

Cat out of Bag.

Since the botched hunting trip it was clear that the siblings needed more time and experience before they could have some modicum of independence and create a sense of security for Alicia. As for Alice she was more nonchalant than one would expect but it didn't mean she was completely unconcerned. In the wild once the spiderlings grow to a certain size hatch they would disperse by various methods, the mother in this case left them their own devices in the best case and in the worst case might try to cannibalize them. Whether they lived or died was no longer a concern afterwards. This callous behaviour was correlated with the large quantity of offspring numbering in hundreds and the relatively small effort needed after fertilization depending on the species of the spider. Compared to hundreds, two was a tiny number. Understandably this meant Alice was more caring than any other in regards to spiders yet what runs in the blood is hard to overcome.

Though thanks to Alicia's influence she has become much more empathetic even if others don't see it that way. Although normally known for her inexpressive coldness, recently her expression has become more lively if still a bit subtle for the common man. And before she noticed it Alice seemed to have 'regained' her lost leg, of course asking the owner themselves netted in more confusion. However if one were to examine the timeline of events leading up to the restored limbs, the only notable occurrence was...

"The twins huh... but why... It wasn't a physical problem, otherwise Regeneration would have fixed it. So that leaves out mental problems... Well Anna and Goldia were the biggest wish of her life, I guess now that her dream is fulfilled she's feeling more whole, literally. Whatever it was plaguing her, it's gone now..."

In an early morning Alicia was near the village of verdun along with the siblings, additionally Ash was lightly dressed in his training garbs as the reason for this gathering...

- "They have potential, especially the energetic one. She reminds me of something... anyway that being said I'm not too sure about the other one. She's better off away from the chaos of the battlefield."

It was obvious that the two needed some training thus Alicia sought out her teacher to take them under their wings. Downplaying the sudden

appearance of the siblings was a challenge but eventually everyone silently agreed to just carry on as usual. But seeds of wonder and speculations were already planted deeply in their minds and although not explicitly told many had correctly guessed their origins. Yet one secret remained that baffles them all, the question of how...?

- "So you'll accept?"
- "It is the least I can do."
- "Do you need help with anything? It is a bit rude to just ask of you something without returning the favor."
- "It's really nothing, p-"

Despite the stern expression on his aged face Alicia saw an inkling of want within.

- "Hold it, you don't need to be modest right now it's going to be a waste of both of our time. I know you have something on your mind, just spit it out."

>Acquisition requirements met.

>Cold reader earned.¹

Telepathy	
Extrasensory communication through existing connection.	
Higher levels improve effective range of communication without connection.	
Rank VIII: 1536 meters	
{ Flora-empathy } Ability to communicate with any flora element.	{ Cold reader } Read surface level thoughts and emotions.

'What the... well it can wait...'

After a brief moment of internal incongruence, with his head hung low the old corporal managed to croak out a sentence.

- "It is no secret that our food situation is in dire straits. The milk from the thundergoats you have entrusted to us helps greatly. We wouldn't dare think about feeding on them."

'Ah... well I don't think Ramiel cares too much about that but let's not go to those depths for now.'

¹ [Cold reading](#).

- "We have tried many things to allay the problem but we have no lasting solution that works. It is disgraceful to-"
- "Stop right there. I understand what you're saying I'll figure something out."
- "I'm most tha-"
- "Yes yes I get it, anything else?"
- "Nothing for now."
- "Who should I talk to get more details?"
- "The ranger captain."

'Faenas huh... that's perfect, if I recall correctly she wanted to see me it's about time I gave her a visit.'

- "Then please take care of Anna from now on."
- "Of course."

After a small odyssey of asking for her whereabouts around the elven village she learned that Faenas was at her home.

'I should have tried her door first before going around ah who cares now.'

When she tapped on the door a few times, she came to the entrance with thumping steps, undetectable to those without Pallesthesia or Presence detection. The Elven girl in her uniform - as if she was about to go out - seemed surprised to see her.

- "Ah! Alicia I just came in, sorry I don't have tea... or the fire ready."
- "No need to, I heard you did some investigating on new food sources?"

The ambiguous look on her face implied that the previous excursions weren't all too successful

- "That... Well, it was mostly on halt but with the recent low of activity in the forest I was considering resuming that project. Did something happen?"
- "I heard from Ash that you need a helping hand?"

