

Three days later, south of Lanneis.

A lonely form dragging a strange sled crested a hill of desolate gray earth. A forest of black stumps lined her right, sometimes cut by ruined towers and small stone mounds that looked like broken teeth on rotted gums. The land fell into a ravine on her left with more desolate tundras afterward, extending ad infinitum. It was cold, dry, and dusty.

“I’m going to sneeze.”

“AAAAH PSHAA!!!!”

“I sneezed.”

**//Yes, Your Grace.**

**//The airborne particles here represent a hazard to public health.**

“Your mama represents a hazard to public health.”

**//We can take a break, if you are in distress.**

“Am I in distress?”

Current status:

- Exhaustion
- Malnourishment
- Mana poisoning (serious)
- Soul trauma (serious)

“I’m in distress, Solfis. Somebody call a medic. Mediiiiic! Oh, wait. It’s me. Not thinking clearly. It’s the CONSTANT FUCKING BULLSHIT HEADACHE.”

**//I apologize, Your Grace.**

**//I wish I could help.**

“But you do. You doooooooo. I’m sorry Solfis I’m being a bitch, but I got a real excuse.”

**//Can this unit convince you to eat a bit more of the travel rations? The ones we recovered from the cache have a sweet variety.**

“If the rations wanted to be eaten, they should not have tasted like ass.”

That was an obvious nugget of wisdom. The old golem should know that already.

And really, it had helped. She had made great strides in mana manipulation, reaching the basic level. She could now create small tendrils of black stuff and even direct them. And she could make it pop from anywhere!

She made one appear from above her ass.

“Look, I got a tail.”

Her attunement had improved enough to cast spells, although Solfis prioritized meditation to extend her life expectancy. She had gained endurance and willpower, increasing her ability to cope. She had progressed in athleticism, survival, pain tolerance and meditative trance. Basic mana manipulation allowed her to expel mana from her conduit as they were saturated. All of that improved her chances. It did not feel like it was enough. She was in pain every bloody second of every sorry minute of every fucking hour of every goddamn day she was not fretfully sleeping. Solfis had her take naps and she would wake up twenty minutes later with her head so far up her ass she could lick her own amygdalae. Then it would start again.

And the food sucked. That was the cherry on the whole cake. At least if she had comfort food it might have been better, but the rations were all solid bricks of nutritive bullshit that had to be literally mined with a fucking pickaxe to break into swallowable bits. It was a pain to eat and a pain to keep down.

“When I get here, I’ll find fantasy cherry cake and eat it. As revenge.”

Viv’s bloodshot green eyes widened at the prospect, and a thin line of drool moistened her dry lips.

“And clams in cream with paprika. A side of perfumed thai rice. Grilled asparagus.”

It went on for a while.

“...and chocolate fondant with vanilla ice cream. Have you ever had chocolate fondant, Solfis?”

**//Unfortunately, not yet, Your Grace.**

“We got to have you have some. It melts on the spoon and in your mouth, and the contrast with the pure and refreshing taste of the vanilla ice cream will cleanse your palate so that every

mouthful retains the tasty impact. Then we have to move the region specific desserts. Like the *Kouign Amann*. That's a dessert from *Bretagne* that's basically sugar and butter held together by faith. And just a bit of flour, I guess."

**//It sounds delicious, Your Grace.**

**//I am sure that we can recreate it with local ingredients.**

"Really?"

**//Absolutely, Your Grace.**

**//We have plenty of magical ingredients that improve the taste beyond what reality should allow.**

**//You can look forward to it.**

**//Just hang in there.**

"Damn, this is making me hungry."

**//The red brick has a lot of a local fruit called the permonn.**

**//There should still be some of the taste left.**

**//Permonn is common to many regions.**

**//Tarts made with it are a delicacy,**

"Alright I'll try it."

Viviane used the tried and true method of pushing water in her mouth and letting the brick dissolve. It was a slow process, but she did feel the taste of the permonn Solfis had mentioned. It was sweet and curiously almondy. She loved it.

