//Contact established. Receiving mana now.

“You can feed from black mana?” Viv exclaimed in surprise.

//This unit can feed from any kind of mana.

//The mana is absorbed by the crystal and converted into pure energy for my continued existence.

That made sense... but then why...

“Hold on. If you can absorb black mana and Harrak is saturated with the stuff, then why the fuck did you not pump it into your power source?”

//The inability to recharge ourselves is hard-wired into our systems.

//Only transfer from one golem to another is allowed, and only in case of emergency.

//This was a security measure designed to prevent golems from functioning independently of their engineers for too long.

“I...”

She stopped.

“They did not trust you?”

//This unit cannot infer the intent of its creator.

“I see. I’m sorry.”

//You dragged me out of this prison, Your Grace.

//You rewrote the directive to guard the city at all cost.

//You have nothing to apologize for.

“Alright. So, how long do I keep doing this for?”

//Until you are too tired and must rest.

“It’s really working right?”

//...Lift your hand against the background of the wall, Your Grace.

“Huh?”

Viv did as told out of curiosity and inspected the crystal. The last of the light of day cast the barrier around Harran in the color of old bone, grey and decayed. Even then, the lighter color offered a sharp contrast to the phenomenon currently taking place.

The tip of her thumb and index were emitting a dark cloud that evaporated into the air. It was barely visible and sometimes it faded when she was less focused. But it was there.

Magic.

She was visibly manipulating mana.

“I’m a mother-fucking witch!”

You have gained the skill: Mana manipulation.

Skill assessment in progress.

Focus +1

//This unit is delighted to inform you that your chances of survival have been revised and improved.

“Oh so you will tell me the odds now?”

//No.

Sunlight brought a slurry of new experiences.

The first was a serious migraine and a bone-deep fever.

You are suffering from mana poisoning.

Endurance +1

“It’s like slapping me then kissing me.”

Viv climbed out of the tent and packed the camp properly in one minute.

“Oh, Viviane tres chere, what’s for breakfast? The same fucking thing as last breakfast, and last lunch, and last dinner Vivane you silly goose, edible brick with a side of powdered dust, and can you guess the wine pairing? That’s right! Tepid water!”

The constant pain and general feeling of being fed up were finally getting to her.

Your skills have been assessed!

Some of your skills have been designated as 'alien' and do not match this world's magic. They will be listed for your convenience.

Some of your skills have been decoupled from 'alien' skills.

Congratulations! Thanks to your relentless efforts, the skills:

- Writing
- Reading
- Essay composition
- Arithmetic
- Geometry
- Calculus
- Eloquence

...

The list was long. It was cool to know that her preparatory school experience and her bachelor in history were finally going to be useful. Fucking joke that she had to go to a magical world for it to happen.

...

- Chemistry
- Biology
- Engineering

Have all been merged into the full skill: 'Polymath scholar'!

- Your ability to retain information from lectures and books is significantly enhanced
- You are able to better convey ideas through the barrier of culture, language, and experience.
- The various knowledge required to solve specific problems will come more easily.
- The term 'smart' will appear when others use the inspect skill on you

Fan-fucking-tastic.

//You have a brilliant mind, Your Grace, as expected of the heir. Long may you live!

"None of this matters because we're in the middle of the bloody desert."

Or rather, at the edge. Bah, it did not matter.

//There is more coming, milady.

Congratulations! Thanks to your relentless efforts, the skills

- Cooking
- Cleaning
- Laundry
- ...

Have all been merged into the advanced skill: Householding

“Daddy would be so proud.”

//...

“Not much to say about that one, hey?”

//When we are done, Your Grace, we will make sure that you never have to touch a broom again in your life.

“Aw.”

//Unless you wish to swat someone, Your Grace.

“Or ride it.”

//Your Grace?

Viv’s image of flying at high speed under the moon in the company of strapping young lads and lasses while wearing fancy school uniforms evaporated like snow under the sun. She was too old to be admitted anyway.

“Nevermind. There is more.”

And there was more indeed. She gained the advanced skills in athletics and survival. Survival was useful in helping her orient herself, as well as finding and identifying natural resources. Just like the rest, it was completely fucking useless in this wasteland. Athletics was the true treasure here as it would help her walk faster and drag the cart for longer without taking breaks.

Outlander-specific note.

The gods Nous and Maradoc come to your aid in your hour of need!

Skills have been separated in tiers and levels of control for a better grasp by the human mind. The numbers represent how well you understand a skill and how deeply you can draw on magic to assist you in your endeavors. The magic of skills is deeper than the magic you cast. They are bound to concepts.

Basic skills consolidate into advanced skills, which consolidate into full skills. You do not lose your abilities by consolidating skills, so no two advanced skills are identical.

You need to reach a threshold in required skills to consolidate them.

If one of your skills was already consolidated, it will be counted as still existing for the purpose of further consolidation. For example, [Archery] can be consolidated into the advanced skills [Sharpshooter] and then [Scout] at a later date.

Individual skills progress over seven thresholds from novice to divine. Progressing past the master threshold (4) requires skill and a lifetime of dedication. Each grade is further divided into 10 ranks for the convenience of your human mind.

“What the fuck? Do they think we love math?”

//Human minds categorize and separate more than other sentient species' minds.

//Human minds also like to compare themselves to see who is the best.

“...Fair enough.”

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Beginner 9
Survival	Beginner 9	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Advanced 6	Pain tolerance	Beginner 9
Small blades	Beginner 7	Meditative Trance	Beginner 5
Basic music	Beginner 5	Mana manipulation	Novice 2

“Twenty four years of study and hard work and I got ten skills,” Viv commented as she finished packing her meager belongings.

//It takes effort and purpose to obtain a skill at the novice rank.

//Most skills should be taken with the objective to consolidate them.

**//One full skill and three advanced skills at your age are nothing to scoff at, Your Grace.
//For a commoner.
//Your world had no magic and many of the skills you acquired are no longer applicable.
//We will now work towards the acquisition of [Mana Mastery] and [Genocidal Maniac].**

Viv's hands freeze on her harness.

"There is a genocidal maniac skill?"

//This unit intends to find out. Glory to the heir! Long may she live!

"Okay calm down buttercup. Get your priorities straight."

**//Diagnostic in process.
//Priorities are already straight.**

Viv started walking. There was a tab with 'alien skills' which included the Special Forces Training consolidated skill and other stuff like computer science and even modern accountancy. They were shown as temporarily deactivated.

She focused on her memories of assembling and disassembling a FAMAS, her standard assault rifle. She could still visualize every component including the tripod she never used. Her memories were not gone, this world simply did not know how to add magic to the mix.

"Do you know why my advanced skills are stuck at Beginner 9 by the way?"

**//Advanced skills all incorporate the magic of the world at higher levels.
//You will keep progressing now that your soul has a greater influence on the world.**

One hour later, Viv had to stop for the dreaded, inevitable moment she had expected ever since realizing that all the toilet paper on Harrak had long since disintegrated.

**//You should allow me to use all sensors at all times, Your Grace.
//This unit cares not for your weak form's biological imperatives.**

"Shut up and watch the dunes."

Life was hell.

Trying to move her mana gave her the only solace she could find. The meditative trance skill must have been at work. The absence of notifications indicated that she had gained it back on earth, along with pain tolerance. She remembered that sometimes, it felt like her body was past its limit and only willpower carried her forward. The altered state she had reached then came much more naturally now, as if she had turned into a super buddhist monk.

It really helped her deal with the fever and the ever-present migraine.

Later, they went past the Harrak west gate. It, too, had a couple on each side and led to the central pyramid. She now realized that the explosion had angled towards the south where she was now going. What little she could see in the distance looked completely demolished, and that was only the side of the blast.

Power +1

You have reached a milestone! You can now increase your strength dramatically for a single movement at the cost of increased fatigue.

“Progress.”

//Your nature as an outlander and your low physical stats will lead to rapid increase of values.

“But so far I have mostly gained mental stats?”

//I believe that you have not gained anything per se. Your body just acclimated to magic and the interface now accurately represents your intellect.

“The relationship between stats, what I really am and magic is a bit confusing.”

//Human interface is designed to be useful and accessible even to the illiterate and the stupid.

“You mean, people who cannot read don’t see letters?”

//No. They perceive the concepts directly.

//It is a much slower process.

“Does the god Nous really look down on us like that?”

//Have you met the average human?

“...”

//Perhaps the average human in your native world is a balanced, rational individual with empathy—

“You don’t have to finish that sentence.”

//It is through no fault of your own that you were born in an imperfect fleshy vessel, Your Grace.

“Thanks.”

//Empathy expressed, returning to the main objective.

//For the next segment, I would like you to recharge me while walking.

“Really?”

//This unit—

“Ok, got it.”

It kind of annoyed Viv that she was willing to just do anything the golem told her to do. On the other hand, it was clearly for her own good and if she did not like to do what she was told, she would never have joined the armed forces.

Come to think of it, her act of rebellion against being told what to do by her dad had led her to a career path where she was told what to do by random folks. There was a Freudian message there somewhere.

She did not particularly want to find it.

At least Mouq had the qualifications to tell her what to do. The Berber woman had also once killed a man by punching him to death with a ceramic plate. It was hard to say no to someone who had done that, then cleaned her face with a hanky and gone on with her day.

Viv opened the sliding thing and took the crystal and its hose. She had to reduce her distance to the carriage to stay in range of the core, an issue she solved by rolling the rope around herself.

Moving and charging proved difficult at first. She stumbled a few times, and lost the connection as well. Eventually, however, she finally received a good surprise.

You have reached Meditative Trance Intermediary 1. You are now able to meditate while performing simple, repetitive tasks.

Passing the threshold made a major difference. She felt something help her, something that had become a part of her as intimate as breathing. It was eerie that something so new could feel so natural, and it left her to wonder how she could have worked without magic before. It made her wonder what heights of competency the men and women of this world could achieve with time and determination. And a bit of luck, she supposed.

Despite the skill's progress, it became increasingly difficult to keep her focus. Fatigue made her stumble after a few minutes.

//This is far enough. You can place the hose back into the panel.

Suspicion immediately arose.

"What do you mean, far enough?"

**//There was a necrach buried twenty paces to your right.
//Your black mana emissions completely masked your presence.**

"What?! So close? And you did not think to warn me?" she sputtered in anger.

//This unit will not share data when the sharing has a likely negative impact on your chances of survival.

"I have a right to know!"

**//This unit apologizes. This unit cannot knowingly and under any circumstances endanger a member in good standing of the imperial family.
//This directive is hard-coded.**

"Damn it. I got saddled with a rogue AI..." Viv muttered to herself.

As she packed the hose, a thought occurred to her.

"Hey, you had a pretty low power reserve. Are you at risk of shutting down?"

**//This unit now has over fifty days of operation at current energy level.
//The integrated power core was designed to allow me to function for ten seconds at maximum combat efficiency after my main power core was disabled.
//It can be further charged.
//However, this unit is no longer at risk of failing.**

"Good for you,"

**//This unit will still perish if you are disabled, Your Grace.
//Please take care of yourself.**

"I'm trying!"

More meditation. More moving stuff around. Viv received several notifications that her mana manipulation was improving, but it was at the lowest stage possible and progress would be

exponentially harder the more she learnt, so that was not impressive. The joy and pleasure at doing actual magic was ruined by her constant headache and fever. The pain seeped into every aspect of her life. It took all of her self-control not to snap at the golem every time it opened its metaphoric mouth.

Not that emitting black smoke from one's fingertip was anything to write home about. At best it was a party trick that would leave the victim feeling sick to their stomach.

**//Black mana is associated with death, change, shadows, and destruction.
//It is not inherently evil.**

"Right."

//However its practice used to be frowned upon in many cultures.

"Of fucking course."

//That is what some of the books in my data store confirmed.

"The engineers stored books in the golem's memories?"

//That is correct.

//Some of the content was made available to the golems' processing unit, their core.

//Some of the books were stored separately.

//Engineers used to connect magical screens to view the data.

"How much erotica do you have?"

//Less than 2% of all books are erotica.

"Wow, that is surprisingly low."

//This unit did not need twenty-six copies of "The School of Hard Knobs," and eighteen of "Lady Stiffyni and her three daughters"

//Redundant content was expunged.

"Hahaha I bet. Is there any nice girl on girl or boy on boy action?"

//Records indicate that the 'Gladiators of Harrak' series was a reference on the subject.

//This unit has tomes one through eight stored on its database.

"Ok, just keep everything. I might want to study it later for, uh, research purposes. Understanding the local culture."

//Understood, Your Grace.

//However, without access to a viewing screen, I would have to dictate them to you.

Ew ew ew. No. Not even if he could take the voice of Hugh Jackman.

“Ok, going back to black mana. How is that affecting me? How bad is it?”

//Please keep in mind that there are no recorded occurrences of a monochromatic human.

//The fact that the mana is black should not have too much negative influence on your body.

//However, if you do not obtain a secondary alignment, you will be limited to casting black mana and arcane spells.

“Pure energy?”

//This is for much later, Your Grace.

“Right, I’ll focus.”

Damn that fever.

//Most spellcasters, even the modest ones, can cast a simple healing spell.

//There is no reasonable way for you to obtain life-attuned mana.

//You will not be able to heal yourself.

//Additionally, healing spells may have a reduced effect on you.

“That sucks.”

//Not to worry.

//With my training, you will soon join the ranks of powerful mages.

//We will find a way to solve this issue before your attunement reaches half of your total.

“Good to know.”

//...And your organs fail.

“What?”

//...This unit is reasonably certain that your body will turn part-elemental at this junction.

//It has happened to archmages before.

//Some of them survived the process. Rejoice!

“You can stop comforting me now. Thank you.”

The city wall to her left was becoming increasingly more ragged as she walked on. Stones were missing from the top, and debris now appeared on occasion across the dunes. Some of those the size of houses.

“Hey, what happens when someone reaches the highest level of attunement?”

//They become the next god of magic.

Solfis' tone always grew more quiet as he spoke of the gods. Viv did not know if it was true reverence, or if the golem used human emotions as facade.

They reached the end of the city far earlier than planned, because the city ended earlier than planned.

“Wah...”

The walls were now shattered ruins, only fragments remaining here and there where a bigger structure had blocked most of the blast.

