

The season of spring was currently in full swing in Azurvale. It was without a doubt one of the most beautiful times of year, as it was when the Hylt trees were in their full bloom. The predominantly green canopy that loomed over the elven capital had given way to countless light blue flowers of varying sizes and shapes. Colorful azure petals drifted lazily on the wind almost the entire time, giving the city a mysterious atmosphere that could not be seen anywhere else in the world.

Granted, that wasn't entirely a good thing. Though beautiful enough to be the city's namesake, this 'weather' played havoc on people living on solid ground. Some days the loose flowers piled up so high up that they were almost like snow, only with less melting and more rotting. It was therefore also a time of the year when Alchemists enjoyed a boom in business, mostly in the form of allergy medicine and specialized herbicides. The loose petals also had some minor applications of their own, such as material for paints and novelty food coloring.

All in all, it would've been a perfectly standard spring, if not for one black sheep among the twelve great Hylt trees. Ambrosia had successfully cross-pollinated with Lavender the mountain alraune, resulting in the flowers that adorned her branches having a bright pink coloration. The fruits and nectar she would continue to produce this year would be especially sweet and fragrant, of which Boxy approved greatly. It was therefore decided that Lavender would become a permanent resident of the dungeon as its new dungeon master. That way the dryad could cross-pollinate with her whenever she wished and the shapeshifter would have someone to manage the place whenever it was out and about.

As for Azurvale's citizens, they were surprisingly delighted by this turn of events. The shower of pink petals got mixed receptions, but the higher-quality produce was nothing to complain about. The sudden change wasn't as jarring as one might expect, as Hylt tree blossoms were known to sometimes deviate from the standard blue hues of their species. And considering that particular tree was also the one where the home of the Hero of Chaos was located, this sort of outcome was almost to be expected. As for the purists and traditionalists that hated the change, they still had a whole eleven trees to satisfy them, so everyone had something to enjoy during the spring season.

Well, everyone who was in Azurvale, at the very least. Unfortunately for one elven Druid, however, she was as far from that capital as one could get. Her name was Opia, and she was currently wading through a jungle in the southeastern part of Velos, the continent that lay south of the landmass of Atica where she was born. The climate here was vastly different, though it could be summed up in three simple words.

"Fuuuuck, it's hoooooot!"

Opia let out a groaning complaint as she wiped her sweaty brow with one of her arms. Her shoulder-length dark green hair felt unbelievably sticky, so much so that her bangs were practically glued to her forehead. At least they weren't long enough to cover her similarly colored eyes, otherwise she wouldn't be able to see a single thing in this damnable jungle. Her

face as a whole, though twisted in a displeased frown, was on the cute side, not to mention surprisingly youthful for her age.

Her body, however, was not. Though her looks suggested she was an elf in the first half of her twenties, her lower half had too much padding for that to be true. She was in an overall great shape thanks to her extremely active lifestyle, but that shape still manifested itself as wide hips, fleshy thighs and an eye-catchingly full rump. The combined thickness of her lower body strained against her beige shorts as if it was trying to rip them apart. Her upper half was far less fortunate, as the two lumps on the front of her short-sleeved yellow blouse were underwhelming at best.

Though the Druid appeared to be lightly armored by adventurer standards, it was almost unavoidable in this sweltering heat. Even though the sun's rays were blocked by the overabundant vegetation, the humidity in the air made heat stroke and dehydration almost as big a threat as they were in the desert. It was possible to find enchanted gear capable of making the climate more bearable while also offering superb protection, but Opia wasn't made of money. She could barely even afford the extra-strength bug repellent one needed to avoid being constantly bothered by insects, arachnids and other tiny critters.

Then again, one could argue that the thing keeping her safe from those vermin was actually the hydra hatchling she was riding. Though it was far from fully grown, this quadruped reptile was already larger than a horse, allowing its owner to ride its wide back with no issue. Well, other than the lack of a saddle. The beast's rough green scales were hardly the most comfortable, and the shocks it sent through her body with every step were enough to make her generous behind jiggle constantly. She was definitely going to be sore later, but the barebackness of the ride couldn't be helped.

After all, she had only met the creature less than an hour ago. She immobilized it with her Druid magic and used her Monster Tamer Skills to make it into her pet. It was a bit tricky bringing the monster under her control since it had three of those snake-like heads, a number that would increase all the way up to nine as it grew older and larger. The affectionately named 'Spittles' would need a lot more training before it was completely subservient, but for the moment it was obedient enough to let her ride it without too much of a fuss.