Hearing about Alicia's offer, her whole face seemed brighten up.

- "Seeing how you dealt with those man-eaters, I would love to have you as my escort, if you don't mind protecting someone like me."
- "Sure, why not. When are we going out then?"
- "Give me only a few seconds to prepare then we'll be off."

She started darting from one place to another stopping only to grab the things that she needs before dashing off to somewhere else.

- "Do you mind taking a detour to the mountains?"
- "Hm? What for?"
- "Dryssia asked for a certain flower... I think it was called tod... something..."
- "Toddypops? I know them, their strong smell attracts the attention of many beasts."

She stopped and hesitated upon seeing a certain wooden figure seemingly lost deep thoughts, while she was gathering her belongings for the trip. Before Alicia could make out what it was she was so intently staring at she quickly snatched it up and put it in her sling bag.

- "What was that?"
- "Just my pastime."

« Cold Reader »

↳ L Surprise... Excitement... Embarrassment... Curiosity... 1

"That's how it feels huh, it's almost like I'm mirroring these emotions. Good thing it can tell which ones are mine and which ones are from someone else's otherwise it would get confusing real quick... This could come in helpful in the future... I just need to find some use for it... Though I can't say this skill respects privacy... Is it because I don't have privacy in my head with Alice hanging around? You have some sick sense of humor, 'Skill'."

>Correction. Educement belonging to a Skill.

'And you're not helping my case either!'

- "I'm ready now."
- "Are you sure your patrols are fine without their captain?"
- "I have officers under me who can handle any small problems while I'm absent. You've met them before actually, Iavea, Mirtil and Droria."
- "Ah the trio that follows you around, one of them messed up their leg back then. Is she okay?"
- "Eheh, she recovered completely, but I don't know how she would react to being remembered as 'messed up legs'."
- "Trust me she doesn't have it as bad as I have."

The food scouring trip was accompanied by pleasant conversations about their day to day lives, held up from every now and then by the occasional attacks from aggressive creatures and the perusal of other bounties of the forest. In order to make room for all the things she has to

bring back, Faenas was packing relatively light. The scarce a few arrows she brought along in her quiver meant after every encounter she would have to pull them out to reuse. Her sling bag filled up in a hurry with more and more forage, necessitating her to put some of it into her quiver. Apparently where Alicia was headed Faenas found some fungi in the caverns near the area that seemed promising for cultivation but before she could collect some to sample the giant viper that resided in the cave started to notice her presence in its den.

- "Dryssia was having trouble with that too and you have food issues... I think I know a solution for both these problems."
- "I hope it's not what I think it is..."
- "The secret ingredient is murder."

Low sigh escaped her as she found herself to be right, when she didn't want to be.

- "I knew it... Are you sure?"
- "Well as long as what I was told is true, yes."
- "Told? The Swülde?"
- "The head-hunter from the troll tribes."
- "Trolls?"

From her looks it was clear that it was her first time hearing about them.

- "Never heard of them?"
- "No, they're probably not native these lands."
- "Apparently they led a nomadic lifestyle until recently. Also they have great hunters."
- "I see..."

Faenas' steps slowed down as she thought about something...

- "Is something wrong?"
- "Un, Nothing."

They had exited the sylvan shades of the forest and found themselves in the rugged wilderness near the base of the mountain ranges, closer to their objective.

< Olfactory >

- "Alcohol...? No, Spirit with something sweet?"
- "Do you mean rum? Ah we're close then, that's what toddypops smell like... Strange I don't smell them though."
- "You want to go check it out?"

- "Your sense of smell is the best lead we have so lead on."

Few minutes of walking later the two could make out a rocky hill in the distance and the alcoholic scent intensified with each step taken closer to it. Eventually Alicia saw the cave opening in question, The signs of presence of the giant viper was all over the place ranging from the subtle to obvious, from broken twigs and slithering trails to old shed skin rubbed off on exposed rocks.

