

Focus +1  
Acuity +1  
Willpower +1

Mana mastery: Intermediate 6

Acuity Reflex: Intermediate 7

Viv went over the recent gains. Those were nice. They would also set her on a way to greater heights. For now, she was only at the beginning of her next stage. The last notification was more concerning. She supposed it couldn't be helped.

Draconic intimidation: Expert 8

With the way things were going, this one would reach master first. Sighing, she focused back on her current predicament: getting out of dodge.

Abe looked groggy, Viv thought. He also looked pretty badass. His huge frame was now filled with lean muscles and despite the grayish hue of his skin, he didn't appear to be sick. The red eyes looked lost for now while he looked around the operating room with a sense of childish wonder. His mouth hung open. He would have been cute except for the rest of his appearance: wrinkles which placed him on the grandpa scale, gray dreadlocks, and the mark of Enttiku shining ominously on his forehead. It looked a bit like a hooded figure if one looked closely. It was an ancient rune, older than the empire itself. She inspected him.

[Arcane Servant of Death]

So he had a path now. Interesting. Viv ignored the flurry of other titles to shove robes on the dazed ex-lich.

"Get dressed, we gotta go."

"Oh. Sorry. I was distracted."

"Understandable. Put the robe on please."

She wasn't sure if it was the natural state of things or if it was part of Enttiku's blessing but damn, the old man was hung like a donkey. Now that he was no longer her patient it was getting distracting.

Abe obliged and they were ready in record time. He trotted by her side while they exited the hospital without objection, perhaps sensing her stress. It was already late afternoon.

“I apologize. This delay must impede your plans.”

“Look I saved you with the power of friendship and gods-approved necromancy. That was the best possible use of my time. I just want to finish everything and get going before anybody gets any ideas. We’re rich and surprisingly successful. That means people are going to come with us with demands. We want to get out before they decide how they’re going to do that.”

“Agreed.”

Sidjin was waiting outside, eyes fixed on the road. The guards and patients studiously ignored him.

“Let’s go,” Viv said.

They flew back to the city, Abe and Sidjin with gray mana and Viv with her harness and self-kinesis. Even though she was getting used to it, the sensation of flying without a machine still felt exhilarating. They stayed close to the ground because high flight near Helock was considered rude and the griffin riders might disapprove. It also suited Viv’s deeply ingrained fear of stinger missiles just fine. She was airborne over uncontrolled territory, therefore she was vulnerable to MANPADS and no amount of logic could convince her otherwise.

The group landed near the gate and continued on foot, racing past whispering Helockians. People recognized her on sight now. A few saluted her but there were quite a few hostile glares as well, especially from the older nobles. Elunath’s manor soon came into view. The gates were closed which was not a bad sign. A prostrate woman sobbed on the steps. Not great. Viv noticed that her dress was torn, revealing a bruised shoulder. She sported an impressive black eye. Her hair was shaved, badly. As she looked up, Viv recognized Renea. Elunath’s pet snitch. The other girls had gotten her hands on her, none too gently. She was lucky to be alive, Viv thought.

The girl cried as she approached. Viv readied some black mana but it soon became obvious that she was not threat.

“Why?” she cried. “Why? It was all for nothing. All for nothing... I thought I had no choice. Did I? I don’t know. I don’t fucking know anymore.”

There was only pity in Viv’s heart at the moment, partly because Renea was Stockholm syndrome’s poster child and partly because she didn’t know all the horribly stuff Renea must have done.

“Are you here to kill me?” the mage finally asked.

“No. We want in but you are... in the way.”

Renea hiccuped then stood on shaky legs. She left, limping a bit. Viv watched her go, wondering if she should do anything. She wasn't sure. And they were on a schedule.

No time to worry about everyone.

"Let's get in."

"Wait!" Abe interrupted. "Wait."

He clutched his belly and moved forward. Pain marred his wizened traits.

"Abe?"

"I... I don't feel good. It hurts. Like some pressure."

"Abe, what's wrong?"

Viv approached the old man. She still had mending potions in her belt. Would they help? He should have been okay.

"I can use a diagnostic spell," Sidjin said, already weaving colorless mana.

Suddenly, Abe's face turned into an expression of pure surprise. He was having an epiphany.

"I need to urinate!"

The old man waddled to the nearest flower bed and whipped out his junk. A sigh of contentment came with the subsequent release. Viv refrained from facepalming.

"Wow," Sidjin said after a brief observation.

"I know, right?"

"Did you..."

"Nope. Enttiku formed his body. Maybe he was like that before he died."

"Huh. To change this rather awkward topic, have you asked him what his new path entails?"