That wasn't why Opia had tamed the beast though. Though it was large enough to trample any rampant vegetation in its path and proceed through the thick undergrowth with little difficulty, using it as a means of transportation was just an added bonus. In reality, the elven Druid had made Spittles her pet because she thought it looked adorable. It was an unpopular opinion to say the least, as this jungle's hydras looked as hideous as they were vicious by normal enlightened standards. Even the local raptors thought of them as unpleasant to look at, despite them having scaly hides of their own.

This wasn't the case as far as this oddball elf was concerned though. Ever since she was a little girl she found bugs, lizards, spiders and other potentially venomous critters to be fascinating and cute rather than disturbing and/or disgusting. Some would say she merely adopted that

affection as a means of dealing with being bullied for being the only elf girl in a human village, and she had a hard time disputing that theory. Nevertheless, that fascination still led her to becoming a Monster Tamer on her fifteenth birthday and pursue a career focused on caring for dangerous magical beasts.

This was over two decades ago though, and though her love for the ‘adorably grotesque’ remained, her Job focus had shifted tremendously. During her many years as a mercenary, Opia found her true calling was that of a Druid. One that was an expert on acids, toxins and diseases, both when using them in combat or defending against them. It was worth noting that the dangerous substances she worked were not the alchemical kind, but the ones conjured with magic or secreted by monsters.

That was why she was still a Monster Tamer, even if she mostly used it in more of a supportive or recreational capacity. Both it and the Druid Job relied on the Natural Affinity (AFF) and INT Attributes, so the synergy between them was good. Especially considering the so-called ‘venomancer’ could capture and train various venomous creatures. Which, incidentally, also included jungle hydras. The one she was riding was even named after its inborn ability to spit malicious toxins at things, with each head possessing a strain with its own effects. Of the three, Opia’s favorite was the middle one without question. Its venom had hallucinogenic properties that made for some mind-blowing experiences. Or nightmarishly bad trips, depending on the dosage and the victim’s constitution.

Getting high on hydra venom had to wait for later though, as Opia was currently on the job. The local Mercenary Guild had posted a Quest regarding the investigation and cleansing of some sort of degenerative disease in this area. It was perfect for this elven Druid, given her area of expertise, and she wasn’t about to complain about getting her hands on Spittles. It was a bit of a shame the hungry tyke had eaten her pet basilisk before she could subdue it, but she wouldn’t lose any sleep over its death.

In the end it was a monster, and though their strength and tenacity had to be respected, getting pointlessly attached to them was just idiotic.

“Hrrrssss!”

“What is it, boy?”

Spittles suddenly let out a gurgling hiss and lowered its heads warily, prompting Opia to raise her guard. The unseen threat showed itself to be a half rotten humanoid corpse, which ran out of the thick foliage while screaming its lungs off. Spittles hissed and lunged forward while turning itself to the side. Its body slammed the ghoul with its flank to knock it to the ground, then proceeded to stomp it flat under its webbed front feet.

“Oww! Damn, I need to get you a saddle.”

Opia rose up from the muddy ground while cursing and rubbing her aching butt. Though the hydra hatchling had been kind enough to dispatch the living corpse, it did so completely on its own. Its sudden movement caught the Druid by surprise, throwing her and her luggage off its back. Such embarrassing things were bound to happen though, as it was still a fresh capture. It had to be trained over time if it was to become more obedient and mindful towards its master, so for the moment riding it around and letting it deal with small fry on its own terms was all it was good for.

“Ugh, undead,” Opia groaned some more. “‘Mysterious disease’ my ass. Should’ve known it was the freaking Blight.”

The elf picked up her backpack and intricately carved wooden staff off the ground and warily proceeded forward with Spittles following behind. Her suspicions were confirmed when, after pressing on for about forty more meters, the vegetation around her turned from lush and green to yellow and dry for no good reason. A couple more dozen steps forward saw the jungle become a blackened and rotting wasteland, with a foul stench permeating the air.

Just as the appearance of that ghoul indicated, the plague of undeath known as Blight was indeed present here. Opia’s Skills were keeping her from suffering the ill effects the disease had on the living, but she knew symptoms like this when she saw them. No other disease killed flora and fauna alike in such an indiscriminate fashion. She then realized Spittles lacked her resistance to the supernatural sickness, so she turned around to put a protective Spell on it to keep it from growing weaker.

“Gas Mask!”

A bubble of faint green light enveloped one of the young hydra’s three heads, with the other two following suit when the elf finished recasting her Spell on each of them. Now that the air Spittles was breathing was being actively filtered by magic, it let out some pleased gurgling noises and stomped around a bit in approval. Opia reassuringly patted each of its necks with a small smile on her face before turning her attention back to the problem at hand.