Viv had thought that most of the damage had been done by the fallout, and while it was probably true for most of the land, such was not the case for the city,

The entire south side of Harrak was...

Well...

It was gone.

There were no other words for it. She had to stop to appreciate the complete destruction that had torn apart the titanic building and flown its remains across the land, leaving nothing intact in its passage. The center of the city was a vast crater as large as that of a volcano. There was nothing left, nothing but peeled off land exposing the bony foundations below. It was as if the black maw of the imperial palace's wound had vomited death, and was now patiently swallowing its slain prey over the eons. Necrarchs covered the open ground like worms on a corpse. They squirmed and swarmed in a multitude of grotesque forms without purpose, macabre reminders of the consequences of uncontrolled magic. The cold realization sent a chill up Viv's spine. It froze her heart through the fever and broke her concentration. Her pace hastened.

Solfis remained silent when they left the rotting capital behind, even as dunes now fought with stone to stop her progress. It was then that she knew for certain that the golem had surpassed its nature at some point in the centuries of solitude it... no, he, had been subjected to. She herself was emotionally detached from the catastrophe. It had happened to other people, a long

time ago, long before she came to this world. Only personal grief — or whatever equivalent the strange being was now feeling — could justify his silence.

Harrak disappeared behind a hill as the sky was turning dark.

“Should we stop here?” she finally asked.

//No.

//There is a waystation a bit further.

//Even if only the walls remain, they should provide you with a much needed shelter.

“Okay.”

The road snaked between hills. It might have been fields, or it might have been forest, or perhaps the area south of the city was a slum that extended to the horizon. There was no way to know, and she would not ask the golem.

She found the shelter a bit farther and waited until Solfis made sure there were no signs of undead. Its top half had collapsed outward, but the first floor remained and Solfis guided her to a sandy basement where a circle of silvery metal remained. He had her push mana out of her hands, trying to cover each finger in turn with black smog until she felt drained and tired. The circle was a mana isolation circuit meant to isolate the person inside from mana in the air. Sleeping here would reduce the speed at which the fallout would kill her. Solfis had optimized her trip.

“Hey,” she started with her head on a rolled-up sleeping bag she used as a pillow.

//Yes, Your Grace?

“You okay?”

//I am fully operational.

//There are many new parameters I need to take into consideration.

//They concern the best path to follow to guarantee your survival.

//This unit appreciates your concern, Your Grace.

“Sorry about Harrak. I know you were trying to protect it.”

//This unit knew the state it was in.

//Do not worry.

“Do you mind if I refer to you as male?”

//Not at all.

//Now rest, you have a long journey tomorrow.

//We must reach the Lanneis slave pens within two days.

Viv did as ordered and closed her eyes. The presence of slave pens orbited her tired, feverish mind and joined other elements she had observed.

The palace was a monument to megalomania.

Solfis had mentioned subjugated lands.

Solfis had mentioned inferior cultures.

Solfis was a freaking war golem.

Harrak had been destroyed in a black magic event that had turned the entire population into monsters.

The various ideas crystallized into a theory.

It finally occurred to her that maybe, just maybe, the ancient Harrakans might have been assholes.

Three days later, south of Lanneis.

A lonely form dragging a strange sled crested a hill of desolate gray earth. A forest of black stumps lined her right, sometimes cut by ruined towers and small stone mounds that looked like broken teeth on rotted gums. The land fell into a ravine on her left with more desolate tundras afterward, extending ad infinitum. It was cold, dry, and dusty.

“I’m going to sneeze.”

“AAAAH PSHAA!!!!”

“I sneezed.”

//Yes, Your Grace.

//The airborne particles here represent a hazard to public health.

“Your mama represents a hazard to public health.”

//We can take a break, if you are in distress.

“Am I in distress?”

Current status:

- Exhaustion
- Malnourishment
- Mana poisoning (serious)
- Soul trauma (serious)

“I’m in distress, Solfis. Somebody call a medic. Mediiiiic! Oh, wait. It’s me. Not thinking clearly. It’s the CONSTANT FUCKING BULLSHIT HEADACHE.”

//I apologize, Your Grace.

//I wish I could help.

“But you do. You dooooooo. I’m sorry Solfis I’m being a bitch, but I got a real excuse.”

//Can this unit convince you to eat a bit more of the travel rations? The ones we recovered from the cache have a sweet variety.

“If the rations wanted to be eaten, they should not have tasted like ass.”

That was an obvious nugget of wisdom. The old golem should know that already.

And really, it had helped. She had made great strides in mana manipulation, reaching the basic level. She could now create small tendrils of black stuff and even direct them. And she could make it pop from anywhere!

She made one appear from above her ass.

“Look, I got a tail.”

Her attunement had improved enough to cast spells, although Solfis prioritized meditation to extend her life expectancy. She had gained endurance and willpower, increasing her ability to cope. She had progressed in athleticism, survival, pain tolerance and meditative trance. Basic mana manipulation allowed her to expel mana from her conduit as they were saturated. All of that improved her chances. It did not feel like it was enough. She was in pain every bloody second of every sorry minute of every fucking hour of every goddamn day she was not fretfully

sleeping. Solfis had her take naps and she would wake up twenty minutes later with her head so far up her ass she could lick her own amygdalae. Then it would start again.

And the food sucked. That was the cherry on the whole cake. At least if she had comfort food it might have been better, but the rations were all solid bricks of nutritive bullshit that had to be literally mined with a fucking pickaxe to break into swallowable bits. It was a pain to eat and a pain to keep down.

“When I get there, I’ll find fantasy cherry cake and eat it. As revenge.”

Viv’s bloodshot green eyes widened at the prospect, and a thin line of drool moistened her dry lips.

“And clams in cream with paprika. A side of perfumed thai rice. Grilled asparagus.”

It went on for a while.

“...and chocolate fondant with vanilla ice cream. Have you ever had chocolate fondant, Solfis?”

//Unfortunately, not yet, Your Grace.

“We got to have you have some. It melts on the spoon and in your mouth, and the contrast with the pure and refreshing taste of the vanilla ice cream will cleanse your palate so that every mouthful retains the tasty impact. Then we have to move to the region specific desserts. Like the *Kouign Amann*. That’s a dessert from *Bretagne* that’s basically sugar and butter held together by faith. And just a bit of flour, I guess.”

//It sounds delicious, Your Grace.

//I am sure that we can recreate it with local ingredients.

“Really?”

//Absolutely, Your Grace.

//We have plenty of magical ingredients that improve the taste beyond what reality should allow.

//You can look forward to it.

//Just hang in there.

“Damn, this is making me hungry.”

//The red brick has a lot of a local fruit called the permonn.

//There should still be some of the taste left.

//Permonn is common to many regions.

//Tarts made with it are a delicacy,

“Alright I’ll try it.”

Viviane used the tried and true method of pushing water in her mouth and letting the brick dissolve. It was a slow process, but she did feel the taste of the permonn Solfis had mentioned. It was sweet and curiously almondy. She loved it.

“Oops. We’re out of water.”

//We will arrive at a waystation in one hour, Your Grace.

They kept going along the forest, the Solfis had her turn into it and towards a small stone mass that looked a little bit like a scrotum.

“What’s this place?”

//It was a training base for the Imperial Scout Corps.

//They were renowned monster hunters.

//I apologize in advance.

//This place was known as ‘the ballsack’.

Figures.

The base occupied a small basin. The tall trees around must have provided amazing camouflage back when the land was alive.

It was also crawling with undead, even now, at noon.

Viv stopped the sled at the crest and looked down. The first of the creatures squatted idly a hundred paces down. Her black alignment meant that they had difficulties smelling her and that gave her a minor advantage as most undead had poor eyesight according to Solfis. They would still acknowledge her as human if they had a good look so she could not just stroll in.

The school had neglected to build walls, or perhaps Scouts looked down upon those. There were a few square buildings, a long one, and a circular open-air amphitheater. There were few of them and she assumed that most of the training must have taken place outdoors. The roofs were made of dark tiles and the walls were thick and unadorned, reminding her of what she had seen in the capital.

//Those are crawlers.

//They are far less dangerous than necrarchs, but you still do not stand a chance against one.

//As we move away from the epicenter of the cataclysm, we will come across less powerful undead.

//It is unfortunate that this species does not fear the sun.

“Yeah. What should we do? Bypass?”

//The, and I apologize, ‘ballsack’, is the only reliable source of liquid in the vicinity.

No, that would be the prostate. Hehehehe.

//I fear that you will have to get down there and grab water.

“But how? They’ll see me for sure. There are at least. forty of them.”

//It is time to learn your first spell.

“Really? Now?”

//Yes.

//Do not worry, it is fairly simple.

//This spell is called ‘coating’.

//Coating is a prerequisite to basic mana-based shields.

//Black mana coating has the advantage of making you harder to detect by anyone.

“Okay.”

//You need to exude mana from every side of your body, at the same time.

//Do not worry about symbols or giving meaning to the mana yet.

“We can give meaning to the mana?!”

//Do not worry about giving meaning to the mana yet, Your Grace.

“Okay okay.”

//Try now.

She did.

At first, it was difficult to direct the power in several places at once. It was already difficult to keep the tendrils she made stable to begin with and this was adding one difficulty. However, soon something curious happened. Dark mana started to cover her chest over her super nifty armor and once it had done so, it was... tame. For lack of a better word. It stayed there with minimal effort. She tried to do the same with her back and now she had a cuirass coating. Adding her left leg made her lose the chest part.

//You are doing great, Your Grace.
//The crawlers are not particularly smart.
//Coating your torso and head should be more than enough.

That proved to be easier. Making the mana start from the chest felt natural, and expanding it from there was easier. It was as if the magic understood what she was trying to achieve and tried its best to help, but the magic was also a labrador puppy and not a very bright one either.

//You can go now.
//The sealed water cistern will be under the principal's office.
//The principal's office is the small cubic building with a pointed room by the long rectangular building.
//There is one more thing.
//By the cistern, there should be a box with a symbol.
//The symbol will be a horizontal line surmounted by a half-circle.
//Take the box's contents too.
//Do not run and do not stop while you are in the open.

“Okay.”

Clad in black, and leaking foggy black mana like a coal-fuelled locomotive, Viv went on. She decided that in order to demonstrate her boundless courage, she would just look straight ahead and tell herself that the pale-skinned simian clawed and fanged horrors were just a figment of her imagination or very weird meth addicts or something. It was the fever. Yep.

She walked with purpose and wondered if the crawlers could smell pee through her skinsuit when the first creature took a look at her.

Somehow, the red eyes passed over her form and the creature went back to staring into the distance.

Viv kept going.

The buildings of the ballsack institute were much larger from up close, and she realized that a flat area on the side could have been a firing range. The principal's office was clearly visible from her position, as the seat of the place's great poobah. She kept her sanity by staring ahead and singing cartoon songs under her breath.

One of the larger specimens sauntered on her path. There was now a small wall of fleshy bones between her and her destination.

Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeon. Fuck!

Her anger and stress increased the energy output. The basic coating flared.

The creature jumped a bit and traipsed away. It hissed like an angry kettle.

That's right. Sod off.

She took a risk and looked right at the large rectangular building. It was a dormitory, and most of the windows had been torn off. What shocked her almost made her drop the spell.

There were traces of combat.

She spotted overturned beds, slashed walls and the rotting shafts of arrows. People had fought in here, which meant that people had survived the initial blast.

They could have fled.

She had kept in her heart the belief that people had survived and made it out. The camp was one clear evidence, but there was always this small fear inside of her, that it had been a desperate last attempt by a dying world, that there was nothing left here but ashes and dust for weeks in any direction, and that her coming here was the cruel joke of a band of doomed gods.

The battlefield gave her hope.

She returned her attention to the principal's office, feeling her focus waver. There were less creatures here and she hastened her pace, practically falling against the heavy gate, which crumbled under her gloved hands. She was in.

The hall was dark. There were stairs up that looked ready to give up under the weight of a mouse. The way down was made of stone.

Viv grabbed a stone from one of her cloak's few pockets.

It was one of the first things she had recovered from a cache. It was a rare but inexpensive tool that produced light for mana.

Most people with basic attunement could light their life mana to lighten their surroundings, but the illumination would be weak. The stone's purpose was to provide more light when required. She had coveted the thing with single-minded obsession. Only Solfis' stern warning had prevented her from using it at night to war off the endless darkness. She used it now.

White light shone on desiccated walls. It did not stink, and she thought she had figured why: the black mana had killed all the microorganisms responsible for decomposition. The place was too dead to even rot properly.

There were no creatures inside. She dropped the coating for now and made her way down.

The supply dump was less intact than others. Something had hidden in it at some point, but at least it had the decency to close the cistern and Viv took a moment to fill her flask, drink, and wash her face. She did not remove her skin suit to bathe. It was cold, and she was already weakened. Hygiene felt like a secondary concern.

She found the box too. It contained a single bag made of some leather she could not recognize. It felt parched and dry under her touch, although it still hung on. She took that as well. It was lighter than the water.

She climbed back on and sat down to focus.

The coat came easier this time. She knew what to do and had black mana up to her head in no time. It was tiring, she realized. She would not be able to keep it up much longer.

This time, her path weaved between clusters of creatures instead of charging forward like an idiot. They gave her nothing more than a passing glance. Some even politely stepped out of the way.

It was weird.

All she had to do was say 'hello' and she would be dead in moments. The idea called to her like the void. It would mean an end to the constant pain she was in.

Then she remembered that Solfis was up there and the possibility of giving up became revolting. She climbed the edge of the ravine, spitting and vociferating against those stupid Scouts who could have chosen a nice hill, but instead chose a gap next to a giant scrotum. They really were assholes.

//Well done.

"Are you sure this thing can hide me? It looked like they saw me and just didn't care."

//It can hide you in the dark. Or at night.

//And only if the coating is regular.

//But the black emission makes you look much less human, and thus, not like a target.

//Powerful undead beings leak black mana.

//You leaked black mana, Your Grace.

//Therefore, they took you for a necrarch.

"So they completely saw me from the start. Are you going to give me the full data at any point in the future?"

//Of course, Your Grace.

//But right now my priority is to save your life.
//You have been in this world for five days.
//This unit has operated in this world for over five hundred years.

