

There was a slow dripping noise. The kind of intermittent sound you might expect from flowing treacle. A more easily explicable noise was the low muttering, and the soft rustling of unrolling fabric.

A woman was bandaging her arm, thick, pale green blood dripping slowly from the bindings. Lithe and athletic, she seemed stretched compared to the human norm. This was, of course, because she wasn't human - she was an elf.

"Sunken temples," she muttered. "Are never worth it. Never."

Her name was Azira, and she was Thaloren, the branch of the elves that rejected technology and magic. She was a champion of nature - a wilder - born to the power of slime. Mages called them Oozemancers, mocking their hatred of all forms of the arcane, which the wilders sought to defeat at every turn. Just days ago, she had been a Ziguranth too. Among that society of distrustful mage hunters, she had been known as the Paragon.

She had been many things. Not many were left.

She stood up, letting the torn sleeve of her green-stained jacket fall back down over her bandaged arm, and she looked around with distaste. She saw ruined pillars. Broken walls, like the one she'd sat upon to bandage her wound. Barely four feet above her head was water, held back by a shimmering field of magic.

She scowled at the thought.

It had made her skin crawl as she passed through it, but at this point, she was inclined to prefer magic to searching for pockets of trapped air while desperately swimming downwards, fighting off curious imps and oversized squid as she did.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder, the slimy strands framing her ivory skin as she began to move forwards. Her hands reached into her pockets, drawing out a pair of pale stones, moss growing on their every surface. With a strange hum, one that seemed to come not through the ears but from the listener's own bones, they began to glow - one green and one purple - until a bright, long arc of energy formed from each of them.

She sniffed once, derisively, as if showing her disapproval for all of creation. Then she turned, and began to head deeper into the ancient ruins. Before she had to travel too far, she saw what she'd been looking for for almost an hour. A spiral staircase, downwards into the ruins below. This was... suburbs. But down there was something. It was just a shame that something was guarding the staircase.

It wasn't as bad as the last horror she'd met. That one had resembled nothing more than a vortex of blades, which she couldn't even approach without lacerating herself. At least this one had flesh to hit. In fact, it didn't seem to have much else besides flesh. It was bloated. Obese,

perhaps. The proportions of a baby, blown up to human size, its mewling cries turned into howls that grated on the mind.

Azira swung her hands together. A soft green glow and a soft purple glow collided, growing stronger as the two mindstars neared. As they crashed together, there was a discordance that rang through her entire body, like swinging a mace into a steel door. Natural and psionic energies united, and from the bright glow a pale green... glob shot forth. It struck the horror in the gut - not that there was much else to strike. Its howling went higher, a keening of what must have been pain. Within moments, the slime had melted away the largest share of the thing's body, and the keening faltered and stopped.

She trod on its remains as she went down the stairs, wondering what she'd find. Whatever it was, it had been put there by the Sher'tul. Those that ruled the world before today's races had even learnt to speak. If nothing else, it would be worth a fortune. But what she hoped to find was a weapon. Or a secret.

She began down the stairs, musing on the possibilities. A weapon would be useful. Both to use against the madmen who had seized the Ziguranth, and to fight the monsters who made the madness look like reason. A secret would be better, in the long term. A weapon would help her now, but she'd fought with the powers Eyal had given her for all this time, and she could keep on doing so. But lost knowledge would change the entire system.

She took the final step, and across a dank hallway, saw what was waiting for her. "Another horror." she said, dully, the blades of her mindstars shimmering back into existence. "Of course."

Brown fluids melted together, rising upwards to a vaguely humanoid outline, albeit with no head. Black eyes opened where the chest should be, blinking with displeasure at the light she carried with her. Tentacles rose up - always with the tentacles - until fifteen eyes blinked in confusion. Warts and boils grew and burst endlessly, like bubbles on the surface of some putrid stew.

Azira did not look impressed. She looked a little more impressed when three tentacles met in front of the beast, and a beam of pure mana shot out, the violent, purple blast twisting the air. She swore, diving sideways to cling to the wall. Moments later, the wall shifted, something hard and white stone thrusting out from it to throw her towards the monstrous creature. Tiny, knobby spikes of... bone.

"How... predictable." she hissed in disdain, even as the twisted weapons threw her into the waiting creature. She was ready, though, and the psiblade of her left star swung around, meeting a tentacle halfway.

The beast didn't scream. Screaming would be hard, with the lack of a mouth. Or head. Or... anything other than a vaguely humanoid torso with tentacles. What it did do was take several steps backwards.

Azira huffed.

"Bone and tentacles." she didn't seem to care about the dozen tiny cuts on her back, and the slowly dripping blood. At her feet, pooling blood was bubbling. There was more blood there than anything could lose and live. And, pale though her blood had been to start with, it had not been quite this green.