Cleaning up a Blight infection by herself was not impossible, though it would take her a while. By her estimate the infected area would only be about two or three kilometers in diameter. She could easily get rid of the disease in a day or two through constant application of her Cleanse Air, Cleanse Water and Cleanse Soil Spells. Her Scourge Inoculation Skill would also make her restorative magic fortify the area against disease, preventing the Blight from spreading further for a limited time. The real problem here was that doing so would surely attract the attention of any and all undead in the area, which had to be eliminated anyway if she was to prevent the plague from resurging.

Dealing with those things was going to be the real challenge, as the undead’s unnatural physiology rendered them immune to most scourge-based magic, which was her specialty. Necrotic Wave, Plague Bomb, Sentient Toxin, Poisonous Gale, Petrification and a number of other ominous sounding Spells from the Desolation school of magic would be unusable. The

same went for a number of the Druid's active Skills, such as Degenerative Aura and Sapping Grasp.

Which wasn't to say she was helpless. She still knew some basic restoration and plant manipulation magic that would probably be useful, even if it wasn't trained too well. She also had a few caustic incantations like Acid Javelin or Corrosive Splash that could easily burn and melt away flesh and bone, regardless of whether it was already rotting or not. The downside was that those Spells took time to inflict damage and lacked the physical impact needed to push her targets back.

Long story short, since Opia was unable to use her debilitating poisons to provide herself with cover, there was very little stopping the undead from swarming her. As a Caster-type, being locked down in melee combat was extremely dangerous. It was why Druids typically teamed up with trusty companions, but she didn't really have any of those. She therefore considered postponing the Quest and going back to town to get backup from other mercenaries. It was certainly the safest route, though hardly the most profitable one.

Ultimately the question was whether Opia felt confident enough to tackle this problem by herself. Frankly speaking, as a Level 83 Druid and Level 42 Monster Tamer, she was already ahead of the power curve compared to the vast majority of adventurers she'd seen around these parts. She'd just run into an enemy she wasn't very good at dealing with. Besides, she wasn't completely alone since Spittles was with her. Granted, he was likely to just go on a rampage if an undead horde showed up, but he was large enough to be used as a distraction at the very least.

Before making her final decision, the pear-shaped elf looked down at the bracelet on her left wrist. It had the appearance of a golden snake with tiny rubies for eyes, which had wrapped itself around her limb and had bitten down on its own tail. It was her good luck charm, and had the very handy property of tightening itself whenever it sensed its wearer was in danger. Admittedly it hadn't done that at all when that ghoul showed up earlier, but that was because it had accurately judged a single low-class undead was no threat to her and her new pet. And given how it hadn't given a single warning sign this entire time, Opia felt encouraged to try and handle this by herself.

So she began scouring the Blighted zone's perimeter, looking to thin out the undead presence while purifying it with her magic. She ran into a few groups of zombified monsters and animals - mostly orcs, monkeys and the occasional feline monstrosity - but they were nothing she and Spittles couldn't handle. The skirmishing was actually proving to be a big help in training her new pet. Healing its wounds and curing its undead-inflicted afflictions was steadily showing it that Opia was a reliable ally that would look after it, making it more likely it would remain a good boy when things turned sour.

However, the elf's easy-going attitude disappeared the instant her wrist-mounted early-warning system tightened itself hard, digging into her skin. This timing was pretty bad, as she was still in the middle of melting down the latest pack of undead fodder she'd come across. To make

matters worse, the thing her lucky charm was sensing was exceptionally big, as evidenced by the loud thud of approaching footsteps. She somehow managed to mop up the stragglers in the next few second and create an opening to escape, but it was already too late.

The major threat revealed itself by bursting from some half-rotten foliage behind her. It was an undead hydra, one that had been a fully grown adult before it had died and was reanimated. Standing a roughly five meters tall and with six of its nine heads still intact, it was a much more intimidating sight than Spittles. The youngling itself admitted to that much by letting out an agitated-sounding gurgle and taking a few steps back. Its instincts, suppressed as they were by Opia's meddling, still told it that it was no match for this thing.

The elf was of the same mind. And now that Spittles had stopped thrashing about, she was able to leap onto its back and grip one of its necks for support.

"Don't just sit there, run!"

"HRRSSSHHH!"

Spittles didn't need to hear that instruction to know it needed to dash for its life, but it certainly helped put some spring in its step. It began fleeing in an extremely undignified manner while its older, bigger and deader 'uncle' gave chase while letting out a constant rumbling growl. It immediately became apparent this was not a race Spittles would win though. Even though the part-timer Monster Tamer's Logistical Legwork Skill was improving its movement over rough terrain, it was no match for the much wider stride of its pursuer. And even if it was, the undead's tireless nature meant it would still catch up to it eventually.