"Oops. We're out of water."

**//We will arrive at a waystation in one hour, Your Grace.**

They kept going along the forest, the Solfis had her turn into it and towards a small stone mass that looked a little bit like a scrotum.

"What's this place?"

**//It was a training base for the Imperial Scout Corps.**

**//They were renowned monster hunters.**

**//I apologize in advance.**

**//This place was known as 'the ballsack'.**

Figures.

The base occupied a small basin. The tall trees around must have provided amazing camouflage back when the land was alive.

It was also crawling with undead, even now, at noon.

Viv stopped the sled at the crest and looked down. The first of the creatures squatted idly a hundred paces down. Her black alignment meant that they had difficulties smelling her and that gave her a minor advantage as most undead had poor eyesight according to Solfis. They would still acknowledge her as human if they had a good look so she could not just stroll in.

The school had neglected to build walls, or perhaps Scouts looked down upon those. There were a few square buildings, a long one, and a circular open-air amphitheater. There were few of them and she assumed that most of the training must have taken place outdoors. The roofs were made of dark tiles and the walls were thick and unadorned, reminding her of what she had seen in the capital.

**//Those are crawlers.**

**//They are far less dangerous than necrarchs, but you still do not stand a chance against one.**

**//As we move away from the epicenter of the cataclysm, we will come across less powerful undead.**

**//It is unfortunate that this species does not fear the sun.**

“Yeah. What should we do? Bypass?”

**//The, and I apologize, ‘ballsack’, is the only reliable source of liquid in the vicinity.**

No, that would be the prostate. Hehehehe.

**//I fear that you will have to get down there and grab water.**

“But how? They’ll see me for sure. There are at least. forty of them.”

**//It is time to learn your first spell.**

“Really? Now?”

**//Yes.**

**//Do not worry, it is fairly simple.**

**//This spell is called ‘coating’.**

**//Coating is a prerequisite to basic mana-based shields.**

**//Black mana coating has the advantage of making you harder to detect by anyone.**

“Okay.”

**//You need to exude mana from every side of your body, at the same time.  
//Do not worry about symbols or giving meaning to the mana yet.**

“We can give meaning to the mana?!”

**//Do not worry about giving meaning to the mana yet, Your Grace.**

“Okay okay.”

**//Try now.**

She did.

At first, it was difficult to direct the power in several places at once. It was already difficult to keep the tendrils she made stable to begin with and this was adding one difficulty. However, soon something curious happened. Dark mana started to cover her chest over her super nifty armor and once it had done so, it was... tame. For lack of a better word. It stayed there with minimal effort. She tried to do the same with her back and now she had a cuirass coating. Adding her left leg made her lose the chest part.

**//You are doing great, Your Grace.  
//The crawlers are not particularly smart.  
//Coating your torso and head should be more than enough.**

That proved to be easier. Making the mana start from the chest felt natural, and expanding it from there was easier. It was as if the magic understood what she was trying to achieve and tried its best to help, but the magic was also a labrador puppy and not a very bright one either.

**//You can go now.  
//The sealed water cistern will be under the principal’s office.  
//The principal’s office is the small cubic building with a pointed room by the long rectangular building.  
//There is one more thing.  
//By the cistern, there should be a box with a symbol.  
//The symbol will be a horizontal line surmounted by a half-circle.  
//Take the box’s contents too.  
//Do not run and do not stop while you are in the open.**

“Okay.”

Clad in black, and leaking foggy black mana like a coal-fuelled locomotive, Viv went on. She decided that in order to demonstrate her boundless courage, she would just look straight ahead

and tell herself that the pale-skinned simian clawed and fanged horrors were just a figment of her imagination or very weird meth addicts or something. It was the fever. Yep.

She walked with purpose and wondered if the crawlers could smell pee through her skinsuit when the first creature took a look at her.

Somehow, the red eyes passed over her form and the creature went back to staring into the distance.

Viv kept going.