- "You have a plan right?"
- "First I'm going to check if it's in its den, then..."
- "Then what?"
- "Well if it's not in it, we can just collect enough to hopefully have for Dryssia to grow more."
- "And if it's in there?"
- "We bring it out and kill it."
- "How exactly are we going to do that?"
- "We'll get there when we get there."
- "You're not inspiring a whole lot of confidence in me..."
- "It'll be fine, trust me. Do you know what Todd... something looks like right?"
- "I do, what of it?"
- "Well "
- "You'll know I found the Viper when loud belligerent noises are coming out of the cave."

The temperate caves were pitch black and deathly quiet save for the whistling sounds of the wind outside and drips of water flowing down the stalactites splashing against the cave floor. Despite the cramped confines of the interior, due to excessive rubbing against the rough scales of the viper the limestone floor and stalagmites had become smoothened over time giving them a rather likeable appearance. Regardless of the homey interior Alicia proceeded carefully in the dark. Although she was tempted to create fire for light, considering what could be in here she decided not to, relying only on Pallesthesia for navigation. While she was focusing more intently on picking up something with, it felt as if the whole cave was about to collapse before suddenly stopping. Yet insides of the cave were serene as if nothing had happened.

'I guess there's somebody home already... It would be a mission success if I can find the fungi and get out without an incident but... As great as Pallesthesia is unless something makes movement I'm practically blind to it, while I can 'see' by making my own drumming vibrations and get a sense of where everything is I'm also telling where I am to whoever's listening... Not something I want to do... As for the viper... they have great night vision... rather infrared heat vision, if I make a light with fire I would be like the sole firefly in the pitch black night another way of announcing where I am...'

As she drew closer the dank smell of the caverns were overcome with the smell of blood and she could make out intermittent shuffling through the ground...

'Excellent... It's feeding... While vipers are feeding or just after they have eaten they're mostly immobile. They're not the fastest of predators due to their size and since they swallow their prey whole, that's like a giant boulder in their belly dragging them down. I should change my angle of approach though... I was starting to like this floor too... Hope I haven't forgotten how to be a spider...'

Without the viper's scales to sand it down the roof of the caverns were rough as they come but it also provided excellent cover for Alicia's approach and the uneven surface was no deterrent for her; rather it was much easier to cling onto them even though they were moist with water condensate. Navigating through the maze of stalactites she found the Viper in a narrow passage, the prior 'earthquake' she felt was from the serpent springing forwards to further swallow its unfortunate victim.

「Firebolt」

As it was preoccupied in its feast Alicia instead probed what its reaction to fire would be using small flames. Although it was wary of the sudden appearance of light, it quickly simmered down and continued to devour the last of the paralyzed food. Illumination provided by the flame was enough for her to faintly make the outlines of fungus that grew along the cave walls. The warm glow of the flames revealed a small part of the viper; much of its body was hidden in the dark, deeper in the cave. Reading the vibrations of its breath and subtle movements Alicia judged that it was much shorter than she expected 8-9 meters was her guess... Vipers that relied on their venom were much shorter than their constricting cousins who could reach up to double the size and length of the vipers.

'Chanterelles... Oysters... Morchella I think... and some others I can't even recognize what is that stringy ball thing...?'² Let's just get what I can reach and dip before this thing starts getting photosensitive.'

< Weaver >

With a silken sack she gathered as many samples from the walls without provoking the viper. Because she was hanging onto the roof and walls of the caverns, her lengthy hair kept blocking her vision due to gravity prompting her to messily bundle it up with silk strands. Bones and some indiscernible calcified remains of viper's prey were abundant in areas densely populated with fungi.

'These are most likely some of the unfortunate victims that wandered into this den, fungi are just the hitchhikers feeding off of whatever is left of them. It's going to be tough to harvest them consistently with the viper, but without the viper the fungi will stop growing since they won't have a food provider. You live today snake... You live today... I'll just hope Dryssia can grow these... Also don't mushrooms usually grow on trees, why are they so abundant here?'

>Retrieving data...

>Report: Flesh found in the digestive tracts of local rodents texturally match specimens found by administrator.

>Hypothesis: Possibility 74.12%

>Considerable number of rodents regularly feed on Fungi found in forests causing declining populations of fungi.

>Cause of fungi thriving in the current cave system likely results from the following factors.

>Presence of a predator that preys on rodents.

>Predator unlikely to consume fungi.

'Ah those giant rats... Makes sense they chew pretty much anything that they can bite... But when did you do a detailed dissection on a rat?'