This was the driest 'shut up, kiddo' she had ever been subjected to.

The path interface is now available.
You are now fully integrated into Nyl.

"Paths?"

//Excellent.
//This will assist us.
//Think the word "path"

"Is it like a job?"

You may choose a path from the following list. Every path represents a commitment to a concept. Paths empower your body and mind, allow you to grasp associated skills more quickly and to increase their potency.

You can only have one path until your current path evolves.

Paths can evolve to a more specialized concept, or several paths can combine into one. There is no wrong choice, as long as you follow your convictions.

Good luck out there!

Available paths:

- Empty palm warrior
- Scholar
- Accountant
- Explorer
- ...

//Pick Black Hedge Witch.

"Hey, can't I read?"

//Of course, Your Grace.
//Read, then pick Black Hedge Witch.

Viviane grumbled and skimmed the list. There were a lot of choices, most of them related either to being a lightly-armed fighter, or doing a desk job. The only exotic one besides [Black Hedge Witch] was [Alchemist] and she had not come across a single herb in the past week.

You follow the path of the [Black Hedge Witch.]

“When do I get my cat and my hat?”

Mental stats are 1.2 times more efficient when casting black-aligned spells (on average).
Relevant skill acquisition is improved.

“More math.”

**//Do not concern yourself with those overmuch, Your Grace.
//They are points of references to make you understand the impact of committing to a path.**

“Is this a good path, at least?”

**//There are no bad paths, Your Grace, only bad choices.
//Hedge Witch is one of the lowest paths of dedicated spellcasters who explore black mana.
//The closest one is Black Apprentice, and it relies more on book study, while you rely on meditation and spoken guidance.
//This path is perfect in these circumstances.
//You will be able to upgrade it later.
//In the meanwhile, it will allow you to cast more and delay the extent of the poisoning.**

“I don’t feel any different.”

**//A path is a commitment over time.
//Like most things, it will bear fruit through your efforts, You Grace.
//This unit begs for your patience.
//This unit will guide you to greatness.
//In the meanwhile, we should move on.
//This unit sees that you recovered the medical supplies.**

“Yep!”

They opened it. There were bandages. Viv removed the dried up exterior and found that the inner fabric was still serviceable for some of them. That was a small miracle. She also found bottles of glass that had contained antivenoms and tonics at some point in the distant past, now evaporated. The scissors and scalpel were a nice touch, but the real find was a minuscule crystal vial with a wax stopper. It still contained a dense red liquid.

“What is that thing?”

**//This is a dragonblood potion.
//It is not actually made from dragon blood.**

“Awww.”

**//The potion will temporarily turn whoever drinks it into a physical juggernaut.
//It will also exhaust them.
//And potentially make their heart explode.**

“A rather unfortunate side effect.”

**//Yes. Please do not drink it.
//Now, we should go. Walk towards that lone peak over there.**

“I thought I was supposed to leave the Heartlands from the south?”

**//That is correct.
//However, your priority now is to leave the fallout zone and lower your mana poisoning.
//We must also avoid inhabited lands.
//Otherwise, you will waste too much time avoiding conflict.**

“When will you teach me how to blast undead?”

//All the dark mana you currently wield energizes undead creatures.

“Huh. How about, errr, influencing them? Pushing them away?”

//Any spell other than stealth I could teach you would lower your chances of survival.

“What!? Why?”

**//They would give you the illusion that you stand a chance in direct combat.
//That is currently not the case.**

“Pfffft. Killjoy. When do I blast stuff?”

//Soon.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

//This unit is pleased that you subscribe to the idea of obtaining the genocidal maniac skill.

“Hey!”

Viv's interface.

Current status: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Mana channels (budding)- Extreme compatibility- Divine spark: luck
Mana distribution: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Black 76%
Current attunement: 5.21%

Physical		Mental	
Power	11	Focus	27
Finesse	16	Acuity	28
Endurance	19	Willpower	28

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Advanced 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 4
Small blades	Beginner 7	Meditative Trance	Intermediate 5
Mana manipulation	Beginner 1		

Paths: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Black Hedge Witch (0)
--

Two days later, South-West Heartlands.

“Bitch.”

Viv reached the top of a hillock, stumbled, then dry heaved. There was nothing left to throw up anyway.

She angled the sled and sat on top of Solfis, who did not object to the cruel treatment. Come to think of it, she had sat on several people before and they seldom complained.

“Weeeeeee!”

The sled drifted on sand at a brisk speed, and inertia carried her to the base of the next hillock.

“Bitch.”

The earth was grey and black here. The mountains were brown and snowy at the top, except that shorter one she was going towards. The sky was still dreary, but there were hints of fluffy white where the clouds met the mountain peaks. Not one fucking dot of color on the whole thing.

“I go to a fantasy world and end up in the ass end of the deadlands. I cannot even find the words to define the unfairness of it all, Solfis. It’s like someone offered me to tour *Middle Earth* then dropped me inside of *Mount fucking Doom*.”

//Take heart, Your Grace.

//We are almost at the base of the mountain.

“Yeah yeah.”

She had faced survival courses before. Her sergeant had thought it was funny to leave them in the wilderness with barely enough to cover their modesties, but that had lasted three days and no one had shoved plutonium up her arse to make things spicier.

It was frankly getting a bit too much.

“Bitch.”

Viv grabbed some mana and pushed it towards her fingers. The tendril shot out and darkened a stone to her left. It looked no worse for wear.

“Bzzt. Hehehe.”

Magic had its moments.

She crested the next elevation and was elated when she did not feel nauseous. In fact, it did not feel so bad anymore. She was light-headed.

Viv wobbled, and, slowly, fell backward on the sled. Her armor protected her back and her head serendipitously found the rolled tent. It was nice. The clouds above rolled with a light breeze that could not be felt down there. They were so high, she thought, high and out of reach. The sight hypnotized her.

Mana distribution complete.

Mana distribution:
- Black 100%

“It’s kind of nice.”

She felt herself drifting. The fever was fading now, and her headache was more a peripheral thing she was vaguely aware of rather than the skull-drilling agony it had been for the past few hours.

A voice kept nagging at her. It was vaguely annoying. It repeated itself again and again and again like a leitmotiv grating at her serenity. The distraction became so unbearable that she emerged from her peaceful contemplation.

“What!”

//Bibiane.

You are suffering from acute mana poisoning.

You are dying.

//Your Grace, I need you to listen carefully.

“Shit.”

Vivane pushed herself up until she was sitting. Her eyes would not focus.

//Your Grace, I need you to take the dragonblood potion now.

“The one you said might make my heart explode?”

//Yes.

//We are within walking distance of the lone mountain.

//This unit will guide you there.

//Swallow the potion, please.

Viv rummaged through her cloak pocket and took out the ancient phial. She used her ceremonial knife to peel off the stopper and pushed the container to her parched lips.

“Here goes nothing. Cul sec!”

Now, during her harrowing week trudging Nyil’s unwashed sphincter, Viv had come to see this enchanting world as dull, grey, and depressing. The air had little scent, the food had little taste. There were few conversations to be had and they mostly ended up with her partner telling her to sleep or to practice her skills. She could not honestly give the place more than a one star rating, and that was just because of Solfis being a dear. It came as a surprise, then, when liquid, tasty magma bore its way down her throat and filled her chest with the burning fires of creation.

“Woooooooooooooooooooooh!”

Sweat pearled on her brow and her heart beat like a solo drummer at a death metal concert. She was ready to take on the world. She could excavate the Sahara with a spoon. Nothing would stop her.

//Straight ahead, Your Grace.

“TO ADVENTURE!”

Viviane ran. She ran with the liberating pleasure of a professional athlete whose endorphins had just kicked in. Each one of her strides pushed her from the ground as if she had rockets under her rickety soles. She wanted to sing.

“Bzzt! Hehehe.”

She kept sending bolts of dark mana left and right as she went on. The usual exhaustion and headache associated with any strenuous activities had simply melted like snow under a flamethrower. The lone mountain Solfis had mentioned was so close that she could see the tiny buildings around a cave at its base. They were blessedly empty of weird creatures, although she felt like she could kick them in the taint and jumpstart the Nyil space program.

Colors blurred at the edge of her field of vision. Solfis’ encouraging comments came distorted like he was talking through water.

//You are doing great, Your Grace. Carry on.

They reached the base of the small village. She noticed a small mound of blackened bones on one side. The buildings had been damaged in battle. The large cave opening beckoned.

In her unraveling mind, the entrance opened and closed along the rhythm of a deep breath that shook the earth under her feet.

“Woah. Trippy.”

Her hands and feet turned glacial. She could barely move them anymore.

//Quick, Your Grace, get in.

“But...”

//There could be *fondant au chocolat* inside!

“*FONDANTS!*”

She sprinted in, braving her fears. There were no fondants! Only a big cavern with some sort of blue expanse in the middle.

The air inside tasted incredibly pure.

//Quick, You Grace. In the pond.

“Wtah? Hwerrr?”

Viv lurched forward to the blue expanse, searching left and right. Her feet pierced the surface and she almost collapsed. She was now knee-deep into warm water. Steam floated up from the hot spring into the cold air. There was a form at the back, but she could not discern its traits.

The purest sense of relief invaded her veins up to her knees and climbed up her back. She cried out in pleasure.

Heaven.

Orgasmic relief.

Viviane fell backward until her head came to rest against smooth stone and water climbed up to her chest. Then, she promptly passed out.

You are suffering from serious mana poisoning.
You are suffering from mana poisoning.
You are suffering from mild mana poisoning.
You are no longer suffering from mana poisoning.
You are no longer dying.

Viv opened her eyes to a lack of pain for the first time in what felt like forever. The lack of sensation was so surprising that she winced in anticipation, expecting the migraine to smash into her skull like a sledgehammer. No such thing happened. She was fine. Exhausted, drained, but fine. Water covered her armor, cape and skinsuit. She felt the warm liquid lapping at her neck, but the rest of her body had remained dry, and the spring's salutary effect had gone through her protections as if they had not been there.

She stood up and immediately slipped. She was still wearing the harness. The sled was back towards the mouth, straight and solid and hosting her pet fantasy terminator.

"You alright there Solfis?"

//This unit's core is fully functional.

"That was closer than I would like."

//Your success was never in doubt, Your Grace.

"Really?"

//This unit was not equipped with a worry module.

"Ahem. That must be nice."

//This unit always makes winning moves.

//Timid moves that merely belay defeat are the prerogative of inferior fleshy things.

//Present company excluded.

//This unit believed that the spring had endured. It did.

"What if it hadn't though?"

//Then Your Grace would have died and this unit would have self-destructed.

//But it had and you did not.

//Therefore, this unit's logic was sound.

//This unit did not need to doubt.

Viv stood up and climbed the step to the surface. Her gear was dripping around her.

“Say, any chance that I could take a dip?”

//The water of this spring is potable and has powerful healing properties.

//You may both drink and bathe.

“Good stuff.”

Viviane grabbed her pot, which had seen very little use on account of having no fuel to boil anything. She had left the flammable logs at the Harrak camp behind as they were quite heavy. The water was tea-warm and tasted strangely sweet. She drank her fill, then placed one of the smaller food bricks in it, hoping it would remember that it was food and not construction material. Then she peeled off the skin suit.

“Pwaaaaah!”

She jumped into the water before she could succumb to her own body odor. Water had been scarce for a week so it was not her fault at all.

There were black tracks on her skin, and she wondered if she had sweated solid mana or something. They were gone after a good rub.

She submerged and let the welcoming liquid close over her head. She passed a hand on her head out of habit, only to remember that she was bald as a monk.

Actually that was no longer quite the case. A thin fuzz covered her scalp like grass regrowing after a forest fire. There was hope.

When she surfaced, her skin did not feel so dry anymore.

The vapor of the spring split like a curtain, revealing the form she had seen before. At the back of the cave, an alcove had been dug into the wall and a veiled figure sat in the lotus position. The mysterious person's position indicated power, as if they were presiding over a banquet or a board room meeting. Viv was pretty sure it was a body.

//The remains of Cassia the Unbroken.

Solfis' tone had the reverence he usually reserved for deities.

“Who was she?” Viv asked.

It felt strange to have a conversation about the culture of the Harrakan Empire. She forgot too easily that the monsters, the wastes, and the ruins, had once been a flourishing people with a vibrant life. Even centuries after the disaster, there were still small pearls of existence left in the forgotten corners of the Heartlands, and she had been lucky, in a way, to have borne witness to it.

//Cassia the Unbroken was a legendary priestess of the god Neriad.

//Neriad is the god of courage and purity.

//She fought not just for the Empire, but also the other nations of the continent.

//She was universally loved.

//When she died after a very long and fulfilling life, the ground opened and a spring emerged.

//The Cassian spring waters still carry the blessing of Neriad to this day.

Viv inspected the dead woman. Serenity and majesty emanated from the remains, a sense of purpose fulfilled and of well-deserved rest. Meditative trance came easily when she directed her attention forward. She felt welcomed, protected. There was at least one entity besides Solfis who cared.

Her reprieve stopped just as Solfis' alarmed cry sounded out throughout the cavern. From a side tunnel, a creature appeared. The sound of claws on rock heralded its coming.

It was... a dragon!

A very, very tiny dragon.

It barely reached above her thigh. It had dark scales, small wings that looked vestigial and a large mouth filled with fangs, which it was opening right now.

//Look out!

The creature rushed and jumped at her with far more speed than should be possible.

Time slowed for Viv, as she expected. The dragon was much faster; she would only have one shot.

With her left finger, she pointed at the creature while her right hand swiped her blade from its sheath by her discarded armor.

She poured as much power as she could into the black ray, A thick tendril zapped forth and crashed into her surprised target, darkening a few scales but, more importantly, forcing the beast to close its eyes.

It landed right in front of her.

She grabbed its muzzle with her left hand and pulled up. The creature jerked.

She activated her one strength boost and rammed the enchanted knife upward.

“Hah!”

The blade dug into the soft scales of the creature under its chin, near the base of the tongue. The strength of the blow buried the weapon to its hilt and right into the minidragon’s brain.

The creature fell, dead.

“Aha! You thought.”

Finesse +1

Silence descended upon the cavern after the extremely short and thoroughly anticlimactic battle.