"Not really. I think we'll have ample time on the way back."

"What if it's... dangerous for us?"

"From Enttiku? Against a faction that's clearing the deadlands?"

"A fair point, Viv."

“Thank you for waiting,” Abe said as he returned. “I had forgotten how satisfying pissing on the flowers could be. I wish to apologize for the delay and for using a rude term.”

“Men,” Viv bemoaned while Sidjin nodded in understanding. “Can we finally go?”

“Yes yes.”

Elunath’s door was still unlocked. They found a real crowd in the atrium, a babbling bunch that fell silent the moment they entered. Viv recognized most of Elunath’s harem led by Sen, the receptionist, and Lana, still wearing a fitting blue dress. Solfis stood silently in a corner. Finally, there were a pair of trussed shapes in dark cloaks left on a carpet to the side.

“What’s with them?” Viv asked as she entered.

“Thieves. They tried to break in,” Lana replied with a guarded voice.

“So soon? Well, I salute their proactive spirits.”

“Yes, well. Let’s get to the point.”

Viv noticed Lana’s stiff shoulders and bunched fists. Sen, too, was tense, though the tall northerner expressed it with a high chin and an imperious gaze. Behind them, mages in the second and third steps quietly arrayed themselves, some afraid, some defiant. One girl immediately broke down to start sobbing from the stress. They burnt like a riot of mana torches in Viv’s sight. The many hues of their powers formed a flickering rainbow of coiling power that would scare most casters but Viv could easily see through the bluff. Those were not warriors and they were not organized. They were a scared, huddling pile of victims ready to bite and lash out at the first sign of a collar. Only Sen, Lana, and a couple of other older girls appeared willing to fight. The only thing Viv felt towards them was sympathy.

“We want to know if you will try to enforce the contracts. By Helock’s law —”

“There are no slaves in Harrak,” Viv interrupted.

She could immediately see doubt. She couldn’t blame them.

“You are free to go. I won’t do anything to you. There are no obligations between us.”

“Do you swear by it?” Sen retorted.

“On Neriad’s name, there are no bindings between us and you can go and never see me again.”

“Excellent. In this case, I’m out of here and out of this damn city. Goooooodbye.”

Sen picked up two bags and walked out without looking back. The majority of the other girls filed out behind her, giving Viv a broad berth. She didn’t take it personally even though she

had technically liberated them. Doing so was the bare minimum decency demanded in a world where the term had little meaning. And they were scared. It was ok.

Soon, only Lana and six others remained.

“I am interested in entering an agreement,” Lana said.

“Wait!” the sobbing girl from before said. “Wait. Sorry. I want to go as well. Can I?”

“Sure,” Viv confirmed.

She grabbed her bag protectively to her chest and strode out, claiming she was going to take a boat. Sidjin chuckled.

“As I was saying, I am interested in entering an agreement,” Lana said.

“Should we sit? Do you want privacy?” Viv asked while Lana’s attention turned to a still dazed Abe.

“No. We decide now. I am not staying in this place any longer than I have to. I will be brief. Sen insists on instant freedom while I believe we cannot be free if we do not have protection. All of Elunath’s pupils are talented and, for now, vulnerable. Many powerful individuals of Param will believe they are too valuable to be let loose. You claim that Harrak is a good place to live, that we will not be separated or used. You hinted that we could decide what to do, what to research. I want a binding agreement. Not a vague promise. Is there truly a law or an institution in Harrak that would protect them?”

“Hmm, yeah. Me. Heiress to the throne and black elemental war caster on the fourth step who just offed Elunath with my allies.”

That forced Lana to reconsider a bit.

“Oh. That is indeed a convincing argument.”

“If you want to come, you can come. If you want to wait before doing so, that is also fine. Our gates are open. As for self determination, I wouldn’t even have to lift a finger to defend you there. Anyone bothering your girls would end up a crossbow bolt porcupine before they finish their first sentence. Look. The thing about New Harrak is that, hmm, people have it easier doing what they enjoy rather than what someone else expects them to do. Hadals make the best murderers and maybe it makes sense to force them to act as assassins but we don’t do make them do that. Most of them are our hunters and scouts. And it’s best from a population perspective if women stay home to raise a lot of children but many of us serve in the army and postpone raising a family. Maybe some never will. Assigning roles to people from birth makes a shit ton of them miserable and the goal of our nation is to make people not miserable. So maybe it’s not optimal. Maybe giving advanced projectile weapons to freshly emancipated populations doesn’t magically turn them into shock troops but it sure as hell makes them motivated. What I’m trying to say is, no one there will give you trouble on how you contribute so long as you contribute. No one will demand you forfeit your dreams or your

body. And you will be protected while you do so by the very same people you will be helping.”

