

Dawn came over the defunct metropolis.

Viv crawled from under the tarp and blinked at the strange sight.

That was not her barracks.

Then it all came back to her. The new world. The interface. The huge monsters.

The huge monsters.

She scanned her surroundings but there was nothing out of place. The morning light was pale and wan, and it made the surrounding stones look like ivory.

Instead of rushing up, she forced herself into breathing exercises. She had to think first. There were many questions and she had few answers. Some of her priorities were easier to determine than others.

Magic? Cool, but later because she had no idea where to begin.

Determining how she came here and going back to her squad, her friends and family, the world she had left behind and where she had spent so many efforts carving herself a place to hopefully find happiness?

Later.

The first priority was survival.

How would she achieve that?

She had to leave. She would die if she stayed. It was not just the monsters, but also the lack of food and water.

One thing was clear. Those who had made camp there had done it despite the lack of cover, and that meant that this place never saw rain. Rain would cool a body quickly. It was also unpleasant. She did not believe that magic would change that. She also did not believe that someone would bother with a rain-repulsive shield or something when there were so many buildings around.

This place was also dead as a doornail. She had not seen a single dried up patch of grass. No renewable food source.

So, she had to leave.

In order to do so safely, she needed to find a water source. Without water, she would die within two days.

That desert looked pretty empty. She had to find it here. It did not rain, but there could be underground cistern.

In dark places.

She also needed boots. It was alright now that the ground was either flat or made of sands, but walking in the desert meant, perhaps, stones, and walking on that with the equivalent of heavy socks would be bad.

She also needed more food.

She took a brick of travel ration and removed the cover. The food was an unappetizing brown brick, and about as solid. She nibbled on it and managed to dislodge a few crumbs but it was going to be an uphill effort.

It tasted alright, to her surprise. It was like jerky but sweeter and more granulous. She immediately thought of Pemmican, a type of travel rations originally used by America natives like the Cree nation.

She had about three or four kilograms of food, give or take. The effort of hiking for hours meant about two thousand calories per day would be nice though she could probably stretch it. One hundred grams of Pemmican was a bit under a thousand calories so she had between fifteen and twenty days of food... actually that was not too bad. She would run out of water long before that became a problem.

Alright so, water and boots via underground cistern.

Yesterday's idea of finding barracks was looking more appealing by the moment. If they did have smaller doors, perhaps the big Necrarchs could not fit in and barracks would definitely have boots, food, and a water reserve. That was worth a shot.

Willpower +4

Acuity +6

Focus +3

Stats adjustment completed. Skills assessment in progress.

Ah, yes. The weird magic.

Come to think of it, she had been too dismissive once before. Perhaps there was a way for her to get an edge.

But first, she had to pee.

Viv walked out of the circle.

Immediately, a sense of fever overcame her again, though it was manageable. Her bones itched. It was rather disconcerting.

“What’s going on?” she asked the interface, but it ignored her. Asshole.

Viv walked into the nearest building. It could have been a restaurant at some point, she thought. There was a large opening along the main room as well as a door. A long stone counter split it in two and she saw an open door to what could be a supply closet. All the furniture was ruined, but she found scraps of metal and ceramic that confirmed her hypothesis. She laughed when she entered the closet: there was a chair made of what looked like solidified sand with a circular hole where the ass should be, and another hole in the ground under that. The expedition members had had the same idea, it seemed. They had made a toilet.

Viv marveled at the smooth fabric of the skinsuit as she was closing it again. It was really good at keeping the heat in. The only problem was that she had to pool it around her ankle to denude her butt.

[Faded skinsuit of the Imperial Protector (enchanted): this is all that remains of the once legendary squad. Most of the enchantments were lost in the cataclysm, but the durability remained. It still possesses a minor self-repair function.]

Nifty.

Actually...

“Give me my stats,” she ordered.

Physical		Mental	
Power	8	Focus	24
Finesse	16	Acuity	28
Endurance	15	Willpower	24

She inspected the various elements.

[Power: your strength and defense, your impact on the physical world. Reaching multiple of tens grants you additional benefits. Current benefits: none]

How arbitrary.

[Finesse: you coordination, agility, speed, and precision. A measure of your control over your own body. Reaching multiple of tens grants you additional benefits. Current benefits: improved balance and precision]

Hmm.

[Endurance: the ability of your body to endure and recover from abuse. Current benefits: you can stay active for forty-eight hours at great cost]

Well that was weird. But helpful. She could already operate for long periods of time thanks to her training and a few tricks she picked along the way, but that would certainly help in a pinch. One thing that bothered her was the seeming overlap between power and endurance in terms of defenses. Was defense not one's ability to endure abuse? Bah, whatever. This line of thought would bring her nothing for now.