The buildings of the ballsack institute were much larger from up close, and she realized that a flat area on the side could have been a firing range. The principal's office was clearly visible from her position, as the seat of the place's great poobah. She kept her sanity by staring ahead and singing cartoon songs under her breath.

One of the larger specimens sauntered on her path. There was now a small wall of fleshy bones between her and her destination.

Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeon. Fuck!

Her anger and stress increased the energy output. The basic coating flared.

The creature jumped a bit and traipsed away. It hissed like an angry kettle.

That's right. Sod off.

She took a risk and looked right at the large rectangular building. It was a dormitory, and most of the windows had been torn off. What shocked her almost made her drop the spell.

There were traces of combat.

She spotted overturned beds, slashed walls and the rotting shafts of arrows. People had fought in here, which meant that people had survived the initial blast.

They could have fled.

She had kept in her heart the belief that people had survived and made it out. The camp was one clear evidence, but there was always this small fear inside of her, that it had been a desperate last attempt by a dying world, that there was nothing left here but ashes and dust for weeks in any direction, and that her coming here was the cruel joke of a band of doomed gods.

The battlefield gave her hope.

She returned her attention to the principal's office, feeling her focus waver. There were less creatures here and she hastened her pace, practically falling against the heavy gate, which crumbled under her gloved hands. She was in.

The hall was dark. There were stairs up that looked ready to give up under the weight of a mouse. The way down was made of stone.

Viv grabbed a stone from one of her cloak's few pockets.

It was one of the first things she had recovered from a cache. It was a rare but inexpensive tool that produced light for mana.

Most people with basic attunement could light their life mana to lighten their surroundings, but the illumination would be weak. The stone's purpose was to provide more light when required. She had coveted the thing with single-minded obsession. Only Solfis' stern warning had prevented her from using it at night to war off the endless darkness. She used it now.

White light shone on desiccated walls. It did not stink, and she thought she had figured why: the black mana had killed all the microorganisms responsible for decomposition. The place was too dead to even rot properly.

There were no creatures inside. She dropped the coating for now and made her way down.

The supply dump was less intact than others. Something had hidden in it at some point, but at least it had the decency to close the cistern and Viv took a moment to fill her flask, drink, and wash her face. She did not remove her skin suit to bathe. It was cold, and she was already weakened. Hygiene felt like a secondary concern.

She found the box too. It contained a single bag made of some leather she could not recognize. It felt parched and dry under her touch, although it still hung on. She took that as well. It was lighter than the water.

She climbed back on and sat down to focus.

The coat came easier this time. She knew what to do and had black mana up to her head in no time. It was tiring, she realized. She would not be able to keep it up much longer.

This time, her path weaved between clusters of creatures instead of charging forward like an idiot. They gave her nothing more than a passing glance. Some even politely stepped out of the way.

It was weird.

All she had to do was say 'hello' and she would be dead in moments. The idea called to her like the void. It would mean an end to the constant pain she was in.

Then she remembered that Solfis was up there and the possibility of giving up became revolting. She climbed the edge of the ravine, spitting and vociferating against those stupid Scouts who could have chosen a nice hill, but instead chose a gap next to a giant scrotum. They really were assholes.

**//Well done.**

“Are you sure this thing can hide me? It looked like they saw me and just didn't care.”

**//It can hide you in the dark. Or at night.**

**//And only if the coating is regular.**

**//But the black emission makes you look much less human, and thus, not like a target.**

**//Powerful undead beings leak black mana.**

**//You leaked black mana, Your Grace.**

**//Therefore, they took you for a necrarch.**

“So they completely saw me from the start. Are you going to give me the full data at any point in the future?”

**//Of course, Your Grace.**

**//But right now my priority is to save your life.**

**//You have been in this world for five days.**

**//This unit has operated in this world for over five hundred years.**

This was the driest 'shut up, kiddo' she had ever been subjected to.

The path interface is now available.  
You are now fully integrated into Nyil.

“Paths?”

**//Excellent.**

**//This will assist us.**

**//Think the word “path”**

“Is it like a job?”