Lana assessed Viv for a long time with the power of her glare but the witch didn't really care. There were things she was fully confident about and her principles were one of them.

The application was still subject to some doubts.

“This is a nice dream you have. I hope you can keep it alive because Param has seen many dreams and it's eaten them all.”

“We're already done so twice. Look, as I said, we can't achieve miracles just because our ideals are noble. But give motivated people enough time and resources, and we can end up with something quite nice. You can be a part of it.”

“That still sounds like promises, not a binding agreement.”

That ticked off Viv a little bit.

“I have forged that place with my own two hands on the corpses of princes. My people have bled to make it a reality. It should be all the commitment you need and it is all the commitment you'll get. As I said, travel there and see with your own eyes if you have trouble believing. The borders are open. Now, was it all or did you want to discuss your employment?”

Lana didn't flinch though some of her defiance bled out. She was both less afraid and less resolute. Viv wasn't sure how much of that remaining terror was trauma and how much was Viv's reputation. She wasn't using any intimidation right now.

“We want to discuss employment. We also want to discuss pay.”

Viv sighed. That was the kind of negotiations that could take half a day given there were exactly six mages concerned, with various trainings and specialization. She didn't have the time. She didn't even have a budget.

Irao used that opportunity to walk out of the shadows.

“They have emptied the office's safe,” he helpfully suggested.

“What do you mean? They took money?”

“Yes. All of Elunath's coin. They split it among themselves.”

Lana deflated when Viv cleared her throat.

“Technically that belongs to me. Let's just call it, hmm, compensation for back pay and an advance on your contract.”

“For one year only!”

“Fair enough. We can discuss everything in more detail later, alright? I want to be gone before the city wakes up to the fact we just killed their strategic deterrent.”

“The way you talk is so strange.”

**//She is an outlander.**

The girls turned to Solfis, clearly unnerved by his alien presence.

**//You must get used to it.**

**//As I have.**

**//After a while.**

“Don’t make it sound like a chore. Alright, loot!”

“If the ladies do join us, we should get them settled in the ship and make sure the captain does not object immediately. I can accompany them since I negotiated the contract, if that is fine, of course,” Sidjin offered.

“Yeah that would be great. Solfis will carry everything we can take with us. We don’t need another porter.”

**//I have found this comically large bag.**

“Then I’m off. Don’t trigger any traps, please.”

“I will protect our safety,” Abe agreed.

Perhaps sensing their urgency, the newly freed mages hurried after Sidjin who used kinesis to lift the book crates. There were quite a few of them. It left the rest of the league to pilfer in peace.

The office gave up a few trinkets as well as Elunath’s research journals which they took with them. Viv wondered why someone with perfect recall would need journals. Perhaps out of habit. Solfis also claimed the skull of some dinosaur-like creature for himself. They ignored the private quarters and communal labs since Irao confirmed the harem had taken their own project notes with them, which was entirely fair. It was really Elunath’s sanctum that would yield the best stuff.

Irao led them to the gate where he had stunned Renea, then both he and Abe made sure no traps had reactivated before Viv gated them in. There were many treasures there but not exactly the kind Viv could use. They decided to leave the extensive collection of stones, ores, and fossils behind to focus on the immediately useful stuff. Deeds and financial documents went in the bag first, then it was time for the magical goodies.

The only surprise was that Elunath had destroyed the scepter of the cursed god as he'd claimed he'd do. Viv half expected him to have kept it around while the abominable artifact whispered sweet promises into his ears in the dead of night. The other items proved to be a treasure trove. They found a plethora of enchanted swords, magical suits of armor, and nasty daggers. Into the bag they went for later distribution. They would form a core of legacy stuff for the most promising soldiers, Viv thought to herself. A magical sword didn't make much of a difference on a battlefield where numbers and discipline reigned, but thirty in the hands of elites could. Some of the suits were resistant to specific elements as well which would help. All in all it was a good haul that would push Solfis' strength to its limits. And then, there was the caster stuff.

The first great find was a scepter specifically designed for complex rituals, perhaps belonging to Elunath himself. It was an extremely efficient way to use mana, recover the unused power, and recharge one's reserves faster. It also came with a decent core. That would go to Sidjin since most of his favorite spells were so complex. The second great find was a pouch of cores of various sizes worth several times their worth in gold. The last one was what made Viv absolutely giddy.

"Wait. This is... this is my skinsuit!"

And indeed, the repaired Harrakan cover she had lost in Enoria had somehow found its way to Elunath's connection. Viv suspected some vindictive archmage may have something to do with that. Not just that, Elunath had repaired it.