[Focus: the ability to shape your thoughts without getting distracted. Essential in casting complex spells. Current benefits: ability to cast spells, Inspect skill]

Looks like all those years spent studying were finally paying off. Or not. Maybe she was a retard and every human here had all their stats over thirty.

She hoped that there were humans left. The bodies had been human, she thought. Except perhaps the king. The sleeping bags were also human-shaped.

Moving on.

[Acuity: the ability to think fast and accurately, and to infer and deduct. Essential in casting quickly. Current benefits: increased processing speed, temporary perceived time slow]

It was strange that her physical stats were so low compared to the mental one. She suspected that it had something to do with how magic interacted with bodies here. The Necrarchs she had seen should have collapsed under their own weights, light bones or not, and the first one had pretty much cracked stone like eggshells. Their bodies were probably reinforced with magic while hers was not, or at least not yet. The interface had mentioned improved stat acquisition speed. That meant that they could be increased.

Alright.

[Willpower: the ability to maintain control of your thoughts. Essential in casting powerful spells. Current benefits: mana shaping, mild resistance to mental effects.]

Self-explanatory.

So, she could think faster for a limited time. That was useful to have. What else was there? Oh, yes, her magic thingie.

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 12%

Current attunement: 0.22%

Viv frowned.

That part had changed, had it not? The black mana thing.

[Mana distribution: between the eighth month of gestation and birth, the child's body adapts to the mana currents around him or herself. The distribution is fixed for life and offers different affinities for spellcasting. Someone born in a desert will show increased red mana distribution, while someone whose mother was at sea before birth will shift towards blue mana. Everyone receives some life mana from their mothers.]

Oh.

Oh no.

Ooooh shit.

She fucking knew it, this was a brand new body!

Wait, no. She could have been transported and her body was only now taking mana.

Ah fuck who was she kidding. This was a new body, made without hair.

She had died.

Then, everyone would know.

Mouq would be mad, and the rest of her unit would be majorly pissed off. Her brother Damien would be inconsolable. Dad would not give a shit and capitalize on the tragedy while Mom would start drinking again. Laure and Rachida would probably feel guilty for a long time. Fraise and Gevaudan would never find out why she never went online anymore.

Viv felt tears well for the first time in a year. She pushed them back. She could not even afford to lose the fucking moisture.

Ok.

She was not dead.

This was a world of magic, she would find a way back and return, and maybe come back again if they had dragons. Who knows? But nothing would matter if she could not find water and get the fuck out.

Ok, what else?

[Mana channels (budding): metaphysical organs used to channel magic. Their development is essential to spellcasting and skill use)]

“And how do I even do that?”

Silence.

Ah, well. Next.

[Extreme compatibility: represents your latent ability for magic]

Nice. And not a short-term benefit just like the rest.

[Divine spark: luck. You have received a spark of divine essence from Emeric, the god of luck. It has integrated with your soul. You are lucky!]

Viv's gaze traveled to her black skinsuit, which a corpse had been wearing a day ago. It then settled on claw marks in the nearby walls, the dead city, the calamitous pyramid. She still felt the feverish haze that permeated this place from inside the protective circle. She stared at her meager belongings.

You are mildly dehydrated.

“Get fucked.”

Rather than walking in a random direction, Viv started making expanding circles from her home base, making sure to always know where it was. She also changed her approach. The danger did not come from being spotted from the streets or from the air — that she knew of — it came from inside the buildings. She was still not sure how the creatures might perceive her, so she kept to the middle of the road and made no noise.

Most of this district was occupied by smaller, official-looking buildings. Peering through the gaping holes where windows used to be, she could spot halls and smaller rooms that could have been workrooms or personal quarters. There were large signs carved into the walls by each gate, damaged but still readable. She saw scrolls, pens, wands and other things like a weird thing that could have been a sort of cereal. She guessed that she might be in the administrative quarter.

She stopped to rest at midday by a dried fountain. She did find a water outlet, or at least she thought it was one, and that made the possibility of underground cistern more real if the local population had been unable to materialize potable water out of thin air.

The lack of water was making itself felt now. She could barely munch on the brick of food she had brought with her. Not enough saliva.

The early afternoon brought more of the same, but soon, she noticed something good between two smaller buildings.

“Well, would you look at that...”

[Old Empire war golem (destroyed): the remnant of an extremely dangerous war machine. war golems were one of the most powerful tools in the Old Empire's arsenal.]

It was fucking power armor! No, a humanoid robot. It must have been as tall as three men when active and, well, vertical.

