

"Here you go. You will want to drink a vial in one gulp every time you have a headache. The effects should be instant." Reina handed the elder elf man a bundle of ten restoration potions. When he tried to fish into his pouch of gold, she put a hand up to stop him. "There's no need! I'm here to help anyone in need free of charge."

"You're too kind for your own good, Reina. Thank you so much!" The elf nodded as he exited the atelier.

Most of her ingredients and reagents were requisitioned free of charge from Grathir after all. She didn't have to pay a single coin. All they needed in return were her reports and findings.

...of which she had been lacking lately.

But it wasn't by choice. There was only so much she could write about centauri, goblin, and orc jizz. It had gotten to the point where she was just describing the taste and consistency, which they undoubtedly did *not* want to hear. Grand Alchemist Eileen might blow a lid if she sent another report regarding the lack of viscosity of centaur cum.

As tough as it sounded, Reina would soon have to start finding things to have sex with to acquire their ejaculate. Maybe a dragon would be interesting. She had heard reptilian beasts possessed two penises. That might be fun.

Have Neeks tag along as the sacrificial fuck goat for anything Reina didn't personally want to bang.

Leaving the atelier unintended for too long would be an issue. Perrwyn, the resident alraune, also needed looking after. If only there was some way to go to and from the atelier while out traveling.

"Hmm... I could requisition for a permanent teleportation circle. What about something more exciting instead?" Reina asked herself.

More complicated machinations have been created through magic and alchemy.

If she included in the next report how both sides would benefit, they might be more inclined to grant her request. Might as well start that report now.

As Reina began to write, the atelier door swung open.

"Welcome! Let me know if you need any help," Reina said. She received a nod in response.

The woman wore a heavy black cloak. Chest-length red hair spilled out of her cowl, which was pulled low to obscure her eyes like someone with a secret to hide. Reina didn't like these types. When it came to trading, a good look into one's eyes told her everything she needed to know about them. Whether they were worth bargaining with, making a return customer out of, or if they were a swindler underneath sheep's wool.

She didn't appear to be an elf, otherwise long ears would bulge under the cowl. What little skin Reina could make out on the hands and face was too smooth to be a beastborne. Human, perhaps? But an unnaturally dark skin shade suggested otherwise.

Fortunately, Reina was prepared. She had several elixirs on her belt, one of them being an elixir of strength. It would grant her the strength to easily overpower anyone save for a witch. A slumber vial was also an option to incapacitate aggressors. If those were to fail, the suspicious patron had yet to realize the plant in the corner of the room was actually an alraune.

Perrwyn tipped the scales for sure.

"Can I help you find something?" Reina offered the shady figure, who was browsing a barrel of rolled up parchment.

"I was merely passing by when I heard an alchemist dwelled in Vessyra. Thought I'd pay a visit. Your atelier is very modest. Cozy." The woman brought a parchment over and unfurled it on the counter.

"Thanks. Drew the blueprints up myself. Had a couple of handy goblins and orcs build it. This all you're buying?" she asked, pointing to the parchment.

"A writing utensil and two magic crystals," the woman said.

Reina raised a brow. She fetched the items nonetheless and was provided payment in return. At the very least, this person had money to spend.

However, once the exchange was made, the strange woman began to scribble on the parchment.

"What are you..." Reina gasped. Although she didn't know what the symbols scrawled on the parchment were, they were undoubtedly runes. Her time spent in Grathir, studying alchemy alongside those who practiced magic, led her to a single conclusion: this was no ordinary human; she was a witch.

Witches she had befriended at the Academy were all kind and extremely studious. Some to the point of fault. Following the end of the Second Crimson Wars, all known witches were expected to wear the crest of the academy to identify themselves. This one did not.

The woman's lips creased into a grin as they both came to the same understanding. Reina felt the witch's eyes burn into her from behind the hood.

"I am in search of something," she began, hovering a magic crystal above the parchment-turned magic scroll on the counter. "A powerful tool called the philosopher's stone. An alchemist such as yourself should know what that is, yes?"

How could Reina not?

The philosopher's stone was not just a tool, but also an ingredient. One capable of infinite possibilities, as well as creating an elixir of life that could grant immortality. But it was

only spoken of in hypotheticals. The stone itself was merely an idea, a wishful concept to give alchemists reason to continue pursuing their craft.

Such a thing was real?

"If you're looking for that, I can point you to the general store. They may have some books for that in the fiction section," Reina answered, cracking a smile.

She suddenly felt very alone. The space around her grew dark. All that existed was herself and the woman she believed was a witch. Even the counter separating the two was gone.

"Jokes fall flat if you're too stiff." She cackled.

The suffocating atmosphere vanished. Reina sucked in a deep breath and recomposed herself. The woman she was just speaking to was no longer in front of her.

Instead, she found her on the same side of the counter, browsing the potion and elixir racks while munching on magic crystals by the handful.

"Ah! My magic crystals! I only just got them restocked!" Reina screamed. She tried to catch the woman, but she disappeared into a mist and reappeared midair, inspecting the net of florae ingredients.

"You don't seem to have a stone here," she mumbled.

"What the..."

Reina jumped in an attempt to catch the witch, but she vanished and reappeared elsewhere again.

And again.

And again...

This went on for a whole minute until Reina ran out of breath.

"Perrwyn, a little help?" she asked between panting breaths.

The alraune yawned and came to life. She sprouted tentacles in an attempt to grab the woman, but they stopped only inches from her face. Instead of binding her, the appendages retracted completely and Perrwyn hid behind her petals.

"On second thought, you handle this," the alraune said.

"You... useless plant..." Reina muttered.

"Ahahaha! Relax. I shall pay for it all." The witch returned the sack of magic crystals. In which the quantity had reduced to half, along with a potato sack heap of gold.

*What's happening?* Reina wondered.

A second ago it felt as though she was going to be killed and robbed. Now the witch seemed too harmless to even hurt a fly. It was like she had been placed into a state of complacency. Was it some sort of magic, or just the aura of playfulness the witch exuded?

"Who are you? What do you want?" she asked.

"Just a wandering witch. As for what I want, I've already told you— a philosopher's stone. Though it doesn't look like you have one in stock. A shame." The witch sighed.

"Ah, yes. A journeyman alchemist such as I surely has a spare casually lying around. Let me just check under my pillow! First of all, philosopher's stones can't exist in this world," Reina declared confidently.

"Then how do you explain this?" She revealed a thumb-sized, crimson stone that looked like it had bright red blood swirling inside it.

Reina swallowed her words. She couldn't believe her eyes. She *felt* it. Like how one would feel the presence of another living being next to her. A real philosopher's stone. If she had something like that, the possibility of creating new alchemical concoctions would be endless.

"If you have it, why are you still searching?" Reina asked.

"Because I need more, and before you ask— Yes, there are more. Several had manifested themselves in Talmora when the Second Crimson Wars ended. If you find one, inform me by placing a magic crystal on this spell scroll. I will make it worth your while."

"But—"

The witch vanished into mists. Left in her place on the counter was the spell scroll, the bursting sack of gold, and a perfectly round, cloudy purple gem.