Opia knew all of this and wanted to somehow help the poor creature, but she could think of no good way to do so. The monster's violent movements made chanting magic impossible, as the druid would surely bite her tongue if she started flapping her gums. There was the option to train it to be more mindful of its passenger to facilitate mounted Spell-slinging, but it was too advanced a feat for a fresh recruit like Spittles. Under such circumstances, it seemed impossible to save the hydra hatchling's life. The most the elf could do was try to leap off its back and use the larger living being as bait to lead the undead abomination away from her in order to save her own skin.

She was just about to do that when she suddenly saw what appeared to be a person-shaped blur run right past her and Spittles going the opposite direction. She was just about to yell at this stranger to get away from that thing, but her voice got stuck in her throat when she witnessed what transpired next.

SCRUNCH

A single kick.

That was all it took to stop the undead hydra in its tracks. The brute force impact to its front right leg was so great that the limb just straight up turned to dust, making its front half slam into the

dirt. The colossal monster coiled its many heads back as it prepared to lash out and bite this intruder clean in half, but the mysterious stranger leapt up towards the base of its long serpentine necks before it had the chance to do so.

“Flurry of Blows: Savage Sweep.”

With a voice that was far too quiet for Opia to hear, she unleashed a kick-based Martial Art while still in midair. Her right leg was coated in a red light and was swung horizontally in a wide arc, cleanly cutting through one of the hydra’s necks as if it were a greatsword. Her entire body continued to spin around, allowing her to use both her legs to perform a beautiful six-hit whirlwind kick combo. The hydra was beheaded before her feet even had a chance to touch the ground, but she wasn’t done with it yet. She angled her body sideways, using the momentum of her revolutions to deliver a guillotine-like chop with her right hand, slamming the creature’s headless body into the ground.

The Druid and her pet could only watch speechlessly while all this transpired, and found themselves unable to avert their eyes now that it was over. The woman turned away from her slaughtered prey and towards her audience, allowing Opia to get a good clean look at her. The initial sensation this black-haired human gave off was that she was gravely wounded. Her left arm was missing at the shoulder, and most of her face and otherwise bare torso were wrapped in bandages.

However, nobody who had seen those moves just now would think she was in anything but peak physical condition. Upon closer inspection, it became evident her bandages weren’t there to dress wounds, but to conceal some horrible burn scars. Her piercing yellow eyes were full of vitality and her expression was so stoic and unflinching that it seemed like she could deflect a meteorite with her face.

The woman then raised her right hand and lowered her stance, assuming a fighting pose of some sort. This snapped Opia out of her shock, as she realized the one this human was looking at wasn’t her, but her pet. The same pet that looked as if it was about to discharge an entire cathedral’s worth of bricks from its bowels.

“Hold on!” she screamed, putting herself between the two monsters. “This child is one of mine! I’m a Monster Tamer!”

The stranger took a long hard look at the hydra hatchling and its trio of vigorously nodding heads before relaxing her stance, much to the other two’s relief. She then turned around as if to walk away, but Opia wasn’t about to let that happen so easily.

“Please wait! You’re a Monk aren’t you?”

It was fairly obvious what her Job was considering she utterly demolished an undead beast of that scale with just her hands and feet. A Monk’s ki could be used to infuse their strikes and Martial Arts with a form of holy energy, allowing them to easily rip apart the living dead. It was

the only explanation the elf could think of regarding what she had just witnessed. It was also highly likely the woman in front of her was a Disciple of War, judging from the style of the wide pants and sandals this stranger was wearing. Axel's religion was the dominant one in these parts, and Opia had seen plenty of his followers wearing similar clothing. Granted, her bandaged toplessness was a bit weird, but the way the stranger stopped at her words made it clear her educated guess had been right on the money.

"Why don't we join forces to wipe out the undead and clean this area of the Blight?" the Druid suggested. "Surely you would rather not let this unholy infestation continue to fester."

The human Monk did turned around and approached the Druid with a quick step until the two were standing face to face.

"Why are you here?" she asked in a disinterested-sounding monotone.

"Like I was saying, I was hired to clean up some unknown disease, but I didn't know I'd be dealing with the undead until I got here. I got in over my head and-"

"Why are you here?"

The stranger interrupted Opia by repeating her question. Only then did the Druid realize she wasn't asking about the here and now, but about her long-term intentions. It was an odd thing to ask out of the blue, but Opia needed this woman's strength if she was to safely accomplish her mission. Besides, her bracelet wasn't picking up any signs of hostility, so she decided to play along.

