

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 Necrarchs 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. Necrarchs 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 exercise. 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 building 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.

//Those 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 those 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 basic 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 pane. 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, unflinching 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 into 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 in 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 days 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.