>Data sourced from kindred units' consumption.

'So even they don't have privacy huh. Wait, I never see them eating though?'

>Spiritual lifeforms do not require sustenance from food. The act is mostly instinctual with possible motivator being satisfaction.

'Does that mean they do it because they want to?'

>Assumption correct.

² [Lion's mane.](#)

‘That’s another thing I didn’t know. Anyway I think I’m done here, I should head back out before Faenas gets worried.’

Awkwardly holding a netful of fungi upside down she made her way out of the caverns, making sure to create an ample distance between herself and viper before returning rightside up. Closer to the entrance, following the distant light dyed in amber at the end of the cave, she could smell the fresh air. When she exited the cave, rays of the sun stung her unprepared eyes adapted to the dark briefly blinding her. She could see Faenas sitting on a tree branch fiddling with something wooden in her hands. Waving her free hand to get her attention, Faenas seemed momentarily startled to see Alicia in her original form. After stuffing whatever she had into her sling bag she jumped down, gracefully landing. Alicia could smell the sharp scent of alcohol about her.

- “Seems like everything went alright, that is quite the haul you have there. I figure you’ve dealt with the viper?”

Catching the sight of her harvest Ranger captain seemed to be beaming with joy.

- “More or less, it was too happy chowing down on its meal to notice me, as for dealing with it... not so straightforward. It seems that these mushrooms thrive because of the viper’s presence. If I kill it the fungi will eventually be wiped out. So if you’re planning to use this cave’s mushrooms as a sustainable food source, you’ll have to figure out something else.”

And just like that the glimmer of hope seemed to snuff out in front of her eyes.

- “Ah, what a shame...”

While she was lost in her disappointment, a promise of deliverance came from the messenger who carried the ill news...

- “But I think I might have an idea. Dryssia could be able to cultivate and make a farm out of these.”
- “Really! We’ll be saved if that’s true!”
- “Before we get to that step we need to figure out if they’re safe to eat first.”
- “Hm... I know a safe place. While you were in there I took some time to get what you’ve asked, you didn’t specify which part of it so I brought them whole.”
- “Ah thanks! Toddle-...”

- “Toddypop. When I was up there I saw an abri³ we could use near a small bluff.”
- “Great, then let’s get a move on.”

From underneath a rocky shelter of a bluff, the sound of crackling firewood echoed into the twilight and the enticing aroma of roasted mushrooms wafted through the air. Possessing toxic tolerance from advanced toxicology, Alicia - after some difficulty - volunteered herself to the position of food tester. After trying small nibbles from different parts of the many mushrooms she gathered with the help of Alma she separated the edible fungi from the poisonous. Unsurprisingly many of them were unsuitable for consumption save for few species that were edible raw.

With the hope that kiss from flames and the being cooked will make them more palatable, Alicia roasted them over a small campfire skewered with a stick. Few of them were beyond saving with their toxic nature being made even more intense with heat. Naturally the process of cooking takes time leading into idle chatter.

- “Again, we’re indebted to you... What’ll we do to return favor...”
- “No need to make a big deal out of it, It was a useful endeavor for me too.”

Picking up a cooling stick of mushrooms she pulled out a tepid piece of an unusual mushroom. It’s color was pale white yet after cooking it it took on a deep pink hue. With only a gentle bite the cap rich juices trapped within it’s flesh seeped out and tinged Alicia’s tongue with a vague taste of sugar and spice. As she chewed on the fungi, it’s texture and taste were wholly different from when she tried it raw when it was tough, leathery and sour. Though edible raw this particular one was much better when prepared with fire.

< Toxic Tolerance >

>New chemical compounds detected. Analysing... Standby...

For reference, according to Alma’s analysis, much of the edible mushrooms were rich in selenium, phosphorus, iron, copper, thiamine, folate, niacin, riboflavin and ascorbic acid among other things like proteins and calories.⁴ Half of them she didn’t know what it was, remembering her

³ Geological term for shelter-cave. Other names are; Bluff shelter, Crepuscular cave and Rockhouse.

⁴ From left to right order. Thiamine or B-1 vitamin, Folate or B-9 Vitamin, Niacin or B-3 vitamin, Riboflavin or B-2 vitamin and Ascorbic acid or Vitamin C.

younger sister who was in medical school might be able to tell her from before she had died...