"Because I've had it with self-righteous dickbags telling me what's right and wrong. I've had it with people living in their mansions and palaces thinking they know what's best for the common folk. I've had it, with them sending other children to die because they can't keep it in their pants. The Republic, the Empire, the Kingdom, the Alliance - all of them can just disappear without a trace for all I care."

Opia really couldn't stand living on the western continent anymore. Having wandered for most of her adult life, she had seen and grown disillusioned with all forms of government she came across. The place she stuck around the longest was probably the Ishigar Republic, but her opinion of that place plummeted when she was conscripted and forced to fight in the war against her will. Opia never dealt well with authority so it was a good thing her unit didn't see much action, otherwise she might have ended up melting her superior officer's face off.

Once that was over she left the Republic out of spite and got a job in the Empire. She had some bad memories from her childhood here, but at least they didn't send random people to fight wars that didn't involve them. They also had steady work for someone with her talents in the form of the government's ongoing effort to contain the deadly miasma released by the Calamity of Monotal. The job was exhausting and the regulations a bit stifling, but the steady salary and agreeable working conditions were more than satisfactory for the elven mercenary. Not to

mention she was doing her part protecting the environment as a Druid, which was just the icing on the disaster management cake.

However, for better or for worse, that career path came to an abrupt end a few weeks ago. The Empire had struck some kind of deal with the Horkensaft Kingdom about bringing in 'experts' to deal with the ongoing environmental disaster they had been struggling with for nearly a year. The way Opia heard it, this sudden development was brought about by someone called the Rustblood Juggernaut. Lofty moniker aside, this individual had allegedly discovered some ancient proto-dwarven civilization buried deep beneath the ground and helped them reconnect with their surface-dwelling descendants. Apparently those cave-hermits were using some long-lost earth magic to produce magic items called Plagueward Totems, which were designed to facilitate the cleanup of something called 'Mega-Blight.'

It was a highly suspect story to say the least, but the 'venomancer' had confirmed their effectiveness with her own eyes. The few samples the Empire had gotten from the dwarves as a sign of good faith were clearly capable of reclaiming land lost to the Calamity's deadly residue. They were doing a far better job at it than she and the rest of her colleagues could muster, so it was no wonder they were let go.

Opia wasn't too bothered by this turn of events though. She had a hunch that job wouldn't last, and it wasn't like she was fired because of a silly reason like bigotry or lack of funding. Not to mention she was genuinely glad that whole mess was finally being cleaned up. She was also able to save up a good deal of money, which she used to finally fulfil her dream of moving to Velos. The tropical climate would take some getting used to, but the political one was far more stable. The raptors were the only enlightened civilization on this continent and they were too busy keeping the jungle and its monsters at bay to worry about fighting amongst themselves.

"Requesting permission to pet the hydra," said the Monk, much to Opia's surprise.

"What, really?"

"Affirmative. I have determined its cuteness to be acceptable."

This weird Monk had a peculiar way of speaking, but Opia wasn't about to turn her down just because of that. Especially since this was the first time she met someone that seemed to share her tastes.

"Sure! Come here, boy!" she beckoned the hydra over. "Don't be afraid of the scary lady, she won't hurt us."

The many-headed monster approached the black-haired woman warily. It lowered one of its serpentine heads towards her, sniffing at her while tasting the air with its forked tongue. The Monk raised her hand towards it, gently stroking the underside of its chin. Something the hydra enjoyed quite a bit, which it showed by closing its eyes while hissing quietly.

"Wow, you're kinda good at this," the elf commented.

"Had similar pet once. Long ago."

"So you're also a Monster Tamer?"

"... No. My father was."

It had been a long time since she had thought about her father. He was a raptor, one of the rare few that was physically attracted to 'smoothskins' like her mother, a human woman was also a bit of a deviant for returning that affection. The Monk's mixed lineage was why she had yellow eyes that were atypical for her race, and likely the source of her skewed sense of aesthetics. Her becoming a Disciple of War was only a matter of time considering her personality and that she was brought up in Velos. Her parents supported her since they only wanted what was best for their odd daughter, but they probably wouldn't approve of what she had become. Not that it mattered since both of them were dead by now.

"What's your name?"

The Monk momentarily paused when she heard the elf's question. She was technically a fugitive in both the Empire and Republic, so revealing either her real name or her callsign was probably a bad idea. She could still go with one of her old nicknames though.

"... Jen."

"Well, good to meet you, Jen! I'm Opia, and this big guy is Spittles."