On top of an ink-colored body suit of thin, smooth material, the suit now showed lines of silvery runes. It also felt thicker as well, more solid. Viv urged the men to turn around and put it on after a brief inspection. One of the functions allowed her to adjust the suit to her current size — which was quickly improving thank you very much. It felt great to have it back, though she would check the full functionalities later.

**//We have all we can reasonably expect to have.**

**//For now, we should leave.**

"I need to recover my own belongings first," Abe said, "although I will have to abandon the majority, I will attempt to take as much as feasible. How may we find the ship? Sidjin handled the negotiations."

"Riverside pier," Viv said. "The Fat Seamstress. Yes, that is the name of the ship. And yes, I wish we could teleport but we have too much luggage to drag around. We'll stop at Losserec and get carts."

"Understood."

**//I will return to the ship with the loot.**

"Hmm, is it safe?" Viv asked.

The bag was certainly large and clinked loudly.



Solfis gave her the most pitying, condescending gaze she had ever received and the worst thing was that he managed it without facial expression.

“Giant murder golem. Right. As for me, I need to close the feud. I’ll drop by the palace and be on my way. Hopefully we’ll be gone by tonight.”

**//Is this necessary?**

“The government can contest us taking the loot away if we don’t formalize our victory. And they can claim the girl’s contracts as well, depending on Elunath’s obligations to the government. We also need it to transfer all bank-held assets to our names though this is less important. I still don’t want to give up that pile of gold without trying. Arthur would never forgive me.”

**//They could try to delay you.**

“If they stonewall me I’ll just leave. It’s for the harem, really. It would be a pity to free them only for unscrupulous nobles to come after them or their villages. Elunath preyed on girls without support.”

“We can all meet on the ship once you are done, Viviane. And if they do block your attempts with legal acrobatics, I know of a few lawyers who will make it extremely painful.”

“Alright.”

Viv didn’t know how much Elunath had in his multiple accounts but it had to be massive. The man was not just rich, he’d been rich for three centuries. She considered her options as they left the empty manor, also technically part of her estate. The Manipeleso Bank and Exchange undoubtedly offered legal services. She’d just lawyer up, promise them a share of the estate if they won and unleash them upon the unsuspecting Helockian justice system.

The group split near the gate to the lower city. Viv continued on along the wall while Abe flew up and Solfis walked past a flabbergasted guard. The main square soon came into view bathed in the late afternoon sun. She noticed an uneasy hum in the populace, many groups discussing in low voices.

They all stopped.

Slowly, silence spread through the vast square until hundreds of people watched Viv stroll across the stone plaza, head held high yet slightly uneasy. There was respect here, but also a lot of fear, and scared people did stupid things. She was committed now and turning her back would be a bad idea but perhaps, just perhaps, she ought to hurry. Her distinctive black sclera made the closest people recoil despite her demure aura. No one contested her when she entered the palace’s courtyard, nor when she walked into the massive rectangular fortress that was the heart of Helockian’s power. She still had to request some help to go through the security door. A young intern volunteered to lead her.

“Hmm, this way,” the young man said, clutching a notebook to his chest. “The service closes in an hour. You’re just in time, haha.”

“I do like to be punctual,” she said.

It somehow terrified the poor kid. She felt a little sorry. Despite his misgivings, he led her through a path she recognized. Sullen guards let her through with nothing more than hostile gazes. Her danger sense kept quiet. So far so good.

“After you,” the clerk finally said.

They walked into the Clan Management Office section. The desk at the end of the corridor stood empty. She looked around to find empty rooms. There were still glasses of klod left steaming on desks burdened with paperwork.

Something was wrong.

She turned to the clerk who seemed just as surprised as she was.

“I, errr, they might be on break? I will check the cafeteria for you. It won’t be long. Sorry.”

He returned to the door. It was locked. He rattled it in vain. Before Viv could decide what to do, the magical equivalent of a heavy coat descended on her. It felt like gravity being suddenly doubled. She gasped. The clerk turned to her.

“Are you alright? Hm.”

Still no sense of being in danger, except she was. She definitely was. Just not in immediate danger. She experimentally called some mana. It coated her hand but could not go far beyond a few centimeters away from her skin. Something was constricting her.

Loud noises filled the entire department. Darkness spread as every window was shuttered, metal panes descending on rock like death knells. The clerk called light with a shaky hand. He looked terrified.

“I didn’t know! I swear.”

“It’s fine,” Viv said.

“I’m sorry!”

“I said it’s fine. Not your decision.”

