

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 bulge, 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 keep her and the dead human, 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 deadlift the core.

“FUCK!”

She took two stumbling steps and put the core down.

It was heavy as fuck.

It was... too heavy.

At least thirty kilograms.

There was no way in hell she would be able to carry it through the streets, much less through a full desert.

“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.