"Hello, Spittles."

Jen's face and voice remained as ice cold as ever, but her actions showed she was having a lot of fun petting the hydra. The feeling was mutual as its other two heads leaned in as well, eager to get their chins scratched. The human thoughtless tried to move her left arm to oblige them, but only ended up awkwardly wiggling her stump. That grim and abrupt reminder of what she had lost in Watford made her good mood deflate in an instant. She stopped playing with the monster and caressed the remnants of her limb, her lips pursing together in frustration.

She could still see it every time she closed her eyes. That red-skinned fiend holding her in place while her cowardly master detonated her body into a searing, blinding swirl of green flame. No, calling Boxy 'cowardly' was just her spite talking. She understood now the shapeshifter was merely using the tools at its disposal to get rid of a threat, and would never in a thousand years face her in one on one combat. The benefit of hindsight allowed Jen to realize that the only one she could blame for how things played out was herself.

A demonic familiar was an extension of the Warlock's power. This was something she should have known quite well, yet treated the six-armed demon like she was her own separate entity. Perhaps that couldn't be helped seeing as how that monster let its familiars run wild without any

sort of restraint, but the biggest issue lied with Jen's attitude. She was so focused on getting her one-on-one duel that she did not consider the battlefield as a whole. This hubris was what nearly got her killed if not for her Spirit Guardian blocking a significant portion of the blast at the last moment.

But the Demonate Spell still overwhelmed the Monk and her Ultimate Skill. It knocked her out and flung her clean across the city. When she next woke up, she was one arm lighter and laying face down in someone's living room that she had crashed into. The Demon King's Blackout was in full swing by that point, though his rift walkers did not attack her due to the pact between Mist and Weaxohn.

The heavily injured Monk used the confusion and darkness to her advantage to retreat to one of the fallback points Edward had set up, just south of the town. But when none of the other Gilded Hand members showed up after several days, she was forced to face the reality that they were not coming. Disheartened, lost and lacking in options, she ended up fleeing the country and somehow winding up here, the land where she was born and raised. Whether it was due to some kind of homing instinct or because she was subconsciously as fed up with warring governments as Opia, she could not say.

But what had she done since then? Nothing but wander around randomly beating the crap out of monsters to vent her frustrations, that's what. Unlike this elf she coincidentally bumped into, Jen no longer felt like she had a purpose in life. Perhaps the woman called 'Zone' did die that day, as none of the conviction and vigor she once had could be seen in this crippled shell of a woman. Granted, it was a shell that could turn boulders to dust with a single headbutt, but a shell nonetheless.

"Are... Are you okay, Jen?" Opia asked with concern plastered all over her face. "You kinda spaced out for a moment there."

"... Why do you care?"

"Why wouldn't I? You got me out of a tight spot I walked into by myself. What sort of heartless monster would ignore their benefactor in this situation?"

They were kind words, but loaded with disingenuous intentions. Jen might not have had a lie detector like her former boss, but she had been at Edward's side long enough to recognize when someone was peddling bullshit. She lashed out at the elf, grabbing her by the neck and forcing her to her knees while slowly choking the breath out of her. This seemingly unwarranted act of violence made Spittles run off somewhere due to its lack of loyalty towards Opia, but the elf herself seemed surprisingly calm for someone who was struggling to breathe.

"Why. Do. You. Care?" Jen asked, her voice showing actual signs of hostility.

"Okay, okay! I give!" the Druid yelled out while patting the rock-hard hand at her throat. This prompted the Monk to ease her grip, allowing her new 'friend' to speak freely. "It's because I

need your power to finish this Quest! I was hoping to reel you in using sympathy and divine duty and then keep the reward for myself! That's all there is to it, I swear!"

Opia was never much of a gambler, but she knew when to hold them and when to fold them. And this? It was folding time.

"I could snap your neck like a twig."

The Monk wasn't kidding. All she had to do was put more strength into her grip and-

"But you won't," the elf stated confidently. "We both know that, and I will admit I was at fault for trying to trick you, so why don't you let me go and we discuss this like civilized people?"

Jen continued staring down the Druid for a few more seconds before she let her go. She didn't like the elf's attempt to deceive her, but that was hardly reason enough to kill the woman. Far worse people have tried to goad her into doing indescribably more terrible things, so this was hardly anything worth getting worked up over. In actuality, she was rather intrigued by this odd knife-ear, and not just because they seemed to share certain eccentricities.

"How did you know I was bluffing?"

The Monk felt quite confident in her intimidation techniques, yet this seemingly random elf did not fall for her act in the slightest.