It didn’t take a genius to realize she was being imprisoned. The only thing she didn’t expect was how well-defended the palace of Helock was, though considering the number of mages in their ranks and the fact it was still technically a keep, it should not come as a surprise. Viv’s perception remained clear. There were active wards on every wall, the ceiling, and the floor. Additionally, a strange spell compressed the mana around her. It felt targeted as well

as extremely inefficient. It took a monstrous amount of mana to suppress someone from far away. Case in point, she could still cast but only spells that were close to her. The clerk didn't seem affected either.

A panel opened on the door that had just been locked and now shone with warding mana. A pair of panicked eyes found her in the shaky light.

"What is the meaning of this?" Viv asked, though she had an idea what was going on.

"You are under custody while the council discusses a possible violation of the collateral damage clause."

"What collateral damage? Elunath destroyed the city."

"The destruction of a warehouse as well as the death of officer Semon and his squad."

Officer Semon? Oh, possibly the corrupt prick they'd baited into leading Elunath to her pipe bomb.

Viv seethed in silence, knowing full well complaining would achieve nothing. This was just an excuse. If they had not used that one they would have found something else. The fact they could not have expected her meant it was a snap decision. It also was a bad sign. She knew Helock would eventually come after her rather than allow a stranger to take over Elunath's everything. She also knew killing their archmage would lead to resentment. She just didn't expect it to be so soon and so brazen, especially after she'd proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that she should not be messed with. That was the problem with assholes in power. They eventually believed that the fall of others didn't concern them. That they were invincible because they were still undefeated.

And curse her for relying too much on danger sense. It didn't protect her from reckless political attacks.

Viv found a seat and plopped her stupid butt on in. She grabbed a pot of klod and helped herself to some. The clerk looked like he was praying to all the gods.

"You there. I am not going to hurt you."

"Thank you..."

"Come closer please. I'd like some light."

"Ah? Of course, of course."

Viv sipped from her cup and considered her options.

The Academy would move to support her against that very obvious abuse of power. Unfortunately, the very fact they'd shut her in implied they no longer care about rules. This was Nyil, not earth. the rule of law only applied among equals here. They were never meant

to protect the outsider. The council threw the illusion of fairness out of the window the moment they decided to imprison her. That meant that escape was the best tool. The problem was that she couldn't cast easily, for one, and her allies were waiting for her at the boat. She hoped no one would go after them.

Her best bet would be to get out via a window. She felt around the wards there. They were solid but she was confident she could cut through them using a dagger-sized Excalibur. The problem was that her enemies would definitely feel it and get flying war mages and griffin riders on the other side. She was still mentally tired from the fight with Elunath. It had barely been half a day.

She could also cut through the ground but again, her guards would feel it. Same with the ceiling. Her harness would probably work, being close to her skin. She finished the cup of klod.

She could also go through the door although that was probably the worst option.

Maybe wait for nightfall and then get out. She was confident she could eventually lose pursuers with a cloud of darkness. What she wasn't confident in was getting jumped from inside as soon as the wards were attacked and then being bombarded the moment her toe left the fortress' boundaries.

And perhaps some bright idiot would send special forces in to put manacles on her any time now.

It was a conundrum.

Viv's mulling got interrupted by a commotion on the outside. It sounded like people arguing. A spell fused and she heard a body hit furniture. It didn't sound like a battle just yet. Not enough screams.

A heavy fist banged on the door. A moment later, the slit opened. It took her only a second to recognize the bushy brows of Dean Tallit, head of the Academy.

"Viviane. It seems I was a little late. Hold on, we need some privacy."

He whispered a few words and the yells of protest were silenced.

"Better. I am sorry I did not reach you in time to warn you. it was honorable of you to close the feud. Unfortunately, Councillor Pendath called on the council to strike against you. They were in session when you gormlessly walked into the snake pit."

"I am blaming myself enough as it is."

"Yes. The trappings of honor. The council was happy enough to let you roam free to teach Elunath some humility and weaken his hold on the council. They never actually expected you to win."

“How many monsters must I kill...”

“Oh, I suspect that one was the last drop. Now they are scared and unprepared, a state rulers should never find themselves in. By the way, we gambled on your success. Black mana tenured Professor Ashra made seventy-two silvers betting you would kill him in combat.”

“Delighted. I think I need to get out of here.”

“You do,” the dean agreed. “I will do all I can to fight them but I must remain neutral for the sake of the school, which is why I haven’t turned that door into so much splinter. The old farts on the council will use this against me. If you have another solution, now’s the time to use it.”

“My friends...”

“The council hasn’t tried to stop them yet. You walked right into their jaw but I assure you, they know better than annoy the Red Mist. And that bone horror you dug out from the Old Empire. Think about yourself. If you need gear... maybe I can visit again. Unfortunately, that’s the limit of what I can achieve.”