The architecture might have been brutalist and squarish, but this thing was a work of deadly art. Its legs were heavily armored at the front, its arms were powerful and far apart and its chest had been protected by a formidable plate that slightly protruded in the middle. A bit like a conquistador cuirass. One of its arms ended in sharpened claws and the other was a normal hand.

Viv remembered the first time she had seen a Mirage fighter jet in a base in Kandahar, two years before. She had been fresh from training then. The jet was not moving and it was not armed, and yet there had been no doubt in her mind that this was a tool of death. It was a visceral impression that she could not fully explain and she had been unable to fully relax until she was back at her camp.

This was happening again. The Golem might be deactivated now but it still bore the marks of the hands that had designed to destroy things.

She came closer to inspect it. She had to. It was not just magical, it was not just one of the only remaining things still intact in this dusty grave of a city, it was something that her own civilization had not achieved. Earth did not have the safe and portable power sources required to move autonomous robots of this size. Magic could, apparently.

It was even more impressive from up close.

The few exposed mechanisms she could see looked well-designed and very-well made. All the protective plates were decorated with fine engravings that could have been decorative or part of something magical. There were notches next to the gladiator-like metal head. The two most notable features, besides the thing being badass, were the claw marks covering the armored parts, and the cause of death.

The claw marks were consistent with what the Necrarchs had, at least the two models she had seen. They did not reach the golem's back, nor did she see nicks on the articulations. It was possible that the war golem had fought similar creatures to a standstill. Or even Necrarchs. She had noticed the absence of human bones in the streets. There were too many inconsistencies to be sure, but she thought that the lack of bodies was connected to the Necrarchs. They could have come from them, or they could have consumed them or a bit of both.

As for why the golem was still mostly intact, she did not know. It was clearly old. Older than the expedition camp had been.

"Hmm."

She climbed on the chest and confirmed what she had thought. The war golem had not been destroyed in battle. Someone had unlocked its chest cavity and then forcefully removed components with enough strength to tear off the delicate metallic framework. She inspected the strange parts that were left. They had...

They had letters...

Viv stumbled. She could read it. She could read the parts as if they were in her native language. She was absolutely certain that she had never seen those glyphs before.

Or had she?

She had. Several times. When the interface had started and here and there around town, half-faded.

She could have read if she had stopped and focused.

Gnnnnnn of course! The interface had said it! She had been granted Old Imperial as part of her bullshit welcome gift!

Skills assessment in progress.

She could not even show it. In any case, this could work. She bent and read.

'Processing Unit' one of those said. It was large, made of a strange cracked material, and surrounded by faded crystals.

'Communication Module'

'Mana shield and blast shield Modules'

Ah, the thing was shielded. Perhaps it had protected it from the faithful event. She had the distinct feeling that being inorganic to start with could have given one an edge in a catastrophe that had killed all life in a fifty kilometer radius.

More interesting though, was the fact that someone had removed what was obviously missing: the power source.

And that made her curious. Salvaged power sources could mean a great many things. In any case, the presence of a war golem meant war golem facilities and those had to be close to barracks of sorts. She would finally return to her natural habitat as a grunt if only she could find where that thing had come from.

She looked around and found nothing specific.

It was too soon to give up. She jumped down and circled the golem until she found something promising. Under the thick layer of dust was the mark of heavy impact, as if something ponderous had been dropped from some height. A ridge in the road stone led further into the city, away from the pyramid.

She decided to follow the general direction. Two street intersections later, she found another war golem. It was sitting against the wall of a sort of gazebo in a strangely human gesture. Its heavy helmet hung limply on its empty chest. It was similarly deactivated and showed traces of heavy combat.

This time, the processing unit and the power source were both missing and she struck gold. The entity responsible for the dismantling had left tracks in a nearby dried up bed of flowers. They were footsteps, and they were deep and golem-sized. Viv followed them.

Administrative buildings let room for habitation blocs surrounded by tall walls guarded by imposing gates left open. Empty guard booths stood a silent vigil to those living quarters turned graveyards. The silence was oppressive. There was nothing but the wind and the ever-increasing feverish sensation that pervaded her body.

One day of solitude was fine. Too much had happened to give her time to settle anyway. It could change, though. How long would it take to escape this death trap? How long without talking to anyone?

She pushed the thought away to a dark recess of her mind, where the other things she could do nothing about lingered. Survival first. Mental health afterward.

More golems appeared, in various states of disrepair. One of them was missing an arm and parts of a leg. She also found her first power source, which was a large crystal with cylinders at the top and bottom, but the one she found was clearly damaged. The two parts were missing every time they were not ruined in every carcass she came across.

Her steps finally led her past one last bloc and in front of a large enclosure.

She immediately recognized a military installation.

“Finally.”