**//...Revising survival probability and danger rating upwards.
//A magnificent strike, Your Grace! And without a warrior path!
//This unit congratulates you on this spectacular victory.**

“Everyone always acts so surprised, but I did pass the qualifications for special forces, you know, even if I was not the best. And let me tell you that it was no sinecure. I got the muscles too...”

Viv’s remarks died off as she stared down.

She had been really fit when this all started. Now, she could count the ribs under her breasts. Her hip bones were too visible. She had lost weight.

She lifted her arm. The hair was regrowing, but underneath the pale skin she saw darker veins that stood out starkly in contrast. They pulsed in time with her breathing.

That had not been there on the first day.

“Why do I have dark veins, Solfis?”

//This unit does not know.

“I hope it’s just the aftermath of the mana poisoning.”

**//If possible, we should rest here for a few days, Your Grace.
//This unit is concerned about your health.**

“You can assess my physical condition?”

**//Your metaphysical body shows signs consistent with exhaustion.
//It will take some time for you to recover.
//You have food for two weeks, and water for a lifetime.**

“I could definitely use a break. Hold on, I am acting like a fool. We must secure the place before we even consider sleeping here!”

**//I agree.
//Dragons and their spawns are apex creatures, however.
//There should not be anything stronger here.**

“Ok, but before I go exploring the mountainside, I need to get ready.”

She rinsed her skinsuit in the springs and dried it, as well as herself, with a spare bedroll. She quickly put on the armor and secured it with clasps, and left her cloak hanging from a stalagmite after giving it a good rub. The skinsuit was made of hydrophobic material. Water did not penetrate its smooth surface. The cloak was more mundane and had to dry.

The boots were next. They were not going to last for much longer, she observed.

Viv was now fully dressed and armed. She stepped out of the cave and into the village.

//Your Grace?

“There is something I have to do first, or I could never look at myself in the mirror again.”

She pulled a ruined door from one of the settlements' entrance and returned.

“Not bad at all! I'm so glad we found salt in that cache back in the Lanneis outskirts.”

Solfis remained silent as she took another bite of dragonling leg. The flesh was tender after being seared on a bonfire of ossified furniture, using a mangled half-shield as a cooking plate. The half-shield was still hanging above the flames, its carcass kept in place with the tent's steel spikes. Nutritious dragon bits cooked in the middle. Sometimes, she would flip them with her knife. The ready food was stockpiled in her pan now empty of liquified brick food.

"It tashtesh shtrangely shweet. Hot!"

//Dragon flesh is a rare delicacy.

//It will help with your recovery.

"Yes, I already feel better."

Endurance +1

You have reached a milestone! You have less need for food, water, and sleep. Your resistance to poison and diseases has been improved. You heal faster.

"Could have used that before."

//Congratulations, Your Grace.

//Your progress is astonishing, as befit the heir.

//Long may she live!

"Is it because of the outlander blessing, or am I merely catching up?"

//Both, Your Grace.

//Your mental strength is on par with a decently trained mage.

//The fact that you achieved so much with no magic is a credit to your native land's education system.

Don't let her uncle hear that.

//Progress will be increasingly slower.

//However, this unit is confident that you will reach the sixth tier before two years, under my guidance.

"You mean fifty something or sixty something?"

//Fifty something, Your Grace.

//It represents the pinnacle of human abilities, and is a mark of the elite.

//Only legendary individuals have ever reached the eighth tier.

//Or so it is said.

//Convincing someone of that power to share details about their interface is a doomed prospect.

“Alright, enough theory. Time to survey my domain.”

//Well said, Your Grace.

//This unit must await here, as it would only slow you down.

//Please fall back if you are at risk.

“Got it.”

Viv cast the cloak thing, since it would help her in the dark corners of the place. As dark mana formed over her, an expression popped in her brain, unbidden.

Sneaky Cloaky Lemon Squeezy.

Probably a remnant of her fever-fuelled delirium.

//I see you have associated a word with one of your two spells.

//I will attribute your choice to a cultural element that I cannot conceive.

“Yep, totally what that is.”

//Naming spells is a personal trick Hedge Witches use to recall the process more easily.

//Your elemental mana bolt also has one.

Indeed. It was ‘Bzzt!’.

//Such names are useful shortcuts, Your Grace.

“Okay.”

Viv grabbed her knife and went into the corridor from whence her lunch had emerged before, her face turned entirely red.

It was now clear that the Cassian springs had been a popular destination at some point. The small mountain was a warren of chambers and alcoves, all designed to be frugal, yet welcoming. The grey stone had been roughly hewn to allow passage between several grottos with illumination provided by multiple windows dug into the rock. She found lobbies, salons, and refectories. All had simple stone furniture that had survived the test of time. All favored function over form and still achieved form as a result, in a zen troglodyte sort of way. Viv loved it. It was

new and unique and she had never seen its like on earth. Interior design touched her in a way the imposing monuments back in Harrakan had not.

She also saw her first signs of life.

[Brown cave mushroom: this common species grows easily and requires little water to survive. The flesh is not very nutritious and extremely bitter, however, it is used as food by many small cavern denizens.]

There were several species of mushrooms. She did not find insects or any other creatures, however.

Viv had a strong suspicion that the waters were purging black mana from the surrounding area. She even felt the familiar feverish sensation when she reached the top of the installation, having found no creatures. Stairs led outside, and she followed them.

Cold wind greeted her, as well as a commending sight of the deadlands. The view did not attract her attention. The main attraction was lying on its side on the promontory she found herself on.

It was... a dragon!

It was huge!

It was also very dead.

Viv inspected the creature and marvelled at its size. It had to be at least five meters long, and sported wings that must have been twice that size when it was alive. Only bones remained now, as well as strips of flaky dark scales. The form huddled around a bag of four broken eggs.

The implication was quite clear.

She rushed back to the main landing in relative silence. She stopped at the threshold of the main cave, hearing something rummaging through her stuff.

//Your Grace, a thief!

Viv charged in with her knife out, intending to punish the guilty party with a well-placed stab. She stopped when she saw what was currently gulping down the rest of the dragonling leg.

It was... a dragon.

It was so cute!

This one was completely white with red eyes and it would have to climb on its hind legs to pinch above her knees. It jumped when it spotted her.

“Squee!” it squealed.

The monster crashed through her tent’s flaps in its mad dash to escape her quickly-evaporating anger.

“Aw, look at the weedle dwagon, so tiny and precious! How can it be so small!”

//This place is dangerous, Your Grace.

//If their mother is still around...

“She’s dead. I found her bones upstairs, as well as four eggs. Are those two really from the same clutch? The dark one was much bigger.”

//Dragons can survive on little food, but they need it to grow.

//They also engage in cannibalism when they are young.

“So the bigger one may have eaten the two others?”

//They engage in cannibalism as scavengers, or when desperate.

//The two other eggs might have contained spawns who ate the meat of their mother.

//If they did so, they may have grown enough to fly out, to the mountains.

//If you did not find another spawn on your path, then they are gone from here.

“What about the one looking at me from under my tent flap?”

//The runt of the litter.

//The food here must have ran out as it came from its shell.

//It probably hid from its siblings.

What are they doing here anyway?

//Dragons favor isolated places to lay their eggs.

//Intelligence in adult dragons vary significantly from one specimen to another.

//However, only desperation would force one to come here.

//She apparently did not survive the attempt.

“Alright. So. How tameable are dragons anyway?”

//...This unit does not understand.

“Don’t play coy with me. You know exactly what I meant.”

//Your grace, please...

“It’s small and cute.”

//Even spawns are headstrong. They will fight restraints and coercion.

“Who spoke about those? I meant as a pet.”

//Your Grace, surely...

“Witches have cats. I just want a scaley cat.”

//Your Grace...

“It’s so cute! Look at that little head! Look at it! It’s so adorable!”

In the end, Solfis relented because he had a larger prize in his sights.

//The dragon should not have been looted.

//Dragons have mana crystals in their chests.

//Those are the same crystals that I used as a generator for my frame.

//Please see if you can acquire one.

//Please take down bones as well.

//Preferably from the creature’s feet, and wings.

She went back up and found the crystal without difficulty. It filled her palm, and still shimmered from the stored energy. Solfis noted that it was barely half the size of his previous core, and that the dragon must have been very young. Possibly too young. The bones garnered his approval.

//Dragon bones have decent resistance and they hold enchantment well.

//They were often used in powerful light armor sets.

He gave her a list of bones to stockpile ‘for later use’. He was especially interested in the wings, which she had to tie to her sled piece by piece. The lightweight limbs popped out of the back like flags.

The following three days were spent recovering from the previous ordeal. While she was no longer at the door of death, Viv had still suffered from the fallout and would suffer again before this was all over. Her lack of alignment had belayed the poisoning, then her full black had lessened it. She had still been on the verge of death. With food for weeks and water aplenty,

Solfis suggested that she spend some time practicing and making ready for the next leg of the trip. She agreed completely especially after realizing that her libido was shot and that definitely meant that she was terribly weakened.

It would still take another two weeks on foot to reach the gap which separated the Harrakan Heartlands from the rest of the continent. Solfis knew of paths through the mountain, but he had guided her west and the mountains to the west only led to an ocean and not much else. It was safer to go south.

Viviane would not object to plans that had her climb a mountain, then cross a centuries-old unlit tunnel to see if it was still intact. There could be stuff there, like eldritch ancient squids and balrogs and whatnot. Walking to what the golem described as a forest seemed a safer bet. Viv also thought that, if you had an entire country of dead monsters, you would want to keep an eye on it. Just in case they suddenly decided to migrate and your own kingdom was on the way. She wanted to meet other people.

She trained mostly her magic and managed to reach rank three of the hedge witch path. Her progress was linked with spell and mana manipulation mastery. With Solfis' help, learning was easy and intuitive. The next step was to be able to find her conduits by circulating mana through them. They extended through her body like a network of veins, part of it, and yet intangible. She gained one point of focus through her efforts. Meditative trance and mana manipulation also improved quickly.

It took her only three days to complete the Sneak — the black cloak — and to be able to reliably hit a target at ten paces with a powerful bolt. She could then do it again after about four or five seconds.

Solfis informed her that bolts of pure mana overloaded their target's body and that it would be extremely painful. A red bolt would burn, a blue bolt would liquefy, but a black bolt sucked the life right out of the target. It was quite dangerous. The mini dragon had resisted most of its effects because its species was highly resistant to pure mana intrusion.

That was nice, but it only allowed her to take out one target, and none of them could be undead.

She named the baby dragon Arthur.

From the beginning, she treated it as a rescue feral kitten with a particularly bad temper and her surprise was great when it actually worked. She started by placing food in front of the tent (she had decided to leave him his safe space and slept in a bag). The creature bolted out then scrambled back in. She placed the food closer and closer to herself until Arthur got more used to her. She used a soft tone when talking to him, and gave him space. She would scold him with a soft 'no' when he tried to get meat from her pot, and he seemed to understand. After three days of this treatment, Arthur would walk around her with circumspection, but less fear. He was learning.

She fought the urge to pet that little head. He was just too cute. The best part was when he postured. He would stand on his back legs and spread his small wings, then let out a mighty 'squee!'. That happened when she refused him more meat. She had to stand up and place her hands on her waist while resisting the urge to laugh. The little terror would then hide back in his tent to sulk. It would repeat almost every meal.

Tragedy struck on the fourth day. She had started to do a light training routine and was talking to Solfis when he revealed her mistake.

"How fast will Arthur grow anyway? He already looks bigger."

//He?

//Your grace, Arthur is female.

"Fuck."

She should have asked.

She did not mean to misgender the poor thing.

And now the dragonette answered to Arthur already.

"Aaaaaah! You should have mentioned it!"

//This unit did not know that Arthur was a male name.

//Knowledge added to central database.

"Augh!"

The blunder did not deter her from training. The next spell she learned was a round shield thing that she could in theory pop out anywhere close to her, but that she could only deploy with her arms so far. It would stop all hostile spells as black was antithetic to other mana types by nature. Unfortunately, it would not do shit against physical attacks.

It occurred to her that so far she had been exclusively endangered by physical attacks. There was a recurring theme there.

It was fine, because magic made it all worth it.

No matter how many times she moved mana around, the wonders of being able to perform true magic never ceased to amaze her. She would probably grow jaded if she lived long enough, but for now the constant wonder motivated her through gruelling hours of practice. Solfis had already adapted to her incredible motivation by temporarily intensifying the program. She couldn't be sure, but she thought that he had sounded proud and excited. Probably something to do with that genocidal maniac skill he had hinted at.

No, it was a joke. It had to be.

She cooked all of the dark dragon in one giant session and consumed the meat over the next few days. Sadly, there was no way to smoke it and turn it into jerky because of a lack of proper wood. She took solace in the fact that between the springs and the black mana, microbes were rare. At least, she thought that was the case. For all she knew, diseases here were evil spirits and all her gut microbiota had been replaced by magical goo or something.

God, that would be weird.

On the fourth day, Arthur ate from her hand. It was endearing.

Solfis found that really extremely disconcerting.

The old war machine explained that the entirety of the thinking population of Nyil had one major concern, and that it was monsters. Even in the heydays of the empire, attacks by creatures had been major threats to civilization, so much that a significant part of their military was dedicated to culling their numbers. There were normal animals that turned more magical the longer they lived until they became a real danger. Magical beasts like dragons, albeit rarer, came with a variety of dangerous abilities. Abominations born from curses or phenomena haunted the land and destroyed everything in their path. Tribes of semi-magical beings raided, pillaged, and killed, sometimes gathering in warbands that could fell cities. With magical bodies, life expectancy was higher and older people were generally quite strong, therefore the cause of death was mostly monsters. Dying in one's own bed was a luxury that very few would ever achieve. Monsters were the calamity of this world, and they were feared as such.

Naturally, there were tamers in many cultures. It was a fully accepted path. No one, however, kept pets for company only. It was just not done.

Viv did not care.

The dragonette would bond with her, or it would not. In the meanwhile, it was fun to watch the little hooligan trap her head in the bedroll and squeal in panic.

Solfis declared that they should leave after a week. By that time, she had mastered the cloak, the bolt, and the shield which had taken the name of 'nope shield' in her mind, to her dismay.