“Ok. Well, check on me later. I might have something.”

“We’re on your side. Good luck.”

“Yes,” Viv said as Tallit left. “Luck.”

She did have a bit of luck stored away. And a favor owed to her. It was the perfect time to cash in.

She sat in a lotus position and closed her eyes.

“I would like privacy please,” she told the clerk.

“Of course, milady.”

Viv was alone now.

Breathe in, breathe out, relax. Her soul awareness expanded. The walls faded away. Nyil faded away. She extended herself to that magnificent nothing, that endless dot that was the in between. Her soul popped up in the void between consciousnesses. It felt empty for now.

“EMERIC, YOU ODIIOUS TWAT,” she said.

“EMERIIIIIIIC!”

She waited for a moment or an eternity, hard to say. Suddenly, dawn rose over the emptiness in a surge of glory. She basked in the golden light while a solid Greek temple

manifested around her complete with alabaster Ionic columns. A blinding form stepped out in a shower of energy.

“Yes? Sorry, was in a meeting.”

“I kindly request your assistance with my current predicament.”

“One moment,” the monstrous, overwhelmingly strong planet-sized presence replied. He plucked a memory from her mind and read it.

“I see, I see. You certainly seem to face a great number of assholes.”

“Yes,” Viv agreed, facing the god, “fancy that.”

“Ha ha. Well, I do owe you one, and besides, fuck those people. They have violated the right of hospitality after a lawful duel. Back in my days, we hanged people for that.”

“Ok gramps. I would like to escape and I’ll call it a win.”

“It so happens that I do have something that would help tremendously. You’re gonna love it. Oooh yes. You will love it very much. I will even return your music box for the occasion. You know, the spark of luck is much more enjoyable once you learn to go with it.”

“It also made you incredibly obnoxious.”

“Yes, but I was more discriminating in who I decided to annoy in my younger days. I have learned to do so again. My advice still stands. The spark of luck is yours but it is not, in fact, your problem.”

“Oh really?”

“It is everybody else’s problem. I will reclaim the tools after you are done so do not worry. Have fun!”

Viv opened her eyes. A plastic glow stick shone on an open wood crate like she had seen so many times before. It was a shipping crate with a fragile stamp and a ‘this side up’. Her MP3 reader waited for her on the side. She stood up and approached. Nestled in the straw, she found a treasure trove of goodies.

“Combat outfit. Fucking Emeric, you could have given me top of the line modern stuff instead of my gear. It’s half a century old back on earth!”

Nevertheless, she felt giddy strapping on the familiar uniform over her skin suit. She hummed as she attached her dagger focus to the knife sheath.

There were M67 hand grenades and a few flashbangs.

“Oho!”

A red-colored satchel charge with a timer, a model she'd never seen before.

“Ok so you did give me some modern stuff.”

And at the bottom of the crate was a very large metal case. She hoisted it. It was super heavy.

“Ok? You have my interest.”

There was a logo on the surface.

*Property of Eurodyne, classification level: galaxy. DO NOT OPEN.*

*Opening this without former auth—*

“Ooooooh.”

There was some sort of digital lock. She placed her finger and the thing beeped green. Inside, she found a full backpack with a single slit and from that slit emerged an ammo belt carrying long, thin cartridges with red tips. The rest of the case held what could only be a light machine gun. The slick black shape was futuristic yet familiar.

*EX-46 commando belt-fed infantry assault gun. Prototype 5.*

“Ok. I take it back. You did send me the good stuff. Nice. NICE.”

The gun even had a small screen attached to the side. She opened it.

*Helmet link: not found.*

*Satellite connection: not found.*

*Reverting to manual mode.*

Human forms appeared as white outlines behind the transparent form of the wall. A target reticule showed where the next bullets would probably land.

“Hehehehehe. Ok, Helock. I feel that our relationship has gone toxic over the past year. Your hurt me. I hurt you. It's time for us to break up. I'm sorry. ”

Uniform: on. Shield: on her left arm. Grenades: strapped. Satchel: placed. Belt: chambered.

There was only one thing left to do.

Viv grabbed the MP3 reader to pick up a song. She barely hesitated. There were nice songs but only one was just perfect for the occasion. She was going to be free as a bird now.

Due to temporary access to otherworldly tools, your unused skill: Special Forces training at intermediate 4 has been reactivated

“You know what, Emeric is only partly right. I am not mad anymore.”

“Hey you!” the guard said, opening the slit. “Who are you talking to?”

“And I am not going to be a problem to you assholes.”

The guard’s eyes found the crate. They widened.

“I’m about to be THE problem.”