The only problem was the time. She could make it back to the circle alright, but it would be a close call if she started exploring right now, assuming the days were about as long as on earth.

Water was a tempting prospect.

She gazed up a double set of open gates with miradors, and the two perimeter walls occasionally dotted with guard towers. The arch above the main gate showed two crossed swords over a large crystal and two dragon wings. Or bat wings, but she was hoping for dragons. What would be the point of magic without dragons anyway?

The entrance was large enough to accommodate four heavy trucks side by side and still have room for a bike or two.

She crossed them and the reason became immediately clear.

The interior of the base had hangars on one side and human-sized, one story buildings on the other. A massive opening led underground right in front of her.

Destroyed war golems laid and sat around haphazardly, gutted. They looked like a med student after-party. She counted at least thirty.

It was an imposing sight.

She turned to the right where the hangars lined up. They were imposing structures of steel sheet with a curved roof that reached to the earth on both sides. Hangars probably meant warehouses, bays, and large space where snoozing Necrachs could come to gather so, fuck that. The smaller structures to the left were promising, though.

Her gaze returned to the opening in front of her.

Possibly water.

She walked, inspecting golems on her way in case one of them was merely playing at being dead. They were not.

She ended up facing a slope down to an underground bunker, with a blast door as thick as a bank vault hanging open.

[Faded Old Empire secured gate (enchanted): this gate was meant to stop artillery spells and arcane siege weaponry. Many of its enchantments were destroyed in the cataclysm.]

She made her way down, staying low and to the side, ready to fall back at the first sign of a white limb. The ground showed signs of passage. There was dust at the corner but none in the middle. None of those were clawed feet.

So far so good.

She stepped on the landing and peered in.

The bunker was a single room as large as one of the other hangars with concrete walls and floors and man-sized openings at the far end. It held many squarish bays with frames obviously designed to maintain golems in position. Most of them were empty, and the few that were not had their guests gutted like the others.

There was something in the center of the room. She had to make a double take to understand what was going on.

A single golem stood in the center of the room. Its chest was open like that of the others, but that was where the similarities ended. It was to them what a timber wolf is to a border collie, and it was not just the size. The armor was immensely more elaborate, and covered in gems and runes now faded. The hands of the construct were extremely elaborate and looked strangely human, as did its face mask, which represented a handsome man.

The power source was exposed, but it still shone feebly with a pale blue light. Three small crystals were hooked to it via a set of cables, and a pile of darkened one sat further away. All the processing units lay in neat rows to one side, lain on a tarp.

[Old Empire experimental war golem: one of the secret weapons saof the empire and a dedicated mage and monster killer, this unique work by the grand engineer Irleven has not been equalled since its creation. Extremely dangerous.]

It did look extremely dangerous. It also looked kind of dead.

The eyes of the thing flashed yellow.

//ORGANIC LIFEFORM DETECTED.

Nevermiiiiiiiiind.

Time slowed as Viv turned to run.

//P-P-P-PLEASE. WAIT. PLEASE.

And stopped.

She took a few step backs to the entrance and looked again. The thing had not moved. Its eyes were a dim yellow, and she was not sure but they appeared to be sweeping across the room.

It was the voice that had stopped her. It was both mechanical and so very alive, a bit like a human voice gone through a synthesizer. She did not perceive despair in the tone but there was urgency in the rhythm, and the curious dichotomy had touched her. It had been a cry for help.

The language was Old Empire. It was a beautiful tongue, she thought, with many soft consonants and a tone that went up and down like a song. Perhaps loneliness was getting to her, but she had liked listening to it.

And finally, there was someone to talk to. Someone who may have answers.

A part of Viv wondered if the thing would stand up and try to kill her if she came too close, but she dismissed it. The experimental war golem was clearly on its last leg. It was also strapped to many heavy-looking pieces of metal that would hang from it and slow its movements.

She had to take risks.

“Hello?” she tried.

The yellow eyes swivelled towards her.

**//GREETINGS CITIZEN, HAVE YOU NEWS OF COMING REINFORCEMENTS? ImperlaL
FAMILY STATU-U-US? COMBAT OPERATIONS IN PR-R-ROGRESS?**

“Errrrr.”

**//ERROR DETECTED. DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS.
//PLEASE STAND BY.
//DECISION CENTER COMPROMISED.
//PURGING MAINFRAME.
//ATTRIBUTING PRIORITY QUEUE TO SECONDARY MODULES.
//GREETINGS CITIZEN, HAVE YOU NEWS OF REINFORCEMENT, ALSO, HAVE YOU
NEWS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY, ALSO, HAVE YOU NEWS OF THE CURRENT STATUS
OF THE HARRAKAN DEFENSE DIRE—**

“Alright alright, slow down!”