They still had a large supply of meat with Viv eating some of the rations. It was starting to get tedious, however, and she was looking forward to adding fibers to her diet.

There were preparations to be made before she would leave.

First, looted amphoras gave her a way to save some of the pond water. The blessing would fade with time, but it would last long enough for her to escape the fallout zone with a relatively low level of mana poisoning.

Solfis begrudgingly admitted that the water could help Arthur as well, if she could coax the creature into leaving with her. The small dragon would eventually die here, with absolutely nothing to eat but mushrooms she could not digest. Dragons were extremely resistant to foreign mana intrusion, but the Heartlands were the highest and largest concentration of mana on the surface. She was quite young. The crossing would be difficult for her as well.

Viviane mentioned the protective stone next to her shelter, but there were major issues in recreating it, most of those she summarized with a modern term: she was a novice. Mystically speaking. It was through no fault of her own, but she just couldn't recreate such a fine piece of mystical engineering.

She spent an hour packing her sled for maximal efficiency, balancing the bones around and behind Solfis while creating a small nest for her tentative pet. Eventually, they were ready.

She took one last look at her progress.

Physical		Mental	
Power	11	Focus	28
Finesse	17	Acuity	28
Endurance	20	Willpower	28

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Advanced 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 7
Small blades	Beginner 7		

Path skills

Meditative Trance	Intermediate 8	Mana manipulation	Beginner 5
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Path:
- Black Hedge Witch (4)

That was pretty good. She would be able to upgrade her path in no time. Paths improved the efficiency of stats in specific tasks and helped acquire skills quicker. They were one of the main power multipliers for sentients.

She wondered if she would keep some of that if she returned home. When. When she returned home.

She hoped that Solfis would not take it too hard. The golem could be surprisingly single-minded in his desire to restore the empire, even if, well, there were no hopes.

Before leaving, Viv dipped into the springs one last time and stood before the veiled mummy of Cassia the Unbroken. Even dead, the woman's presence was a physical weight on her mind, one that did not crush but cow instead. It made her feel more humble, not that it was needed. The presence reminded her of the heights which one individual could attain, and how one could reach the gods through their deeds. Viv still lived today because of what Cassia had done centuries ago, one more soul grasped from the depths centuries after the fall of the Empire that she had defended.

"Thank you for saving me, wherever you are. And to Neriad too, I guess."

There was no answer, only the comforting presence. That was fine.

She hitched the sled and walked out.

Viv walked exactly twenty paces, and then had to calm down a panicked Arthur. The creature was upset at the loss of its familiar habitat. She was letting out miserable squeals and peering everywhere with undisguised panic. Viv thought that the small creature would jump ship and, for a moment, it did, but a piece of meat was enough to lure it back on. Arthur then dove under the covers to devote her entire time inspecting her surroundings with undisguised mistrust.

Like that, they traveled south.

Viv traveled south for a week, sticking to side roads and evading large population centers thanks to Solfis' guidance. The undead grew in variety as the background mana lessened. There were undead animals, like bears, and she had to hide from those until they went on. She had a frightful confrontation with a large, bat-like creature with a terrible breath that only left after inspecting her for twenty minutes. That had been a motivating session of training, spent trying to extend the cloak to her feet while shielding Arthur. The creature eventually left.

Many of those, she only noticed from afar in villages that she passed by. There were towering piles of muscle and flesh, tall creatures with tentacles surrounded by crawlers moving like a single entity, and shadowy things she only spotted briefly. Solfis had names for them all, but he was sober in his explanations.

//This unit has access to several bestiaries.

//Those subgenres are known to me.

//This unit will spare you the disturbing tales of their abilities.

//Instead, this unit would like you to place the... 'nope shield' at your back.

//Try it now.

It was like having a personal trainer motivated by violence.

The night after the bat, Arthur crawled into the tent to sleep by her side.

The constant training between conversations pushed her manipulation skill further, and she was also rewarded by another landmark. Her attunement had reached 10%.

Normally, such a low number meant little. Most adults reached that level after four or five decades if they cast spells with any regularity. It was still a celebrated achievement amongst young teenage mages.

For Viv, however, it made a marked improvement in her ability to cast because of her black affinity. Her Bzzt! spell was as thick as two fingers when fully charged, and her cloak now reached mid-thigh.

Solfis' training changed again. He considered that she had a grasp of the basics that only repetition would improve, and had her do various games and activities to that effect. He always varied them. He had her try to curve her bolt, or made it very straight. Those worked well

enough. He also tried to have her make her coat smoother because right now she looked like someone had dunked steaming squid ink on a cardboard helmet. That proved more difficult. At least, it was entertaining.

They met the real obstacle just as they were nearing the gap. Viv had found herself on a small plateau overlooking flat plains. She could see the gaps in the mountain range to the south, as well as hints of salvation.

Between the gaps and beyond that, the world was green. The forest was dense and imposing, but most importantly, it was quite obviously alive.

The plains were dotted with dark shrubbery as the black mana was finally fading.

It was also dotted with zombies.

The plains were not uniform and she did not have the eyes to know for sure, but close to her the creatures sat and stood at a density of one every ten paces in any directions. The landscape squirmed in the distance.

“How is this possible?” she muttered.

“Squee!”

//Your grace, my sensor range is limited.

//However, I believe that some of those revenants are not from the Harrakan Empire.

Viv agreed. The clothing style between the hundred or so creatures she could clearly see varied a lot from one to another. Even the peasant garbs were not the same. One had a linen shirt that was mostly white, while another had thicker brown coveralls made of a different undyed material. The disparity could be seen in richer clothes as well, although Viv did not know if it pointed to different lands or different eras. Some of the revenants could have been here for a while.

“The important factor here is that I cannot simply pass those by. I cannot maintain the cloak active for that long.”

//Calculating.

//This unit believes that you should walk on the mountainside.

“We already had this discussion. I am not leaving you behind.”

//There is little choice, Your Grace.

“Hmmm.”

Solfis was incredibly useful but he lacked initiative, as demonstrated before.

“How fast are those anyway?”

//Fairly slow and fairly weak, Your Grace.

//The problem is that revenants are notoriously hard to kill.

//They can even survive without a head for a minute.

//They will regenerate to the state they are currently in with the ambient dark mana, unless incinerated.

//You would eventually be swarmed.

Viv could not use Bzzt without empowering the things.

Speaking of which...

“Solfis, I can push dark mana into people with my, ahem, elemental bolt spell, yes?”

//Your Bzzt spell.

“You don’t have to remind me every time.”

//Correct. You push mana.

“Is there a way to draw it instead?”

//Elaborate.

“Can I link with a target and draw out the black mana? It would disable the revenant, yes?”

//That...

//Calculating.

//...

//Insufficient data.

“There is no spell to drain someone of mana?”

//There is a spell used to draw life mana from a target.

//There are no spells to drag black mana from an undead.

//It would kill every practitioner.

//Except, perhaps, you.

“So, it could work.”

**//Perhaps.
//Only you could do it, Your Grace.
//This unit would not know where to start.**

“I do. Tell me about the drain spell.”

**//The drain operates with symbols and is quite advanced.
//The basic function is simple.
//The spell worms the caster’s own life mana into the target’s conduits.
//A connection is maintained.
//Then, the caster pulls and draws both his and the target’s life mana in.
//This spell requires the caster to be significantly stronger than the target.
//Or, for the target to be willing.**

“Who would willingly submit themselves to that. Would that not be excessively unpleasant?”

**//It could be used by exhausted healers to replenish their mana faster.
//Targets reported a deep sense of violation.
//Many volunteer anyway, generally to help the healer save others.**

“Ok. Suppose I take the mana in, would that not poison me?”

**//Only a little.
//You are poisoned by foreign, ambient mana.
//The drained mana would become yours through the process.
//Hypothetically.
//Mana that is ‘yours’ should not hurt you.
//Much.**

“Ok, so I need to cast a bolt of black mana targeted at conduits, flood the zombie...”

//Revenant.

“...whatever, the revenant, with that mana, and once it’s done I just have to pull?”

**//Easier said than done.
//But, in essence yes.
//I know of a symbol that might help you.**

Solfis gave a summary explanation on symbols, saying that he would teach her more later. Apparently, there was only one alphabet and it had existed since the dawn of time. It took twenty minutes for Viv to draw the squiggly thing because she had to follow Solphis’ instructions to do so instead of using a model. It only worked because something clicked once she had it mostly

correct, as if magic itself gave her pointers. The last few modifications made sense to her on a fundamental level.

She ended up with something like an arrow going through a spiral.

**//You merely need to visualize the symbol when you cast your bolt.
//Instead of invading the flesh, it will pierce to the conduits.
//You merely have to will it so.**

“Is there a symbol for pull?”

**//There is.
//However, the pulling part is the easiest one.
//Using one symbol will already tire you.
//We should focus on efficiency, for now.**

“I’m probably going to be pulling a lot.”

**//Yes.
//If it works, you will have a surplus of mana to use for additional training.**

“Sweet.”

**//I shall monitor your condition.
//You must not go beyond mild poisoning again.**

“Fair enough.”

Viv detached herself from the sled, gave a comforting pat to Arthur who squealed timidly, then went on to experiment.

She chose a tall boulder to stand on in case the spell failed and backlashed or something. It would be extremely embarrassing to have survived fantasy nuclear fallout, only to die by having her extremities nibbled by a B-movie prop. That would not do. The boulder would keep the dumb creature at bay for long enough to recover, she hoped. Solfis had said that they were quite dumb.

The next step was to cast the spell on a random target. She chose one of the black-aligned shrubberies.

[Dark fern: a semi-magical plant that absorbs black mana. It can be used as an alchemical ingredient of mild potency.]

Viv pointed her finger dramatically at the innocent shrub. Gestures helped with casting, one of the reasons why Solfis had her practice without it. She visualized the symbol and immediately lost the spell.

The mana dispersed harmlessly into the air.

Solfis had never told her that the thing was in three dimensions! Now it made more sense. It had a two dimensions, flattened version, but that was not as effective.

Encouraged, she tried again.

The usual black bolt crashed into the plant, only this time it had a more elastic quality to it. A bit like a garden hose, but in a horrific tentacular kind of way.

Targeting the shrub was a great idea. It had black mana to steal. She felt her own fill the conduits and—

The plant exploded with the pop of a balloon. Pieces of ashes drifted in the air.

Ok, so ferns had little mana and one very, very small conduit.

“Viviane the dread gardener makes another victim!” the witch mumbled to herself.

Viv had to stop for the next attempt. The piercing rune tired her mind as if she had been writing an essay for half an hour.

Mana manipulation has reached Beginner 8

That was helpful.

She tried again, this time pushing the nearest amount of mana into the next fern. She then pulled, and felt refreshed.

Well, not exactly. Her casting was still messy. The bolt was nowhere close to smooth. She had wasted more mana casting than she had recovered, but, well, that was a plant.

Another pause, and she was ready for the real deal. First, to find a volunteer.

She climbed down from the boulder and walked to the first revenant fifty paces or so away. The ground was sand, rocks, and dust, so she just picked a rock and threw it.

The heavy stone smacked against the creature, braining it. It fell to the ground and stopped moving.

“Well, that works too, I guess.”

She came closer and came to a realization.

“Pwaaah!”

With black mana being rarer, microbes or their magical equivalent had made a grand return and the creature smelled like a rotten body.

It was mild as corpses went. She had experienced worse in Afghanistan before, and some of the old dogs in her unit, those who had been deployed to Serbia, had horror stories about waterlogged mass graves. She could still have done without the stench.

Her cloak, the mundane one not the magical one, had a mask. She put it on. The revenant wore a tattered robe that vaguely looked vaguely priestly. She grabbed it by the shoulders and dragged, thanking unknown gods for the hermetic skinsuit. That thing had saved her life, and now it acted as protective equipment.

Once she was up the boulder and the thing was done, she cast the spell again. It went a bit wide and penetrating the conduits was harder, but she felt that her spell was a bit of an overkill. The thing barely resisted at all and she soon felt her own mana join with that of the creature. Pulling was not just easy. It was fun.

“Yoink! Hahaha. OH SH—”

Too late. Yoink joined Bzzt! in the list of embarrassing terminologies. She felt the golem’s disapproving glare on her back.

Below, the dead priest sort of blackened and fell apart. She could see pieces of skeleton below a dry, ashy substance. Interestingly, the stench lessened.

“Ah well, at least it works.”

She took a few minutes to recover, then cast again aiming at a putrefied young woman in a torn dress. Her target this time had been partially eaten, and there were claw marks on her back. It made Viv wonder how the body had ended up here. In fact, there was no way that all those people had just died here. Was she at the end point of a revenant migration pattern?

The mystery would remain for now.

“It works,” she announced proudly.

//Indeed, Your Grace, an amazing achievement.

//To invent your first spell only two weeks after your arrival!
//It would kill anyone else on the planet, unfortunately.
//Having one's conduit flooded with black mana is usually fatal, black alignment or not.

"How come that I'm alive then?"

//I have no idea, Your Grace.
//By all accounts, you should be dead.

Viv could not squander such a precious opportunity. She immediately started an approximate rendition of the Thriller choreography. The public was not impressed. Arthur squealed in confusion.

"Tough crowd, huh? Nevermind."

Not even a dance skill.

//When you are done, we must plan.

"Ok so I can neutralize revenants. What else do I need to know?"

//Revenants follow trends.
//If enough revenants start walking in the same direction, a rush will occur.
//That is why you should eliminate pursuers before they grow too numerous.
//You may not sleep in the open either.

"Are there any caches left on the way?"

//The sand here has spread out more.
//Some of my maps are no longer valid.
//We have to assume that all the underground caches have been buried.

"How about guard towers or similar structures? The stone buildings should be more or less intact here."

//Indeed.
//One memory database includes the location of scout towers across the plains.
//Most of them should be standing.
//We will progress slowly. We are almost out of the Heartlands.

"I can see a forest in the distance."

//My sensors do not extend that far.
//Do you confirm?

“Yes. it’s green and extends far to the horizon. I can’t be farther than five days away at normal speed.”

//That is a relief.

//I hope that we find new people to subjugate.

“Yes. Wait, what?”

//To communicate with, Your Grace.

