

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 and 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.

“Woooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

Sweat perled 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 protection 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 delay 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.

