

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 Ggrace, 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 kingdom 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 improved also 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 of 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 the meat to 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 a major source of concern, 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

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 sentient.

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.