“What in Maranor’s name—”

“And, Gods, I won’t chaAaAaAaAnge.”

The satchel charge exploded, sending the door in the guard’s teeth along with Nyil’s first introduction to high explosives. Viv was out before the smashed pieces finished landing. The guards were dead. There were more coming out of a passage to her right. She aimed up and pressed the trigger. The gun vomited a stream of metal that pasted the guards, the furniture behind the guards, a decorative set of armor, two curtains and the faraway window. Stone and steel shards rained everywhere. She was sent crashing on broken chairs by the recoil.

“Oof.”

Shorter controlled bursts needed. Sensitive trigger on that thing. Actually... The thing about the skin suit was that it let her mana through. She forced it and... her wings deployed, annihilating a layer of kevlar.

“Much better.”

Viv sprinted forward. She could feel the dampening effect following her but also where it was coming from. She found stairs down. Another corridor. Shields at the end, with a waiting battle mage. Shielded. She anchored herself.

“YOU HAVE MESSED WITH ME—”

The opposition disappeared in a pink cloud.

“FOR THE LAST DAMN TIME!”

Hard on her arms but anchored, the recoil was mostly negated. Another corridor. Guitar riffs rang loud in her ears. Some people were running, she ignored them. Stairs down. A half circle of steel shields with three archmages.



She pulled a pin.

“Enjoy!”

Fragmentation pinged on shields that were not designed to stop something that moved so fast. She was among them. Anchored. One arm on the barrel, then left to right. Bullets streamed across armor and flesh alike. Arcane defenses did little to stop Earth engineering.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.”

Viv moved before the survivors could recover to find a closed door. Ballistic breaching on the hinges opened the way. Her heart beat fast and the air felt great in her lungs. It tasted of freedom and retribution. Her danger sense spiked. No direction. She coated herself in mana and swung her wings. One of them caught something. A woman. Impaled and surprised, blood bubbling on her lips. A dagger in her hand. Assassin.

“Nice try.”

People were coming from both sides. She rushed forward and gunned down guards as soon as they appeared. Her instincts pushed her to roll. An arrow pinged on her shield. She shot back. Bullets ravaged the corridor behind her, shredding everything in its path including a crossbowman. Some others took cover behind walls. It didn't help. Whatever was in those bullets was designed to fuck someone up through a bunker wall. Viv kept running and for the first time, people ran away.

She went down another corridor to find cowering civil servants huddling in corners. Others yelled when they saw her. She ignored them as they were not a threat. Some of the guards surrendered or ran away when she raced past them. Time was of the essence. She soon came across another locked door. Demolish the hinges. A flashbang. She tried to shoot through the walls. It worked. Emeric didn't skimp. Only a few more doors and she was there.

On a corner of the fortress, she found a ritual room with thick, reinforced windows. A circle occupied most of the empty space and in that circle, three defiant mages stood. That was the construct oppressing her. They were fed by more mana from elsewhere but they were the hand that pressed down on her neck. The shield was one of those rare, two-directional shields that stopped aggression in both directions. It made them extremely resilient and that one was fed power from the outside. She could try to force it but... she had a better idea. Manifesting a tiny excalibur, she started to dig around the circle, stopping at equal length to bore small holes. It didn't take long. Meanwhile, the head mage was raving at her.

“If you'd just stayed where you are, you could have faced a tribunal with good cause but no, you had to fight out of here like the wild witch you are. Your efforts are futile. This shield is fed by the entire castle's mana grid.”

“Oh, I know.”

Viv placed her five remaining frag grenades in the tiny holes. Moving fast, she removed all the pins and stepped back.

“The floor isn’t though.”

“You bi—”

The grenades went off in quick succession, collapsing the entire room and the surrounding walls into the courtyard below in a cataclysmic explosion and a cascade of crashing masonry. The mages screamed insults but she was already free. Free to cast. It was like taking a deep breath after a dive.

The late afternoon skyline of Helock waited invitingly. She activated her harness. Her danger sense screamed and she jumped away, casting a shield as she did. The rest of the room exploded from a flurry of thick blue projectiles. Griffin riders using their staves passed by in a tight formation.

Viv stood up quickly. The griffin riders geared for another pass in the distance. Five there. maybe more outside. Could she contest? Not sure but the ground floor had to have a basement and that basement had to have an underground access. She just needed to find stairs. Actually, no. Sometimes, you just had to make the stairs. Viv made sure there was no one underneath, then she pulled an Excalibur and cut a circle around her feet. The ground collapsed on a meeting table a floor below. She cut again and ended up in a cafeteria of sorts.

There was a team of war mages a little farther. They were in the process of putting their armor on.