//New people to communicate with.

“Right.”

Viv shouldered the sled harness and descended the short slope onto the vast plain.

Walking across the plain proved a new type of exhausting experience. While she was considerably less sick than before, she could no longer walk freely. Meditative trance had allowed her to surmount her fatigue. Now, she had to stop frequently to cast Yoink.

At first, she tried to move between the creatures. Unfortunately, this often resulted in having to cast the spell twice. The best solution proved to walk in a mostly straight line coming close to a revenant, killing it, then move to the next one. The mana recovered that way allowed her to keep going, but she had to pause frequently.

Mana recovered naturally, and it did so faster during meditation. The saturation allowed her to recover very quickly for someone who was still a novice caster, but it was still hard and slow going. She finally found cause to rejoice at the end of the first day,

“Hold on,” she told Solfis, “I think I saw something good.”

//Your Grace?

Viv dropped the harness, then stopped.

“Tell me, Solfis, you know how the zombies—

//Revenant, Your Grace. Zombies are the products of a specific necromantic spell.

“Necromancy? As in skulls and graveyards and terrible appearance?”

//This is amazingly accurate.

//This unit thought there were no necromancers in your native world?

“Don’t sidetrack me. YOINK! Anyway. You know how the ‘revenants’ sort of turn to ash and bone when they die?”

//This is a known occurrence when undead are killed via intrusion.

//Your... spell... has a similar result to ‘exorcism’ spells used by the priesthood to destroy magically sensitive creatures.

//Those are creatures with a weak binding to their physical form or no physical form at all.

“Fine, fine. My question was, how dirty is it exactly?”

//This unit does not understand the question.

“Is that black ash sticky? Smelly? Does touching it lead to diseases?”

//...No.

//In fact, it can be used as fertilizer.

“Excellent. Hold on.”

Viv removed the harness and moved away from the sled. Arthur squealed miserably.

Solfis watched her move away — Yoink! Yoink!— towards a revenant in the distance. She waited as it came closer, shambling with rotten arms extended.

Revenants did not feel that dangerous when they were all moving around like piss-drunk freshmen on their first bender, but she did not let her guard down. They moved at the speed of a slow jog, which was quite fast when there were a lot of them. They were also durable, regenerated, and they could crush her windpipe in a second given the chance. The best way to survive was to kill those who went after her before they started a mass movement, then continue.

She had to conserve her strength to do so. This was the one exception.

The revenant had been a man in life. A peddler, she thought. He had a huge backpack strapped to his back with multiple belts, and wore durable travel clothes. But the prize was below.

“Yoink!”

She approached the unmoving form and inspected her loot.

[Boots of easy gait (enchanted): those cheaply enchanted boots relieve the wearer’s fatigue and protect their feet against the vagaries of travel. This item was cursed by its owner upon death.]

Not all vagaries of travel, apparently. The man still had the shaft of an arrow protruding from his neck. False advertising! Even here!

Also, a curse.

She might be able to do something about it.

Viv dragged the backpack up, snapping the arm bones at their base. Easier than undoing all those belts. She removed pieces of peddler from the loot and promptly fell on her ass.

That thing was heavy.

She dragged it back to the sled and opened it.

There were a lot of cooking pots that she threw away in anger. After reflection, she decided to keep one that looked like a wok. There were clothes including a fancy woman's dress she nabbed. She threw away the glass beads, metal tools, and found the treasure in a secret pocket: a pouch of currency.

"Money."

//This will be of use.

//But please, hurry.

Now was the time to see if her idea could work. She placed the boots on the ground and poured some of the holy water on it.

"Neriad... Ow!"

She winced in pain.

//It would be better if you did not pray to specific deities until your soul trauma is cured.

Ah.

"May you find peace in the afterlife of your own faith."

She heard a song like a whisper, and the 'cursed' part drop from the item.

"Hmm. I'm surprised that it worked."

//As is this unit.

She tried the boots. It closed comfortably around her foot as if it had been made for her. Probably some magical thingie at work.

Now she was finally properly equipped.

Her travel continued.

The two days passed making slow but careful progress. She would leave at dawn, then find a tower mid-afternoon and huddle for the night. The abundance of black mana and her practice with the glyph awarded her with another level in mana manipulation. She felt that she was close to a breakthrough.

The idle time was also spent raising Arthur.

Her idea to treat the small dragon as a feral cat kept bearing fruits. The wily creature now understood several commands such as no, stay, come, and wait. That did not mean that she would obey them though.

Scratches were finally achieved as well.

It was brief and Viv did enjoy the feeling of warm, smooth scales, but soon Arthur huffed and retreated back to her sleeping-bag dragon lair looking like a gravely offended lady. Viv gave her space.

On the second night on the plain, Viv made camp inside of a lone guard tower standing within walking distance of a derelict village. Technically everything was within walking distance. In that case, it just meant that getting to the village took only twenty minutes or so at a jog.

The tower was on a rare elevation and gave a good view of the surrounding area. It was a simple tower with a ground floor and stone stairs to the top, from where a sentry would be able to look to the horizon. Such towers were common anywhere in the empire, Solfis had said, and used for the purpose of warning a village of monsters. A signal fire on the roof would warn nearby garrisons of an emergency. Unfortunately, the top floor had been made of wood and it was long since gone. Viv left the sled outside, but she had still dragged the golem in.

Power +1

“How does that even work?” Viv asked as she blocked the way with the crumbling door. She placed Arthur’s bedroll on the ground and started mounting the tent.

//Progress is made over time.

//But most thresholds are passed by more challenging or violent efforts.

//Soldier training alternates slow tasks and violent effort for maximum efficiency.

That sounded like interval training. Huh.

Viv took out her pot.

The door exploded inward. Something had crashed through it.

It had a fat, bulbous torso so large the opening was blocked and a horned head with multiple chins, skin white and repellent. Malevolent black eyes. And the smell!

Stone groaned under the pressure of the intruder's push. A single putrid arm wormed its way inside.

Viv stood and reached for her rifle before her brain could even process the intrusion. Her hands grasped air.

//Shield!

Viv latched on the order like a drowning woman on a buoy. The half-sphere of black mana flickered alive before her, and not an instant too soon. The creature's mouth was opening.

It vomited a pestilential torrent of something she did not see. The attack disintegrated on her cover as it disgorged from the open maw. She felt the revolting impact on her mystic sense.

She was already prepared for the next act.

The creature's massive arm pierced the shield and she slowed her time perception. The shield could only stop magic, that was fine.

She dropped it.

The arm missed her by a breath. Yellow talons brushed her armor but failed to pierce.

There was one thing about magic that Viv had understood. At its core, it was a question of will. Beyond experience and conduit and all those indexes of power, it was a question of changing reality without touching it. To will it to change.

The thing was going to kill her, Solfis, and Arthur. And so it had to die.

"Yoink."

Viv's voice was glacial behind the comical incantation. A bolt of pure void bit into the creature's chest with voracious strength. Her might smashed into its conduit like a torrent, bursting through its massive metaphysical body like a tsunami through a beaver dam. She poured her defiance

and her frustration until everything inside of the beast was hers, until it was all her. Until there was nothing else left.

Then, she pulled.

The torrential black mana that returned coursed through her. She lifted her right hand, willed a black flame to appear. The mana answered faithfully, as she knew it would. The magic danced for her, happy and... alive.

The monster crashed to the ground, slain in a moment.

She could get used to that shit.

Mana manipulation has reached intermediate 1

Acuity +1

Mana channels: nascent

Black Hedge Witch (5)

She felt it then, it all sort of clicked together. Some of the black mana stayed inside of her, more than usual. It smoothed more easily. She understood more and was understood in return.

“What is mana?”

//A magnificent result, Your Grace.

“Squee!”

“Oh, yeah sorry, getting carried away I guess.”

The congratulations died right there in awkwardness. Solfis was contemplating something. Arthur looked from the dead thing to Viv, then back to the dead thing with wide eyes. Viv felt mildly offended by the dragonette’s obvious incredulity. She was also wondering how the fuck they were going to get out with that lard in the path. She also hoped the sled was still intact.

//Your Grace, this unit wonders if you were a combatant in your previous life.

“I was. I was good too!” she exclaimed, somewhat defensively. It was not entirely true. She had barely passed the prerequisite for the special forces qualifications, but it had been hard and she had passed. So there.

//Your Grace, your battle instincts are commendable.
//This unit will work towards integrating your magic into them.
//It seems to be urgent.

“Right. Any idea what that was? Should I expect more?”

//This is a gut spiller.
//A specimen of good size.
//Although, they can be surprisingly silent when they move.
//Especially on sand.
//It must have come from the nearby village.

“Will this sort of thing happen again?”

//This unit has too little available data to predict the distribution of the nearby undead population.
//This unit will only select remote locations from now on.
//This unit has a request.

“Do tell.”

//Can you collect the skull of the creature?
//Please.

Something finally clicked in Viv’s tired mind.

“Are you trying to have me build a bone frame for you?” Viv asked.

//Yes.
//And this unit believes that it has enough.
//Unfortunately, your intensive help would be required.
//Short-term survival will remain our priority.

“Understood. For now, tell me about mana.”

Solfis obliged for part of the evening before having her train more. He mentioned several hypotheses from great sages across the eras. They all had ideas, but the only thing they really agreed on was that Nyil was a little bit alive and that life permeated all of reality, making it malleable. That was reasonably cool. She did think that, if the world was alive, then it was a little bit of a dick, what with all the monsters around.

She went to sleep later and Arthur condescended to some evening petting, but only for five seconds because obviously killing a massive undead abomination with a single spell was still only a middling achievement and she would have to do better in the future.

Morning was dark because the thing still blocked the door. At least it no longer smelled. Viv sighed, retrieved its head and took out her shovel. It took her an hour to clear enough black ash to drag Solfis' fat arse through. Then, they were gone.

On the third day, Viv walked faster. Every time she crested a small hill, she could see the edge of the forest, tantalizingly close. The deep, shiny green of life lured her with the promise of cover and, perhaps, humanity. The main problem was that the revenant density kept increasing. They covered the land and she had to slow down to a lazy walk to be able to kill them as she went. She saw fresh ones and old ones. Some were more damaged than others. Some still wore tattered rich coats or mail armor, or heavy cloaks designed for cold weather. Some only wore a loincloth and that was a sight she could have done without.

It was midday, and she was out in the open when she heard something that stupefied her: trotting horses.

Behind her in the distance, she spotted a trio of riders on things that definitely looked like heavy horses. They and the mounts wore mail and leather, as well as knight helms with closed visors. They also wielded strange polearms. The blade was a half-moon with the concave part facing outward. It looked like it was designed to keep things at bay.

The riders spotted her and made their way forth without stopping.

That was kind of hostile.

She inspected the lead figure.

[Baranese knight: dangerous]

That was a human for sure and she thought the chance was high that they would not attack if they could help it. She removed her hood and mask to expose her face and made large, waving signs.

“Quick, Solfis, what’s the universal sign for peace.”

//An open hand, Your Grace.

“Should I try to hide you?”

//No, Your Grace.

//They will see my frame and wonder what I am.
//Honesty is more valuable than secrecy here.
//Because secrecy cannot be achieved.
//I did not expect us to be intercepted like that.

“Ok. If they don’t stop, I’ll hide behind you and start blasting.”

//I hope it will not come to that, Your Grace.
//Look, they are slowing down.

Lieutenant Cernit’s perspective.

The fort patrol had been looking hard these past few days, and they had finally found something. It was not what they expected.

Fort Stone had fallen. They had seen the alarm signal in the distance, then the smoke afterward. They knew the deal. Fallen forts meant powerful undead or necromancers, and powerful undead did not set things on fire. They had to try and locate the rogue caster, if only so that they could light their own alarm before undead swarmed over the walls in the vain hope that someone, anyone, would come.

What they had found was a trail of dead revenants.

Now, revenants were a pain. They were slow and not so dangerous by themselves, but there were a lot of them on the dead plains and they liked to swarm. They were also notoriously hard to put down for good. The black mana that saturated the place helped them regenerate to their original mangled forms if they were not destroyed, and only fire or a priest could purify them. A trail of bodies, now that was something. Cernit had led them in pursuit. He half-expected to find a necromancer at the end of the trail, and perhaps even catch them with their pants down. For a moment, he thought he had when he spotted the strange carriage in the distance.

“It appears to be a corpse cart,” Benetti had commented, as aloof as always. Jor had said nothing.

“Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure. Good luck,” he had retorted.

He gave them one chance in three. That was the best they would get.

But then, something unexpected had happened. The person they had taken for a necromancer had removed their cloak and was now jumping up and down and waving in a slightly idiotic manner. They were not casting. The dead were not converging on them.

“Hold,” he said, and the others slowed down too.

Cernit forced a calm breath. He would have tried his damndest to slay a necromancer and give the foot soldiers back at the fort a chance. He was not particularly eager to meet his end, though.

The closer they got and the weirder things went. First, the not-a-necromancer was a beautiful young woman with close-cropped auburn hair and an ecstatic smile. Then, she was not wearing cursed robes but an eclectic mix of faded magical equipment like the last descendant of a ruined noble family. He came closer and realized the cart was, in fact, a makeshift sled holding large bones. When they stopped by her side, he found out that she had brilliant green eyes, something that was beyond rare in these parts, as well as the most advanced case of black mana poisoning he had ever seen. He could spot the shadowy veins snaking under her skin from his saddle. She should be screaming on the ground and halfway towards turning into a revenant herself by now.

By then, Cernit was completely at a loss. He inspected the strange apparition.

[Witch]

His instincts and [danger sense] skill flashed in alarm. She was not as strong as some of the war mages he had supported back when he had been at the front. She was still a caster. At least she was friendly. Weirdly so.

The only thing worse than a friendly caster was a pissed off one.

Then the woman started talking in an elegant, lilting voice. The words sounded like advanced military terms.

“Is... is that Old Imperial?” he asked Benetti.

“Yes. My classical education finally proves itself useful. Although I may be a tad rusty. Hold on, allow me to... is that... a golem part?!” the disgraced nobleman answered.

The next words came in a mechanical voice that sent shivers down his spine. He recognized every word from the day he was knighted at the royal palace. It had been an eternity ago.