- "Hm! You should try this one, it's way better than before."

Saying so she handed Faenas the skewer.

- "Thank you..."

It seems even she was taken aback by the exotic taste of the fungi.

- "You're right... I like it... Can I ask you something...? I've been thinking about this for a while now."
- "Yeah go ahead, what is it?"
- "I remember the day when we encountered the man-eaters. Being poisoned by them was the worst I've felt in my life. Going in and out of consciousness... I was afraid, as every time I lost consciousness I didn't know if I would ever wake up again. Reality blurring with fever dreams. Dream... I say... but they were all nightmares..."

Faenas' eyes seemed to lose their light as she recalled her dreams lost in deep thought.

- "But then my nightmares filled with fear and anxiety had ended and a new dream had started. In that dream I was lost somewhere I didn't know. I saw a cloudy light in the distance, I don't know why but I desperately yearned for that thing just out of reach. Then, maybe as if to answer my calls it came into view, a blinding white light. It enveloped me, cast away all my fears and banished the darkness. Something... sweet entered me, I could feel my limbs gaining strength again."

While proceeding with her story she abruptly stopped, her face was flushed, perhaps from the heat of the fire. Staring intently at Alicia. Feeling awkward she urged her to move on.

- "And then?"
- "Then... In the light I saw something... Someone... You... and ever since that day I occasionally have this dream at night..."

'I SHE WOKE UP DURING THE ANTIVENOM INFUSION!'

Hoping to brush over the embarrassing incident...

- "Eh hem, uh... Yeah quite the dream you've had... Wonder if it has any meaning?"

Without Alice's impassiveness, Alicia was terrible at hiding her inner thoughts from revealing themselves on her facial expressions.

- "Tell me..."

- "Eh! Uhm what...?"
- "They said you treated me... I want to know how."

"This is bad! this is bad! this is bad! Why's she acting like this..."

« Cold Reader »

↳ L Infatuation... Excitement... Enticement... Lust... 1

>Analysis complete.

>Cooking process altered chemical makeup of compounds.

>Presence of Psilocybin detected.

>Decreased responsiveness from default mode neural network.

>Heightened production of serotonin detected.

>Heightened Estrogen presence detected.

>Slow down of the limbic system detected.

'Yeah that's great, that doesn't make any sense to me!'

>Side effects of psilocybin related decreased activity from default mode neural network:

>Mild hallucination.

>Ego dissolution.

>Presence of hormones may correlate to increased sexual drive.

>Deceleration of the limbic system responsible for emotional responses results in loss of inhibition.

'How did that happen! I thought that mushroom was safe to eat!'

>Side effects may be present in subjects lacking resistance to chemical compounds.

'So she's high on what is basically hallucinogenic aphrodisiac! That explains her strange assertiveness... How do I snap her out of it...'

>Synthesis of counteragent possible.

'Not sure if I like that...!'

>Oral transfusion recommended.

'I knew it! Hey isn't there any other way?!'

>Subject's body will naturally clear out excess foreign chemicals.

'Seriously? It's between waiting it out or doing the exact same thing again?'

- "Heyy..."

Euphoric girl was intently staring at Alicia, before she could notice she had managed to get uncomfortably close to her.

- "Wh-What is it?"
- "Do it again..."
- "Do... what again...?"
- "That thing you gave me, I want it!"

'...You know what... if she wants it. Fine, I'll do it.'

>Synthesis has begun... Note: Effects may be delayed based on metabolic rate of the target.

With their faces so close to each other, oral administration could be started easily. Her calescent breath seemed to gently tickle her. Though Alicia did feel some prohibition as she felt like she was taking advantage of the situation, she quickly discarded the thought as Faenas affirmed that she wanted this, verbally. Though it didn't quite completely disappear as she didn't know if it was the chemicals or she herself that was talking at that time. Giving herself up to the slithering lead of the elven girl greedily ingesting the counteragent from her mouth, Alicia just closed her eyes and let whatever was happening fly.

After what seemed like a time spent felt in blissful eternity⁵, Faenas collapsed in restful sleep. What happened in the past few moments felt like a blur lost in throes of ecstasy⁶.

⁵ Also known as 30 minutes.

⁶ Screw you countess.