

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 off 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 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 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 chagrin 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 anecrach 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, huh, 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 flung 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 not 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.