//Bow and pay your respects to the Princess Bob, commoners.

The three riders froze in their seats. Benetti leaned towards him.

“That, lieutenant, is the weirdest thing I’ve ever witnessed in my entire damn life.”

A cover on the sled popped out and a serpentine head emerged.

“Squee!”

“How about now?” Cernit deadpanned.

The appearance of a tamed drake threw the group into a state of consternation. At least Cernit assumed it was tame.

“Chief?” Jor asked.

Both of the riders turned to him, as Jor speaking was a momentous event that occurred on average once every tenday.

“Is this the afterlife?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

And that was it. Cernit admitted that he found the strangeness of the situation disconcerting.

The golem and the woman spoke again and Benetti answered in broken Old Imperial. He promptly turned to his officer.

“The woman wants us to attach the thing she is dragging to a horse and go to our fort.”

“With her?”

“I would assume so, yes. And the golem is threatening us.”

“Hmm,” Cernit replied. Everyone knew how stupid refusing a caster was. The woman was a witch though, a wild one. He had to make sure.

“Can we ascertain that she is not...”

He realized that the word for necromancers was copied from Old Imperial. Like almost every technical term in his language.

“...one who orders the dead around,” he finished, lamely.

Just then the woman frowned and turned to a revenant that had ventured too close.

“Yoink.”

The thing fell dead.

“Is there such a thing as a decromancer?” he asked Benetti.

The disgraced gentleman stared.

“Uncromancer? Redeader?”

“I think you can stop talking, lieutenant. And she can call herself what she wants if she kills the things. Help me strap that thing to Bali.”

He climbed down from his horse and stepped closer to the witch, who was currently killing the few revenants ambling their way with calm detachment.

She was tall. Maybe even the size of Jor. And she was beautiful even if her cheeks were a bit hollow. She glared down imperiously.

“Err. Hello,” he greeted in Old Imperial.

“Vivane,” she said, and pointed at her chest.

She made weird sounds, like the buzz of fire wasps.

“Bibiane?”

The woman groaned and slapped her forehead. She pressed him on and he hurried to attach the sled in embarrassed silence. There were too many questions but one thing was sure, the woman was an unknown and, right now, any unknown was good. It would take a miracle to live to see spring.

“Yoink!”

The woman climbed behind Jor, who had the biggest horse. It appeared that he could, in fact, be nervous.

Cernit shook his head one last time and they made their way back at a sedate pace.

“Yoink.”

That was the most outlandish spell he'd ever heard.

Viv rode on a fantasy Percheron, her chest against the back of a muscular lad, and regretted every second of it. It was now clear that he had not showered in a long, long while. She put her mask back on.

The armors had little glyphs on the pauldrons that she did not recognize, but she hypothesized that they protected their wearers against the excess black mana.

Actually...

[Baranese knight]

No, you dingus.

[Black-shielded light knight armor (enchanted): this poorly made armor was designed to equip soldiers deployed in the Dead Plains. It is shielded against the pervasive black mana and the legs have been reinforced to protect against revenant bites.]

Better.

Specialized gear. That meant an organization dedicated to monitoring the dead lands and, possibly, SOPs to handle errant casters found there loaded with loot.

That was probably not great news.

On the other hand, the soldiers had been respectful. They had not leered. They had not laughed. She took it as an encouraging sign.

She quickly realized how the knights operated. Their blades were designed to smash into creatures and push them back without getting stuck in withered flesh. With enough strength, they could even cleave their targets in two, though they rarely bothered. She kept draining the odd revenant and her rider started to take the habit of pointing at targets for her with a grunt. He had an uncanny ability to tell when they would get in range and when they would be too slow to intercept them.

That was one other interesting thing. The undead detected the three knights from much further away than they had detected her. It probably meant that a large expedition could trigger a small zombie apocalypse.

Those guys knew what they were doing.

The horses were indefatigable, probably due to the magical enhancement that pervaded everything in this world. They soon arrived at a small hill and the fort above it. There were no undead anywhere close.

Viv took a moment to appreciate her destination. The fort was old and it had seen some action. Successive garrisons had repaired the holes with stones, the patchwork result giving the edifice a ramshackle appearance despite its obvious sturdiness. The structure itself was simple. It had a single path leading up to a heavily reinforced gate. A circular wall surrounded several buildings with a single tower rising at the back. She was reminded of low middle age fortifications from her home country. She noticed a few sentries on the wall, each one wielding the same revenant-b-gone polearm. She would have to figure out how it was really called. None carried bows.

The place looked quite impregnable. Revenants would have trouble scaling the sheer walls even if they happened to be smart enough to do so. The defenders would merely have to push them away, and then light a fire down on occasion. It was a sweet setup.

A heavy grate was raised to let them in. Those were the thickest steel bars she had ever seen.

[Reinforced steel gates: those fortress gates can stop mundane battering rams for hours. Only powerful spells will breach them.]

They dismounted. She had to lower her head to pass and soon found herself in an inner court filled with buildings on all sides.

As soon as she was through, the omnipresent black mana saturation faded, just like it had at the springs. It was good to be free of the stuff, even if she felt a kinship with the strange energy.

The court was not empty. She counted about ten men in uniforms milling about. They all stood dumbstruck as she came in, their eyes as wide as saucers.

There was not a woman in sight.

Viv knew the deal. Give an inch and they take a mile. She wore her war face and channeled Mouq inspecting a group of drunk dumbasses coming back from leave. It helped that, compared to them, she was quite tall.

The soldiers were a bit unimpressive. There was a ragged, bottom of the barrel quality to them that she could not quite define. They wore a leather cuirass over a green shirt and steel gauntlets, all of which looked like they had been put in service sometimes during the last decade. They also smelled a bit ripe.

Their short statures were not exactly natural. She had seen it before in the more remote corners of her area of operation, back in Afghanistan. These soldiers had been malnourished during their teenage years. It had stunted their growth.

The interior of the fort was clean, at least, so discipline was maintained.

The officer in charge screamed something she did not understand but probably went along the line of “are you donkeys certain you have nothing to do?” The inner court was deserted ten seconds later.

He turned to her.

“Food,” she said, precluding any negotiation.

His second translated her word with an amused smile. He pointed to a side door from which came an enticing smell. She started to leave, then stopped. She turned back to the sled, grabbed a squawking Arthur from her lair and carried the dragonette inside.

She found a small refectory that could feed around a dozen people at the time. A man in a stained apron was piling jerky in a basket at the back, next to a bubbling pot. A fresh loaf of bread waited nearby.

He froze when he saw her.

Her gaze met his. She calmly sat a squirming Arthur on a table and approached the man slowly, with a light smile. His mouth opened but no sounds came out.

She stopped in front of him, still smiling. She grabbed a piece of jerky and bit into it.

It was pretty good!

Removing the basket from his hands, she returned to the table. The cook crashed against a door on his way out.

You have gained the intimidation skill.

“Nonsense! That was diplomacy.”

The interface did not comment.

The officer followed her in as she was starting on a bowl of stew with a slice of fresh bread.

It was good.

Actually, it was really good. The base was some sort of wheat-like cereal that was still al-dente, with dry veggies and sliced roots in a light broth. The bread was dark brown, crispy outside and tender inside. She could fucking cry. Only her adamant resolve and the temperature prevented her from pigging out in front of the plebs.

The man put a hand on the seat facing her. Arthur hissed aggressively from her half-eaten piece of jerky, beady reptilian eyes squinting with aggression. Viv appeased her with a small no, and a second piece of jerky offered as a peace gesture. She noticed, now that the dragonette was so close, that she had grown a little bit. Not much, but enough to be noticeable.

The man sat down and removed his helmet. Under that, he had a strong, honest face with a prominent cleft chin and deep-set intelligent eyes. His traits were weathered and there was grey at his temples. The most curious feature was that his skin had a greenish tint under his tan, just like the soldiers outside. It looked natural. She was curious to know if this was an ethnic trait, since he did not look like he was from anywhere she knew of.

The two knights by his side also removed their helmets, and her suspicion was confirmed. The tall man she had ridden with had a square jaw and a severe look, while the one who spoke Imperial had a refined and elegant air. He was also the only one with a mustache and a short beard. They all had black eyes and dark hair that was not much longer than her own, and the strange green tint.

She had stopped eating as soon as the man pulled the chair. He was nervous, and so were his subordinates, even if the suave one was trying to hide it. They waited. The leader was hesitating.

It occurred to Viv that she could start eating again. She was ravenous.

Her father had shown her that eating and sitting while someone else was standing was the height of disrespect. He enjoyed these kinds of games a lot. He would always remain calm and polite. The insults came from subtle gestures, from twisting the truth with measured words so that reality described through his filter fit his agenda. Viviane had loved him for it when she was young because he had used it on others, and she enjoyed winning. It had turned her life sour during her teenage years.

Karma, really.

Leaving had been the most painful decision of her life, because deep inside she still mattered to him and vice-versa. He was just too much of an asshole for it to matter. She had believed that she had thrown off the weight of his legacy when she had made that decision.

Boot camp had proven her wrong.

Entitled. Arrogant. Distant. Those adjectives had come from too many sources for it to be just a coincidence. The hostility she had felt had provoked her to do better, to show the others that she was not a princess and that she belonged. Instead, it had turned her into the queen bitch. Only a small cadre of others had accepted her, those who saw past her demeanor or simply did not care. It had taken her a long, long time to stop expecting people to do things for her because it was the way of the world. And now, half an hour into meeting humans again, she had reverted to her previous habits.

And they were letting her.

She could do it then, she knew. She could position herself as an exotic, banned royalty and they would eat the deception hook, line, and sinker.

Viv sliced the loaf and extended the piece of bread to the man in front of her. She grabbed the platter of jerky and placed it between them.

She smiled.

A great weight seemed to lift from her host's shoulders. The gruff knight sighed deeply, and the suave took a seat as well. The muscular third went to get more bowls.

"Viviane," she said, pointing at herself.

"Bibiane."

"Bibiane."

Aw what the fuck?

"Bveebveeahn," the tall one corrected as he came back and distributed stew.

Viviane, with two Vs as in vindictive violence, gently massaged the bridge of her nose and tried again.

"Bob."

"Bob."

"Bob."

"Bob."

"Okay, who are you?"

The officer seemed to understand that one, which was nice.

“Cernit!” he stated, with pride.

The mustachioed gentleman introduced himself as Benetti and the stoic one as Jor. Afterward, Cernit started to ask her questions and Benetti translated with some difficulty.

She stopped them.

“Golem,” she said, pointing outside.

It took some effort, but eventually Jor stepped outside and brought back the heavy frame of Solfis as if it was a crate of wine, muscular arms barely bulging under the tremendous weight. It would have been sexy if the man did not look like an outhouse and smell like one too.

He casually placed the central unit on the ground where the disarmed and delegged golem could observe the proceedings.

“I apologize for leaving you behind, Solfis. My stomach got the better of me.”

//I cannot blame you for your fleshy weaknesses, Your Grace.

Oh, he was pissed alright.

//What did you need of me, Your Grace.

“We are going to ask each other questions. Feel free to drop in. But please, stop threatening them and demanding that I be called princess.”

//Your Grace, those are lowly knights.

//This place is a dump.

//You must demand proper respect!

“We are trying to understand what is happening in the wider world. Be patient. This is an investment for the future.”

//Deception is a mighty tool in any ruler’s arsenal.

//Very well, Your Grace.

//We shall have them taught proper manners later.

//Once their nation has been subsumed.

She was reasonably certain that Benetti had trouble following the conversation, but perhaps it would be wiser not to mention conquest when knights of the target nation were around?

“Please, stop provoking them.”

Solfis obeyed for now, and she started a game of linguistics with the Baranese knights. It took her twenty minutes to learn that she was at the Western end of a huge island called Param, and that the knights came from the Eastern part of the continent, where it linked to some other large landmass via a small isthmus. She learnt that because Cernit brought a tattered map and tried to ask her where she was from.

Between the Harrakan heartlands (which had a cute little skull on the map) and Varran stood a handful of other countries. Two of those were very close and rather big. There was a plethora of small stuff as well. Baran was, by far, the largest.

She had to point at the map and say no when Cernit started to ask about each independent city one after the other. Discussions would have stalled without Solfis’ timely help.

//Your Grace, I believe I have successfully identified the language as a dialect of Varrae nation.

//This unit should be able to communicate with them more easily by using this language.

“Really? It took you this long to draw the parallel between Varrae nation and Baran?”

//This unit apologizes, Your Grace.

//It had to access an unused part of my memory linked to the life and habits of the pitiful peoples our great empire subdued.

//The Varrae nation offered the most resistance to our glorious forces amongst all of Param.

//That is to say, they offered an actual challenge.

//Instead of us just crushing them like pitiful insects.

“Could we get to the translation part please?”

//Of course, Your Grace.

The rest of the conversation went much more smoothly. All three knights could understand the dialect and appeared ecstatic to hear it. It made them more amicable, yet still politely distant. The deference made Viv more self-assured despite her best efforts. She lounged in her seat as if it were a throne, and used her height advantage to its utmost when leaning forward. Before she could realize it, she had created a gap between herself and the men, although one tinged with respect instead of fear.

“Who are you?”

“I gave you my name. I am a caster specialized in black magic. Beyond that, I would prefer to maintain my identity secret.”

“What were you doing in the dead zone?”

“I appeared there following a long-range teleportation accident.”

This part was technically true. The fact that the word ‘teleportation’ existed in Old Imperial informed her that it was a possibility. Solfis did not object to her improvised cover story so it had to make sense, somehow.

Those were the only two questions that she answered in full. As for the rest, Solfis made scathing answers to some of the other lines of inquiries and the look of embarrassment on Cernit’s face indicated that he had stepped out of line. Or at least, the line as understood by Solfis.

Viv did not want to undermine the golem’s authority, but she used a lull in the conversation to ask him what this was all about.

//He asked about your path and casting capabilities, Your Grace.

//It is not his place to make demands of you.

//Even if you were a regular Hedge Witch, this line of questioning would still be rude and invasive.

//I merely reminded him to watch his words.

Viv was reclining on her seat, hand playing with a small piece of jerky. She flipped it to Arthur, who snagged it and swallowed it in one gulp. The dragonette locked eyes with the trio and licked her chops.