You may choose a path from the following list. Every path represents a commitment to a concept. Paths empower your body and mind, allow you to grasp associated skills more quickly and to increase their potency.

You can only have one path until your current path evolves.

Paths can evolve to a more specialized concept, or several paths can combine into one. There is no wrong choice, as long as you follow your convictions.

Good luck out there!

Available paths:

- Empty palm warrior
- Scholar
- Accountant
- Explorer
- ...

**//Pick Black Hedge Witch.**

“Hey, can’t I read?”

**//Of course, Your Grace.**

**//Read, then pick Black Hedge Witch.**

Viviane grumbled and skimmed the list. There were a lot of choices, most of them related either to being a lightly-armed fighter, or doing a desk job. The only exotic one besides [Black Hedge Witch] was [Alchemist] and she had not come across a single herb in the past week.

You follow the path of the [Black Hedge Witch.]

“When do I get my cat and my hat?”

Mental stats are 1.2 times efficient when casting black-aligned spells (on average). Relevant skill acquisition is improved.

“More math.”

**//Do not concern yourself with those overmuch, Your Grace.**

**//They are points of references to make you understand the impact of committing to a path.**

“Is this a good path, at least?”

**//There are no bad paths, Your Grace, only bad choices.**

**//Hedge Witch is one of the lowest paths of dedicated spellcasters who explore black mana.**

**//The closest one is Black Apprentice, and it relies more on book study, while you rely on meditation and spoken guidance.**

**//This path is perfect in these circumstances.**

**//You will be able to upgrade it later.**

**//In the meanwhile, it will allow you to cast more and delay the extent of the poisoning.**

“I don’t feel any different.”

**//A path is a commitment over time.**

**//Like most things, it will bear fruit through your efforts, You Grace.**

**//This unit begs for your patience.**

**//This unit will guide you to greatness.**

**//In the meanwhile, we should move on.**

**//This unit sees that you recovered the medical supplies.**

“Yep!”

They opened it. There were bandages. Viv removed the dried up exterior and found that the inner fabric was still serviceable for some of them. That was a small miracle. She also found bottles of glass that had contained antivenoms and tonics at some point in the distant past, now evaporated. The scissors and scalpel were a nice touch, but the real find was a minuscule crystal vial with a wax stopper. It still contained a dense red liquid.

“What is that thing?”

**//This is a dragonblood potion.**

**//It is not actually made from dragon blood.**

“Awww.”

**//The potion will temporarily turn whoever drinks it into a physical juggernaut.**

**//It will also exhaust them.**

**//And potentially make their heart explode.**

“A rather unfortunate side effect.”

**//Yes. Please do not drink it.**

**//Now, we should go. Walk towards that lone peak over there.**

“I thought I was supposed to leave the Heartlands from the south?”

**//That is correct.**

**//However, your priority now is to leave the fallout zone and lower your mana poisoning.**

**//We must also avoid inhabited lands.**

**//Otherwise, you will waste too much time avoiding conflict.**

“When will you teach me how to blast undead?”

**//All the dark mana you currently wield energizes undead creatures.**

“Huh. How about, errr, influencing them? Pushing them away?”

**//Any spell other than stealth I could teach you would lower your chances of survival.**

“What!? Why?”

**//They would give you the illusion that you stand a chance in direct combat.**

**//That is currently not the case.**

“Pffft. Killjoy. When do I blast stuff?”

**//Soon.**

“I’ll hold you to that.”

**//This unit is pleased that you subscribe to the idea of obtaining the genocidal maniac skill.**

“Hey!”

Viv’s interface.

Current status:

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

Mana distribution:

- Black 76%

Current attunement: 5.21%

Physical		Mental	
Power	11	Focus	27
Finesse	16	Acuity	28
Endurance	19	Willpower	28

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Advanced 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 4
Small blades	Beginner 7	Meditative Trance	Intermediate 5
Mana manipulation	Beginner 1		

Paths:

- Black Hedge Witch (0)