"Truthfully, I didn't," Opia said while rubbing her bruised throat. "It was Snek here that saw through you."

The elf lifted her left arm, showing off the golden snake bracelet on it. She gently stroked the sculpture's head, causing it to suddenly spring to life. Its tiny toothless jaw opened, releasing its tail in the process. The animate piece of jewelry then slithered up the elf's raised forearm until it was standing on her open palm. The shiny snake then looked at the confused human with its ruby eyes, its tiny forked tongue darting in and out of its mouth.

"Snek!" it let out in a tiny, whistling voice. "Snek, snek, snek!"

"... Snek?" Jen repeated, dumbly.

"Yeah, Snek. Dunno if that's its real name, but I don't know what else to call it."

"What is it?"

"It's something called a house mimic. I picked it up several years ago in Azurvale. It's technically a monster, but it's perfectly harmless. Really smart and perceptive too. It can sense danger better than any other beast or Spell I've seen, and it's never failed to warn me when something bad was about to happen. You had me going for a little bit, but I knew you weren't serious when Snek failed to react."

“Snek,” the living ornament nodded.

The Monk was able to put out a lot of psychological pressure, but her methods were no match for one of Tol-Saroth’s ‘children.’ Its uncanny perceptiveness and sharp wit were the things the elven sage had built into it, and was the main reason it was still alive after all this time. Snek’s creator originally intended to give the jeweled alarm system to his future spouse to keep them safe, so it was understandable he put his all into making it just right. Unfortunately Snek was never able to fulfil its original purpose since Tol-Saroth’s significant other remained entirely theoretical until his dying day.

“May I touch it?” Jen asked.

“Snek, snek!”

“Snek doesn’t seem to mind, so go right ahead.”

The Monk reached out with her only hand, intending to stroke the golden serpent with her index finger. The house mimic had other ideas though, as it instead snapped its head upwards and bit the tip of her finger playfully. Its warm metal ‘lips’ wrapped around the digit like some sort of ring while its tongue poked at the woman’s nail.

“I think it likes me.”

Though Jen’s words were flat and emotionless, the corner of her lips lifted ever so slightly. Opia didn’t know her well enough to catch that minute change in expression, but she could still read the mood. That was why she didn’t mention that Snek was actually trying to lick up the pieces of zombie hydra stuck under her fingernail since it loved to eat dead skin, among other things. The house mimic was both adorable and useful, but its questionable diet was not something Opia could discuss in polite conversation.

“So what do you say, Jen? Partners? I’ll split the reward 50-50 with you.”

“... 70-30. I will be doing most of the killing.”

Just because the human was having a bit of an identity crisis didn’t mean the human had no goals whatsoever. Such as healing her arm, and the only way to do that completely was with a Rejuvenation Potion made with genuine Hylt sap. Those got significantly more expensive and harder to find the further one got from the Republic, and Velos was as far away as Jen could get.

“Uh-huh, 50-50,” Opia stood her ground. “Even if you can clear out the undead single-han- **by yourself**, the job is to cleanse the area of disease. In this case - Blight. And call it a wild guess, but Monks typically don’t have any magic, so I have to do that exhausting bothersome work by myself. Besides, I’m the Quest holder, and I have the sneaking suspicion you’d rather not have your name on any of the Quest Logs.”

“Snek!”

The house mimic abruptly let go of Jen’s finger and coiled itself around the elf’s wrist, squeezing it lightly. It would appear her efforts to negotiate had earned her some genuine enmity from the Monk. They subsided quite quickly, but not because the human had given in to her demands. It was because she had spotted something in the air far above and behind the elf. A flying object she pointed towards, drawing the uppity Druid’s attention towards it.

“Well... fuck.”

Opia had already deduced that there was more to this infestation than met the eye. This patch of Blight should not have been old enough to reanimate something as powerful as a fully grown hydra. At least, not unless some extremely powerful undead being had settled in the area. However, while she expected one of those to show up, she did not think it would be a dragon made out of bone. Nor did she count on there being what looked to be a person riding said un-dragon as it patrolled the skies.

“70-30,” Jen repeated.

“... Uh, sure. Yeah, I think that’s reasonable. Provided you can actually kill that thing. Can you even get up there, though?”

The Monk answered the Druid’s question not with words, but with actions. A pair of radiant golden wings sprouted from her back and lifted her in the air with one mighty beat. Opia could do little but look on with stunned awe as Jen made a beeline for the flying undead creature.

“Hey, Snek?”

The house mimic lifted its head off of the elf’s wrist and looked at her questioningly.

“Snek?”

“Did you know she was an angel?”