//—EEEEECTOOOOORAAAAATE, AAAAALSOOOO

“Oi! Hold on a minute!”

Was the thing mocking her?

//REQUEST GRANTED. HOLDING ON.

It held on.

“Hmm. Ok. Huh, as far as I can tell this city is empty and has been empty for many years. It’s completely dead. There are no reinforcements coming, as far as I know. There is nothing to come back to. I am sorry.”

Silence.

“As for the imperial family, I saw a man in the pyramid’s throne room. He was quite dead, I’m afraid.”

Silence. The golem looked... dejected. She stepped closer inside of the bunker. Just like the outside, it only smelled vaguely dusty.

“As for the directorate, I don’t know. What is Harrak?”

For a moment, she thought she was being ignored. Then...

//MINUTE ENDED. THIS UNIT IS NO LONGER HANGING.

//HARRAK IS THE CITY WE STAND IN, THE CAPITAL OF THE HARRAKAN EMPIRE AND THE SEAT OF THE EMPEROR, LONG MAY HE LIVE!

It was definitely being a bit weird there.

//WHAT ABOUT THE OUTER PROVINCES? ARE REINFORCEMENTS COMING FROM THERE?

She did not know how much she should state. She wanted answers to her questions as well, and there was a risk that informing the golem of the state of the place could lead it to blow a fuse, or whatever arcane equivalent it had.

“Hmm, can you help me?”

//PLEASE, CITIZEN.

“Alright, fine. As far as I know, your empire has collapsed. The inspect skill calls it “Old Empire” not ‘Harrakan empire’. There could be inheritors left, maybe?”

//COLLAPSED?

“I am sorry.”

//SO LONG AS THE PEOPLE OF HARRAK LIVES, WE WILL NEVER FALL!

Aaaaand now Viv felt like shit. The worst memory of her short career had been once, during an operation around Kandahar. One of the men had received a piece of shrapnel in the back and she had managed to stabilize him, but one look at the wound and she knew he would never walk again. He had been conscious and he had guessed. She always had a shit poker face, one of the reasons why she and her dad never got along.

She had been in a fantasy necropolis for less than a full day and the flaw was already biting her in the ass again.

//CITIZEN, ARE YOU NOT A CITIZEN OF HARRAK?

“I... I’m sorry, I just got here. Everyone is dead. The land is dead.”

//THERE IS NO ONE LEFT?

It was almost plaintive. Again, the tone was neutral and perhaps even a bit cheerful, but it felt forced. The rhythm was off too. Instead of revolting her, it made her feel sympathy. The golem was obviously quite smart. Perhaps it simply lacked the tools to express itself.

“Maybe... maybe far from here?”

//THE CITIZEN OF THE HARRAKAN EMPIRE WOULD NEVER LET THE CAPITAL FALL.

“I am sorry.”

The yellow eyes flashed once. The golem was still not moving. It was also getting a bit late and Viv considered going back. She could still return tomorrow and be fine, as long as there was water here.

The fear of dying of dehydration further dampened her mood. This world was a strange mix of the wonderful and the horrible. There was magic, but also monsters. There was a smart golem but she had to inform it of the destruction of his world. And she was a day away from horrible suffering. If she did not find the precious liquid.

“Are you alright?”

//CURRENT STATUS: ENERGY LEVELS CRITICAL.

//REPAIRS NEEDED.

//MAINTENANCE NEEDED.

//CURRENT DIRECTIVES CANNOT BE ATTAINED.

//THIS UNIT REQUIRES HELP.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know where I can find more of those power sources you use, and I don’t think the city can be saved. There is nothing but Necrarchs here.”

//THIS UNIT CANNOT ALTER PRIMARY DIRECTIVES ON ITS OWN.

“I don’t know how to help you. As I said, I just arrived here. I literally appeared in the throne room and I need some help. Would you mind answering a few questions?”

//PLEASE STAND BY.

“Aw, come on, it’s getting late!”

//PLEASE ELABORATE: APPEAR.

Viv stopped and thought. Perhaps outlanders were hunted for sports in those parts?

That was unlikely.

And the golem would not do any hunting. She decided to go for broke.

“I’m an outlander. I think my body reformed in the throne room. That was yesterday.”

//YOUR BODY DID NOT EXIST BEFORE YESTERDAY?

“Well, not in this plane of existence.”

//ANSWER DETERMINED AS: NO.

“Yeah ok whatever. Can you answer my questions? I’m on a schedule. Night falling. Monsters coming. The horrible nausea and headache that come with dehydration. That sort of thing?”

//PLEASE CONFIRM: YOU STARTED TO EXIST YESTERDAY WITH THE THRONE ROOM OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE.