Viv deployed, fully deployed her draconic aura. Her wings were out like two bleeding wounds in the fabric of reality. Tendrils of black mana emerged from her nightmarish armor, caressing the stone and leaving behind furrows of glassy smoothness. she aimed the gaping, reddening maw of her gun at the small group.

“ARE YOU SURE?”

They dropped everything they had and ran away. Good of them. Now, time to get away.

One more cut and she was in a waiting room on the ground floor. It looked deserted. She brought up the EX-46’s radar to see what was waiting outside.

Apparently, the entirety of the Helockian military including their war mages. Someone gestured at her and she felt mana spike outside.

“Aegis.”

She was confident in finding a basement but... something called to her. Something up. She had to go up.

Viv used her harness to lift off again the same way she had come in. An instant later, the cafeteria disappeared in a torrent of offensive spells. Smoke filled the air. There were

screams outside. It was pure chaos but she went on. Dig a small hole with excalibur, wait for the stone to fall, rinse and repeat. She carved her way up avoiding the groups she could perceive and see. Someone opened a door and aimed a staff at her. Viv rotated and pulled the trigger. Another deafening blast and the library she was in turned to shrapnel and flying shards. No one tried anything after that.

Viv burst out into the crimson light of the setting sun, arms extended, wings free, floating up like a happy balloon while two squadrons of griffin riders approached in attack formation and the song reached a paroxysm. She saw the riders line up their shots, blue orbs shining on the background of the floating rocks.

And then claws caught her from the back.

*Mother!*

*Are they foes?*

“Yes, let’s show them who rules the skies.”

“SKRAAAAA!”

Griffins attack orbs and shields met a cascade of fire, spells, and flying metal. One of the griffins fell immediately, shields smashed in an instant.

\*\*\*

The captain veered away from the death storm coming at them but Ikos wasn’t so lucky. Disciplined, the survivors turned and flew after the witch and her pet. She couldn’t let that stain on Helock’s honor go. They tightened ranks but her shield threatened to fail and only her instincts saved her. Around, powerful impacts peppered the griffins’ formidable defenses. It was not magic. What in Neriad’s name was going on? Then... the pet disappeared into a portal, only to reappear in another one right next to it, barreling towards them with no loss of speed. Spells formed in the air.

“Spread out!”

The order was useless. Her team had seen the threat and made to evade. Jar wasn’t so lucky. The dragon picked him up and dropped his body against a nearby floating stone. It broke from the impact.

“Shit!”

Needed an opening. She used her inspect. It was designed to assess flying enemies.

[Ascender, Elemental war caster, fourth step.]

[Juvenile dragon]

The captain felt a chill down her spine just as the title seemingly merged, something that only happened when two riders achieved such a level of coordination that they became greater than the sum of their parts.

[Harrakan Air Supremacy. Flying danger level: 7]

Even before the new title appeared, even before she remembered there was no danger level 8 in the old imperial nomenclature, even before she remembered the manual stating that 7 was a young adult dragon, a thought had wormed itself in the captain's head, drowning all others.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

"Pull out! Pull out!"

The riders spread out and the dragon mercifully didn't give chase. Gray mana surged and a gale carried the hostile pair up and away at great speed.

\*\*\*

Dean Tallit upended his glass and raised it to the dusk sun and the witch flying away from the comfort of his balcony. Puffs of black mana followed the dreadful pair, spelling 'get bent' in the northerner tongue.

"And fair travels to you, Viv."

Far below the escaping witch, a stunned calm reigned over the street in front of the palace, broken only when a severely damaged wall collapsed to reveal the destruction inside. Smoke belched from the open wounds of the thrashed fortress where artillery spells had detonated them.

Besides him, Ashra poured herself another glass while the rest of the faculty celebrated the show in various degrees of inebriation.

"I will miss our classes," the short-haired professor said.

"No doubt. Nice new boots by the way. They look expensive."

"They were. I believe young Ereska has fallen asleep. Would you help me place her on a couch? And after that, perhaps we could find a private nook?"

"I would like that very much."

\*\*\*

*Mother! Mother! You are so small!*

"Just a little. It's you who has grown so much! Look at you! So majestic!"

*Mother! Mother! You have wings!*

“Yes!”

*I told you you should eat more to grow wings and you said humans don't work that way.*

“Yeees?”

*You did grow wings.*

*So I was right!*

*As always!*

*Anyway.*

*Where is the rest of them?*

“Errr.”

*Mother?*

“Look, it was difficult.”

***Mother.***

“It's a work in progress.”

*Mother.*

*Wings are made to fly.*

*Mother.*

*What are those?*

*Seriously!*