Intimidation reached Beginner 2
Intimidation reached Beginner 3

“Ask him why he wants to know.”

Solfis relayed her words, and she waited as the leader answered.

And waited.

And waited.

The knight talked for at least ten minutes, with Solfis urging him on and asking additional questions.

//Your grace, this man's tale is long.

//This unit shall summarize it for you.

//Lieutenant Cernit is part of a multi-national corps of soldiers deployed at the edge of the deadlands.

//That fleshbag extollated their sacred duty under the guidance of Neriad, the god of virtuous combat.

Solfis' tone is equal part condescending and impatient.

//This unit believes that he is one of the worthless fleshbags considered expendable and sent here to act as an early warning system.

//His role is to light an alarm fire in case they spot or are attacked by mighty foes.

"And then reinforcements come?"

//This unit believes that this is not the case

//This unit believes that Cernit knows that it is not the case.

//Lit fires serve to direct scrying efforts by trained mages.

//They also serve to inform the headquarter that there will not be a need to arrange supplies for a return trip.

"Harsh."

//Sacrificing the few for the need of the many is a necessity when monsters can wipe out a kingdom in three days, Your Grace.

//It already happened.

"If you say so. I fail to see how it relates to me."

//Cernit claims that a necromancer has destroyed the two nearest forts.

"Hold it. A necromancer? As in, skulls and bones and bad breath and controlling the dead?"

//This unit sees that you are familiar with the concept.

//A necromancer mostly uses black mana. Like you.

//However, they focus on controlling and enhancing undead.

//They use those in battle.

Solfis' voice drips with disdain.

"You make it sound like it is an inferior path, but Cernit obviously fears them."

//Humans are fleshy and faillible.

//Undead are fleshy, faillible, and stupid.

**//The mindless undead are an antithesis to sapience.
//A necromancer can build nothing, only destroy.
//Before falling to an assassin's strike.
//Because their bodyguards are imbecilic constructs
//By the time I am done with you, you will wipe out necromancers and their armies with a flick of your wrist.
//While eating fondant.**

That did sound enticing.

Solfis knew her too well. Sometimes, she felt that he was out for world domination and she was but a convenient patsy. She would have to go back to her world before it happened.

Going back to her world.

She had to do it, eventually. There were people waiting for her. The problem was that the longer she stayed here and the more bonds she was creating. There was already Arthur and Solfis, although she was sure they could manage without her.

There was also magic.

The power was still here, coursing through the strange non-organ that was her conduits. It was hers and she felt that she had been born for it. Every second she spent practicing tied her more deeply to the world.

Perhaps, one day, she would be tied too deeply.

**//Resuming demonstration.
//Cernit wishes to enlist our help to last until the change of guard, which will occur in two months.**

"That sounds like a terrible idea. We should just leave and keep going to the forest."

//If I may, Your Grace, that might not be the best idea.

Viv physically recoiled in amazement as Solfis advocated placing her in danger.

"Are you serious? You want us to stay in this death trap?"

//You are thinking that the necromancer will besiege this place in an attempt to lay it to waste.

"Yes!"

**//You are correct, Your Grace.
//I believe that this will happen.
//Nevertheless, staying might still be the best solution.**

“You are going to have to be extremely convincing, Solfis.”

**//Of course, Your Grace.
//If we leave now, there is a chance that we are detected by the necromancer’s outriders and caught in the open.
//Although most of their troops should be made of revenants, they will undoubtedly control fast-moving elites, such as gut spillers.
//There is also a chance that we are intercepted by elite church fleshbags, who would be much less understanding than those pliable fleshbags,
//There is also a chance that the knights attempt to coerce you.**

Viv gazed at the trio, who were politely waiting in front of her. The noble one was trying to follow the conversation without much success.

//Finally, we would be going blind and could possibly face monsters.

“Those are all maybes while the necromancer attack is a certainty, if what you say is correct.”

**//Indeed, Your Grace.
//I deem our survival with this option at around 50%.**

A coin flip? Really?

At least, it was higher than her starting score of lower than 37%. There was hope for her yet.

**//The reason why the number is low is because we will have no avenue of success in any of those scenarios.
//Despite your amazing progress, you remain a lowly caster.
//An experienced village mage could beat you in a duel.
//Being caught means death or long-term imprisonment or servitude.**

“What are the benefits of staying?”

**//One, we will be able to understand the general state of Param before traveling it.
//Two, we will extract the location of local garrisons and towns from our willing host.
//Three, we will obtain useful contacts as well as knowledge of local personalities from our willing host.
//Four, we will obtain the good grace of the Church of Neriad.
//Five, I have ascertained that this fortress contains an up-to-date bestiary, which we will need.**

//Six, we will be fed and hosted for two months, which will give us the breathing room required to bring your skills up to par with a descently trained provincial mage.

//Seven, I now have a workable plan to build myself a battle-capable frame within two weeks, which will be implemented immediately.

//Eight, and this is important, the battle will considerably increase the speed of your development.

“Assuming I survive it. Okay, but I see a few issues as well. First, how come there are no women here?”

Solfis asked, and she was informed that the rule was put into place after several incidents of sexual and plain violence. The garrisons were segregated by sex. One of the forts further along the defensive network was apparently operated entirely by women.

//Your concern is a serious one, Your Grace.

//However, disabling a caster without killing them requires specific equipment that is not present in this fort.

//None of those fleshbags will dare lay a hand on you.

Slofis' belief was built on flimsy foundations, but Viv had to admit that he knew the world better than her. She could also cast Bzzt from anywhere in her body with no gesture and without speaking, a serious defense considering the speed of the projectile.

“Are you certain that the garrison will not turn on me when they figure out I only cast dark spells?”

//On the contrary, Your Grace.

//Those mongrels will be terrified.

//You have little to fear from them.

“From them yes, but what about the necromancer themselves? This is all bullshit unless we can take them down.”

//Indeed, Your Grace, that foe is the crux of the problem.

//However, your own ability to take down even a gut spiller in moments helps us tremendously.

//Essentially, the cover of the fortification, your affinity, and the drain spell put you in a unique position to counter them efficiently.

//Cernit reports that the nearest fort had a fire lit for three days before burning down.

//This indicates a necromancer of middling power, as a powerful one would have felled the place in much less time.

//It will take a certain amount for the foe to come lay siege to our fort.

//They will need to herd a sufficient amount of revenants our way first.

//By then your training will have advanced and my frame will be almost over.

“You seem confident that you can take them down, Solfis. I do not share that confidence.”

**//Your Grace, this unit has killed a great amount of casters from many different paths.
//A basic frame will be enough to dispatch one.**

“You really believe that this is for the best?”

//Yes.

Viv considered her options. Solfis would certainly agree to leave if push came to shove, but she saw little point in going against his advice for the sake of it. Solfis had saved her life. Several times. If he believed that this course of action offered better chances, she believed him. Their fates were tied, after all, and he had several hundred centuries of existence on her.

Solfis had influenced her decisions since the day they met, she realized. He still shaped her as he saw fit, and she allowed it with the belief that survival, and eventually a return to earth, would come from her own hand. This world was merciless. She had little faith that powerful archmages would simply accept her story and help her without exacting payment. Training for a few months would be worth the effort.

And the fact that she loved wielding magic and the feeling of power that came with it had little to do with it. Nope.

She had to admit that her reluctance came from disappointment. She had been looking forward to leaving the wastes, but now she would have to watch the green prize from the crenellations of this lone fort for a while longer.

In the end, it was practicality that convinced her to go with the plan. She had to survive first and foremost. Anything else was secondary.

Not that she would agree so freely, of course.

“Negotiate with them. I want my own quarters, enough food for Arthur, and identification papers or equivalent. And ask for a salary as well.”

//Excellent idea, Your Grace.

//I shall exploit your superior bargaining position to milk them for all that they are worth.

“Don’t make them too resentful, just ask for a fair treatment for a mercenary spellcaster. I am sure those exist.”

Negotiations went swimmingly. Cernit was poor, which she expected, and could only pay her with his own stipend which did not amount to much. His subordinates tried to share their

salaries as well, but the proud man adamantly refused. He was obviously moved by their support, however, and Viv instantly placed him in her 'honorable retard' box alongside movie Faramir and anyone who had ever fancied doomed charge and heroic last stands.

To make up for the little money there was, the brave lieutenant bent himself over backwards to accommodate her other demands. She would get the room at the base of the tower, a room currently used as an officer's mess slash storage room. She would receive enough dry meat to feed her pet 'drake', which they had in excess anyway after the previous garrison had lost half their numbers fending off a mutated undead bat. Cernit could produce a letter of recommendation that would get her recognized as a mercenary in the service of Varran after they were done. That sort of thing could open a lot of doors, mercenaries being a common sight in Param's fragmented geopolitical environment.

Finally, he acknowledged that she was her own woman and that while she would help them fend off their foes, he could not order her around.

They shook hands on it. Viv's employ as a mercenary witch had begun.

Viv inspected her living quarters two hours later. The garrison had moved fast after she had agreed and cleared her space in minutes. It helped that the average soldier could apparently lift their own weight in supplies.

Her new domain covered a single circular room at the heart of the fort's watchtower. Two barred windows leading to the fort's walls on either side let fresh air in. They could be shuttered at night. There was a corridor outside of her room that doubled as an antechamber and as an access point to a ladder leading to the tower's upper floor and its alarm fire. The place had been dusty, but one of the soldiers had shily stretched a hand and created a directed air gust to clean it. She remembered Solfis mentioning that such tricks were common around all humans, more so around older people. She had no access to them. The only thing she could wield was black mana.

She set Arthur's lair near the window. The small one had proven huffy after so many changes in her environment. Having a corner to herself and regular food had appeased the beast enough that she was not being too difficult. Viv wondered exactly how smart Arthur was. Solfis could not answer. Sometimes, she acted like a smart dog, but sometimes she displayed signs of human intelligence, like today when she had allowed the presence of so many humans around her without panicking. Any other earthly predator would have lashed out, she thought.

After that, she designed one half of the room to the study of magic with Solfis' core placed on a solid stone chair. The farther part of the room was separated by the tent cloth hung between poles for privacy, and contained a bed frame and her bedrolls. An embarrassed Jor had handed

her a washbasin and a small yellow lump she had tentatively qualified as soap. She even had a small litter filled with sand for her pet's needs. A delicate attention.

This was such a fucking dump.

But, it was hers, and it was a vast improvement over dying in a ditch.

Moving in also helped her get an idea about the fort and its content.

What the fort had was:

- A garrison of three knights and fifteen soldiers, not exactly the cream of the crop, but well-trained and decently equipped.
- A lot of food.
- A lot of water in an underground cistern but not enough for baths.
- Books she could use.
- A large-scale isolation ring to keep the black mana out.

What it did not have was:

- Wood for fire. They only had enough coal to cook and that was it. The rest was provided by the handful of soldiers who could conjure small flames.
- Magical equipment to stop powerful creatures. Only Cernit and Benetti had magic swords.
- Medical supplies.
- Tea or coffee.

And that was depressing. She had piping hot water if she wanted, but nothing to put in it. And the worst thing was that infusions existed, it was just that the trio of officers had already drunk everything during the first month.

They did not even have booze because it was contraband.

They should just rename the Fort as Fort-No-Fun-Allowed instead of Fort Sky. It was a good thing the garrison swapped every three months.

Once she was set, Solfis attracted her attention.

//We must start working on my frame without delay, Your Grace.

“I'll help as best as I can. I bet that you can't wait to move on your own again.”

//Indeed,

//My immobility has been a burden on my thoughts since we first met.

//Particularly since the dragon spawn's attack.

“I can imagine. Alright, let’s get you ambulatory. Where do we begin?”

//Much like naming you heir, this will be skirting the limit of my hard-coded directives.

//We are allowed to self-repair, but not to modify or rebuild ourselves.

//Fortunately, I am in possession of a functional bone-based blueprint.

//It was designed by a student team as a cheap way to bypass metal-specific tools of destruction.

//Naturally, my previous frame was a work of art without equal, one that was orders of magnitude deadlier and studier than one made from materials harvested from meatbags.

//This unit will make do.

//The dragon bones will serve us well.

//I will need you to order me to repair myself according to that specific blueprint.

Viv stole a glance at Arthur. The small dragon was asleep in her new den. If it bothered her to eat her kin or ride in the bones of her mother, she has shown no signs of it. She hoped that giving Solfis a new body made from a dubious source material would not affect her.

“Fine. Make it so.”

//The first step will be to give me an arm.

Solfis guided her then. The core unit had several sliding doors on its surface, including the one that hid the cord she used to recharge his emergency battery. One of them contained a small repair kit including some sort of engraving equipment that she could hook to one of the core’s cables.

//You will need to write a glyph for me.

//First, we are going to practice writing it on the table.

Viv remembered the difficulty in getting the hang of the pierce glyph, and stopped for a moment.

“You cannot write it yourself, right?”

//No, Your Grace.

“Is it a question of movement or a question of directive?”

//Movement, Your Grace.

//I may operate on my frame for the sake of repairs.

//Even if it requires redrawing a glyph according to a blueprint.

“But you can see what I write?”

//Correct.

“Then how about this, I will sweep the stylus over the target area and you will only activate it when it passes over a space that needs to be engraved,” she offers, thinking about printing machines.

//That is... an excellent idea, Your Grace.

In the end, they could not proceed exactly like that due to a problem of strength, but Solfis managed to make cuts along the lines of the glyph and thus drew its general shape. After that, he monitored the engraving by cutting off the power when Viv screwed up.

//A brilliant workaround, Your Grace.

//Have you worked with golems before?

“In a way, yes. Now let’s assemble that thing.”

The bone Solfis selected as his arm was part of the dragon’s wings. The limb ended up being quite long: twice the size of Viv with an elbow in the middle. It took two hours to finish the thing but when she had, she hooked the power chord to the base of the humerus (or at least it would be the humerus in a man), and the limb shivered and moved.

//This unit must calibrate the limb.

//My energy consumption will increase drastically.

//I will require a charge every few hours until I can finish working on the mana crystal.

“You will need me to charge it?”

//Yes, Your Grace.

//Do not worry, I will be able to operate for several hours on a minimal charge.