“What the hell? Yes! Now tell me where I can find some water!”

//THIS UNIT HAS A REQUEST.

“Ok but later!” Viv said with increasing frustration, “Water first!”

//PROCESSING.

//REQUEST GRANTED. TAKE THE SECOND DOOR FROM THE LEFT AND GO DOWN TWO FLIGHTS OF STAIRS TO THE GENERAL CISTERN.

“No Necrarchs downstairs, right?”

//THERE ARE NO HOSTILES IN THIS FACILITY.

Viv did not wait, she took off and struggled to open the sealed door leading down. It was heavily damaged, and she was forced to kick the hinge until it broke. The stairs were also metal and she slowed down lest they crumbled under her feet and she ended up with a rusty steel bar poking out of her chest. The place she ended up in was the lowest, which, she thought, was not very low. The light was minimal and it came from an open aeration shaft to the outside. She could barely see where she was walking .

The second door moved with little effort.

Inside, she found racks upon racks of supplies of one sort or another extending into the darkness. Only the words of the strange golem gave her the confidence to search the room. Fortunately, the massive shape of the water reservoirs were easy to discern. There were three of them. Her skin suit-covered hands searched the surface and found no opening. There were none below either.

Her panicked mind conjured images of magic dispensers but she dismissed them soon enough. This was the army. The army would never use complicated or expensive stuff when a simple tap would do. She circled around and found it on the other side.

She switched it and liquid came out. It was water, stale and tepid and with a vague iron taste. It was one of the best drinks she had ever had.

You are no longer dehydrated.

“Fuck yes. One less immediate cause of death.”

The tank had been hermetically closed and a tap on its smooth surface had confirmed that it was still full. She had enough there to last her a long time. Things were looking up.

Viv felt, once again, weird about the entire thing. She was caught in a death trap but it had only taken her one day to find food, water, and shelter. She had almost died to a weird monster, had found a somewhat friendly war machine, and now she was rummaging through a magical armory. And that was without even considering the existence of magic and gods and how she could interact with them via the interface. She wanted to share this with Mouq and her friends back home. Mouq would probably tell her to shut the fuck up and to fill the flasks because night was in the way.

Right.

Pouring water in the rigid flasks proved to be an annoying endeavor, not least because the neck was slightly too small and she was wasting water. She filled two and headed back up.

The big war golem was in the middle of some intense discussion with itself.

//CONSENSUS NOT REACHED.

//ALTERING PROCESS MODULES 17,19,43,51,52.

//ERROR.

//TERMINATING PROCESS MODULES 19,52.

//MEMORY PURGED.

//CONSENSUS REACHED.

//AWAITING CITIZEN.

“Hm, hello, I am here.”

//GREETINGS CITIZEN, WAS YOUR QUEST FOR ITEM: ‘WATER’ SUCCESSFUL?

“Oh, yes, thank you.

//EMPATHY EXPRESSED, RETURNING TO MAIN OBJECTIVE.

//CITIZEN, THIS UNIT HAS A REQUEST.

“Ok but quickly, I really need to go for the night.”

//REQUEST: THIS UNIT DOES NOT WISH TO DIE.

...

That was something she could definitely sympathise with.

“You need my help?”

//DOES THE CITIZEN AGREE WITH THE REQUEST?

“I need to know more.”

//THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING MY REQUEST, CITIZEN.

“Sure.”

//EMPATHY EXPRESSED, RETURNING TO MAIN OBJECTIVE.

//CITIZEN, PLEASE CONFIRM THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS.

//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, THE EMPIRE HAS COLLAPSED.

//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, THE PEOPLE HAVE FALLEN.

//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, THE EMPEROR AND HIS FAMILY HAVE PERISHED.

//TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE, YOU BECAME ALIVE WITHIN THE WALLS OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE.

“Hmm. Yes, yes, yes, and yes?”

//CONSENSUS CONDITION: THE CITIZEN WILL BIND WITH THE GOLEM CORE TO VERIFY THIS INFORMATION.

//THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT REQUEST, CITIZEN. YOU WILL BE COMPENSATED FOR YOUR SACRIFICE.

“What? What sacrifice?”

//THIS UNIT WILL GAIN FULL ACCESS TO YOUR INTERFACE DATA AND MAGIC FIELD DATA. THIS UNIT APOLOGIZES FOR THE BREACH OF PRIVACY. YOUR PERSONA DATA WILL BE KEPT SECRET UNDER IMPERIAL LAW. YOUR PERSONAL DATA WILL ONLY BE ACCESSIBLE BY A DULY APPOINTED STATE-LEVEL INQUISITOR IN CASE OF LEVEL FIVE INVESTIGATION OR ABOVE.