The pool erupted, growing in volume a hundred times over as it formed a strange, bubbling, oozing mass, throwing itself at the beast, distracting it as the mindstars ground together. Azira spread her arms wide, and spores fluttered out, blanketing the area. Where they touched the blighted creature, they hissed, and it burnt, screeching silently. It stumbled back on the pseudopodian tentacles that served for legs. In the moment this gave her, Azira crouched, and jumped forwards. Mindstars flashed, and another tentacle fell to the floor.

It didn't seem to bother the amorphous creature, though. It merely grew a new pair with a sickening noise - admittedly, sickening noises were an Oozemancer's daily bread - and promptly grabbed her, squeezing her tight.

She gave out a strangled yelp. Not from the squeezing, but from the blighted, corrupted magic, running into her. It felt *wrong*, the anathemic energies interfering massively with her own nature. The blades of her weapons flickered as she struggled to hold her focus on them, arms trapped behind the beast.

The blades rotated inwards, and her arms stabbed in. The blades came through the beast's front, and into Azira, who didn't even wince. She pulled the blades outwards, hard, slicing the beast in two, and leaving a pair of unsightly gashes in her own torso, already sealing up from the wilder's saplike blood.

The elf took a deep breath, standing still for some minutes as she looked around. It was a stone antechamber of some kind, a doorway lying in front of her. She frowned at the sight of it, before stepping forwards. After all, she had the key.

She pulled it from her pack - a small, slightly glowing orb, passed onto her by an old friend by the name Emily. She held it up to the door, stepping over the corpse distastefully. The orb began to pulse, and the door vanished. So too did the path to the lake behind her, and she tensed, ever distrustful, a blade forming yet again from her remaining weapon. But nothing tried to kill her yet, which was a pleasant oddity for her. With no idea what she'd find, she stepped forwards through the doorway. The stone was different here, no longer the neatly hewn bricks of the ruins, but something that looked more like sculpted marble. There was a corridor on her right,

going who knew where. She decided to go past it, and found a small room, the path running through the middle and out the other side. On either side of the path was a glowing partition.

The partition made her uneasy. But it didn't make her spine itch, which meant it wasn't magic. It disturbed her that it didn't disturb her, though. In her experience, if it looked like magic, it was probably best to destroy it first and ask questions later.

But she'd moved on from that. She wasn't one of them anymore.

So she walked on, and came into a large room. It was roughly square, with several alcoves on each wall. There were four paths into the room, counting the one she'd entered by. Each one stood in a small alcove at the centre of a room. The others seemed locked, although she was fairly sure these doors would vanish if she approached them, the same as the first had. Regardless, she was more interested in the blue orb in the centre of the room. She began to approach it, moving slowly, circling about it to see from as many angles as she could. Quickly, she began to see strange contours on its surface, and to recognise them - that was the shape of the continent she stood on, Maj'Eyal.

But at the bottom, she saw a hole, where presumably there should be an icecap. Presumably there wasn't really a hole in the world. She approached it, cautious, but fairly confident it wasn't about to grow tentacles and attack her. The hole was an irregular shape, oddly patterned. Familiar.

She knelt down, looking more closely, and something clicked in her mind.

Wordlessly, she reached into her bag. What she drew forth was a rod with a strangely patterned tip. Adventurers all over Eyal called it a rod of recall, as it was useful for escaping to a safe place. She pushed the rod into the hole.

And once again, something clicked.

Immediately the room brightened, the doors vanishing. An apparition formed, a slightly transparent, blue thing. It was passingly similar to the blighted creature outside, although there was the suggestion of a head, and it was pleasantly lacking in warts and boils. It certainly didn't feel the same. And more importantly, it spoke.

"Master."

Its voice wasn't the kind of voice that used the ears, seeming instead to appear directly in her brain.

"...master?" she queried. "Why am I your master?"

"You possess a rod. You are the master." it replied, simply. Azira frowned, eyes narrowing.

"...right. Where is this? What are you?"

"This is Yiilkgur, fortress of the Sher'tul. I am the shadow, here to serve you."

"Yes, you already said I am the master. If someone else brings a rod, is it theirs too?" she asked, unsure.

"No. You have laid claim."

Azira gave this simple statement the consideration it deserved, remaining silent for several moments.

"So... I now own a sher'tul fortress. It is mine, as is whatever lies in the other rooms?"

"Everything here is yours, although we lack power for the greater functions as of yet."

There was another, long pause. Then Azira smiled. It was a tired smile, but one of triumph.

"...okay. I can work with this."

==> Emily