“You’ll get to see my interface? And personal data?”

//YES. THIS UNIT REALIZES THAT THIS IS A SERIOUS REQUEST.

“Hmm.”

It would have shocked her more if her preference in underwear was not stored on at least seventeen different servers back on earth to be sold to advertisers. People here apparently took the interface very seriously.

“Alright then, how do we proceed? And hurry, I need to be back before the Necrarchs come out to play.”

//THIS PLACE IS SECURED AGAINST NECRARCHS. THIS UNIT HAS HUNTED MANY NECRARCHS.

“And how long since you last went out and killed one?”

//SEVENTEEN YEARS, EIGHT MONTHS...

“Yeah so there could be one in the hangar and you would not know. How long till nightfall?”

//ONE AND A THIRD OF A PERIOD.

“...”

It took Viv one minute, counting seconds in front of the golem then doing a bit of arithmetic to realize that this planet was rotating slightly slower on itself than earth. A day here was about twenty-six to thirty hours long depending on how much she had fucked up beating seconds for the golem to count. She still had three hours before it got dark enough for the creatures to come out. One hour and a half should be more than enough to head back as she had wasted quite some time finding her way around.

The strict geometry of Harrak made orientation easy. She was six blocks left and three up from the pyramid entrance. That was a long stroll if one wanted to be careful, but nothing insurmountable.

“Ok, how do we do this?”

//PLACE A DROPLET OF BLOOD IN THE PROCESSING UNIT’S BINDING NODE.

Viv had no problem finding the cute little rectangle set in the massive crystal and metal cylinder. The difficulty arose when she realized she had no tool to draw blood. In the end, she had to open her skinsuit to free an arm, and use the claw of an old golem that had not seen combat in forever and hope that it was more or less sterile. It was the best she could do.

//WHY NOT USE MY RAVAGER BLADE? ITS SHARPNESS IS WITHOUT EQUAL.

“How many times did it end inside a Necrarch though?”

//SIX HUNDRED AND TWENTY SEVEN TIMES! THIS UNIT IS A GLORIOUS SERVANT OF THE EMPEROR, LONG MAY HE LIVE!

“That was a rhetorical question, buddy. I don’t want dry Necrarch juice under my skin, thank you very much.”

You are about to allow a foreign entity full access to your interface. This process cannot be reverted. Are you sure you want to proceed?

Wow, way to make it scary.

“Hold on, you will have access to the content of my interface all the time?” she asked with a bit of anger.

//UNTIL THE BOND IS BROKEN. YOU MAY MANUALLY BREAK THE BOND.

“Is this the only way to save your life?”

//IF YOUR STATEMENTS ARE CORRECT, YES.

She stopped.

She was going to do something special for a perfect stranger. To her, the weird golem was quite obviously sapient and sentient so she would help it if she could, but her own life was also important.

“Can I trust you?”

//THIS UNIT’S EMPATHY MODULE WAS NOT CREATED WITH THE ABILITY TO DECEIVE.

That was totally what someone with a deceit module would say. Ah, the feverish sensation she was feeling was messing up with her mind.

“You got to help me afterward, I want to live as well.”

//IF THIS WORKS, I WILL DO MY BEST TO ASSIST YOU. IF THIS DOES NOT WORK, I WILL DO MY BEST TO ASSIST YOU. MY ASSISTANCE WILL BE OVERWHELMINGLY MORE USEFUL IF THIS WORKS.

Ah, what the hell.

Yes.

**//DATA RECEIVED. ANALYSIS. ANALYSIS COMPLETE.
//TIME OF EXISTENCE OF THE BODY: ONE DAY.
//STATED PLACE OF ORIGIN CONSISTENT WITH CURRENT MANA DISTRIBUTION
//CONSENSUS CONDITION CONFIRMED.
//CITIZEN REDESIGNED AS HEIR TO THE THRONE.**

“Excuse your pardon what?”

**//ONLY MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY MAY GIVE BIRTH IN THE IMPERIAL PALACE.
//CITIZEN WAS BORN WITHIN THE IMPERIAL PALACE.
//CITIZEN IS A MEMBER OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY.
//ALL OTHER MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY HAVE PERISHED
//CITIZEN IS HEIR TO THE THRONE OF THE EMPIRE, LONG MAY SHE LIVE!
//PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME, YOUR GRACE.**

“What? But...”

She wanted to protest but stopped. It did not matter if he called her citizen or heir or auntie Suzette, what mattered was getting out of the city, and she assumed that giving her a big status related to how he could survive and assist.

“Call me Viv, I guess.”

//BEEB

“No, Viv, as in Viviane. Viv.

//BEEB, AS IN BIBIANE. BEEB.

Viv thought that the golem was fucking with her, but she scoured her newly acquired knowledge of his language and realized that they never, ever, used the sound v.

And boy did that piss her off.

“Viv.”

//BEEB.

“Seriously, can’t you recreate the sound, at all?”

//THIS UNIT HAS NO NEED TO USE THE LANGUAGE OF THE BARBARIANS AND INFERIOR CULTURES. THE TONGUE OF THE HARRAKAN EMPIRE WILL ALWAYS SUFFICE, GLORY TO THE HEIR! LONG MAY SHE LIVE!

“Just fucking call me Bob, why don’t you.”

//REQUEST GRANTED, YOUR GRACE, PRINCESS BOB. THIS UNIT PLEDGES ITSELF TO YOU.

You have received the allegiance of [HX-013 Experimental Strike Golem, designation: Solfis].

Ah, fuck.

//SET NEW CURRENT DIRECTIVE, YOUR GRACE.

“Keep us both alive.”

//NEW DIRECTIVE ACCEPTED.

There was silence for a moment. The golem’s yellow glare stopped flashing and turning around and seemed to land on her with a singular intensity. It was strange to see this mighty war machine unmoving on the ground. The golem must have been an incredible force in the distant past. Now, it was the only thinking being left in that horrible place besides her, comrades in misfortune brought together by their distinct tragedies.

//THANK YOU, PRINCESS BOB.

And it was already being a jerk.

Solfis the sassy war golem of ultimate mispronunciation sent her on her way after determining the location of her camp and the best path to it. Apparently, it had waged war against the Necrarchs for three centuries, the time that had elapsed since the fall of the Harrakan empire. It and its brethren had not died like everyone else during the cataclysm, and they had fought the undead that had come to populate the place until they ran out of power.

The idea of undead was not new to her. They had been a pain in her backside in Minecraft already. She was curious about them but Solfis had informed her that there would be ample time to discuss this later.

In the meanwhile, Solfis still knew where most Necrarchs concentration had gone and he shared the details with her. Apparently, they rarely moved at all. Her arrival must have kicked the hornet's nest. The upside was that Necrarch had haunts (haha), and they would often dwell in the same place. That made them mostly predictable.

She found the circle with time to spare. The feverish feeling decreased as soon as she stepped in gave her a sensation of intense relief, and she realized that the strange radiation was affecting her mind. Not that she had much choice, and not that befriending Solfis had been a mistake. It was her ticket out of here.

She also realized that while she had the basic necessities, she had nothing else.

She had a small pot, but no way to light a fire. A thorough search of the supplies yielded no obvious lighter, matches, or wand-of-press-here-to-solve-all-your-problems. There were no books either.

After quickly mounting the tent, she realized that she had nothing left to do but to twiddle her thumbs until night came.

A quick inspection of her interface revealed nothing new or exciting.

[Maradoc: god of travels and mysteries]

Yeah you already said that.,

[Nous: strange god of magic and granter of the interface, which allows sentients to understand and interact with the forces of magic.]

She wondered if Solfis had an interface as well. Probably, if he was able to see hers.

She needed a backpack to carry stuff around. She had fabric, but no needle or anything. The sleeping bag would do if she was desperate.

And that was it, that was all she could think about.

She was left with her thoughts as the invisible sun (she was pretty sure there was just the one) continued its course behind the thick curtain of dreary cloud. The shadows could not even lengthen as there were none.

Why did she even end up in this place?

Did she really die? Or was her soul somehow transported? What had happened to everyone once they had found her corpse? Would they bury her in Nice with the rest of her family, or would the military take care of it. She did not know. She had not checked. Her will was made and she had even written messages to be sent to people she liked in case of her demise, since life as a soldier had its risks. The minutiae of burial were not something she had cared about.

She hoped everyone would deal, but she knew that a mysterious death on the battlefield would bring questions and concern. It was one thing to be killed in combat, another one to fall mysteriously.

She hoped she would see her family and friends again.

Her eyes grew embarrassingly wet, with nothing to distract her from her predicament.

Ah, fuck it.

In the heart of the metropolis, a small voice rose in defiance. It did not reach past the small square where the outlander hid, and yet the spirit of it crossed through space and time to convey its priceless message. It was in bastardized English, with a horrible mix of French and Cockney accent.

“Soooooome things in life are bad, they can reaaaaaally make you mad,

Other things will make you swear and cuuuuurse!
When you’re chewing on life’s gristle...

Don’t grumble.

Give a whistle!

And this’ll help things turn out for the beeeeeeeest.

Aaaaaaaaaynd

Always look on the bright side of life. Tudu. Tudu tudu tudu...”