“Snek,” it nodded.

“You could’ve told me.”

“Snek. Snek, snek. Snek snek snek, sssnekek.”

“Yeah, good point. Come on, let’s find where Spittles ran off to.”

“Snek? Snek snek.”

“Spineless or not, Jen thinks he’s cute. I figure she’d be more willing to cooperate if I kept him around.”

“Snnneeeek,” the jeweled serpent said dubiously. “Snek snek snek, snek snek?”

“No, of course not. The fact that I can get high off his venom is just a... happy coincidence.”

Snek wasn't entirely convinced by that excuse, but it didn't say anything further as it returned to its dormant state as the elf's bracelet while she ran off looking for Spittles.

At that same time, a certain newly-transformed lich was getting ready to face down the shining golden light that was coming in fast on an intercept course. Her bone dragon unleashed a caustic breath of death and decay, blanketing the air in front of it in sickeningly green fumes. The angelic Monk did not allow herself to get hit, expertly weaving her body to shift her flight path out of the way. She skimmed along the edge of the highly destructive attack and was about to bury her foot in the flying abomination's ass, but had to abruptly change course to avoid a swipe of one of its massive claws.

“Gods be damned! Why can't you fanatics just leave me alone?!” a woman's voice shrieked as Jen circled around the almost-dragon. “The only thing I'm hurting out here are monsters!”

The ‘fanatic’ did not respond to that, but she knew for a fact it was a lie. She had already used the magic of violence to purify the corpses of dozens of raptors wandering the Blighted area. They were freshly killed and raised, which she knew for a fact because the savage local wildlife would devour dead bodies before they even had a chance to turn undead. And without new bodies to feed it, the undead plague would not be able to take root. That was the main reason why Blight infestations were never much of a problem for this continent and its residents.

The lich riding atop the bone dragon was obviously not a local, however. Not only because of her unholy nature, but because of her physical appearance. Her body was clearly that of a human woman, albeit one wrapped in light purple skin and loose black cloth resembling bandages. And based on the scorn-filled face and heretical monstrosity she was riding, Jen was able to identify her as one Nora Cromwell. She was an Order of the Black Wand VIP that had lost her life along with the rest of the shady guild's Necromancers during the Fort Aynor Purge towards the end of the previous year.

Except it would appear that this one had forsaken her humanity in order to become an immortal cursed being.

The lich, on the other hand, knew nothing about her opponent, other than the fact that she couldn't seem to catch the slippery bitch. Whether it be tail swipes, claw attacks, caustic breaths, or peppering her with bone shards from her ultimate creation's hide, none of her attempts to injure the angel bore fruit. The extreme midair turns and rapid changes in speed made her a difficult one to pin down while also betraying an intimate familiarity with three dimensional movement.

Jen's prowess at aerial combat was not so much talent as it was experience. She had faced actual dragons before and sparred almost weekly with griffins. Admittedly those were either

juveniles or the pets of talented Monster Tamers, but they still helped her attain this fancy flying technique that no Skill could teach her. Even her fellow angels had a hard time keeping up with her, as demonstrated by how she quite literally flew circles around the elven Paladin named Lichter during the war.

However, the creature she was fighting this time around was as far away from angelhood as one could get.

“Lightning Bolt!”

Nora the lich unleashed a fistful of magical lightning at the slippery angel. The Monk may have been a fast and agile flyer, but even she wasn’t quick enough to dodge an instantaneous attack like that. The electrical jolt caught her in the shoulder stump, punching through her defensive layer of Ki. Jen’s body spasmed involuntarily, momentarily reducing her flying abilities to that of a brick, and allowing the undead dragon to swat her out of the sky with its tail.

Or at least that’s what Nora intended, but the Monk sprang back to life at the last moment. She intercepted the incoming attack by smashing it between her left elbow and knee like a human vice. This broke the offending limb in half, but Jen still got clipped by its razor-sharp spikes, which left a sizeable gash in her gut. She could do little to prevent that, as her Ki had already been depleted absorbing the majority of that Spell’s damage. The fact she had managed to damage the tail was really just her making the best of a bad situation.

It was about to get worse though, as a Monk’s Ki replaced their MP when it came to using Spells and Skills. And with Jen’s running on empty, she could no longer sustain her Divine Flight. Her golden wings disappeared and she plummeted towards the ground. Thankfully, even though the maximum amount of Ki she had was rather small, its recovery rate was exceptionally fast. She managed to get back enough of it to regain her flight, and used a quick application of the Healing Hand Skill to close her open wound. It wasn’t that great at recovering lost HP, but it was instant, chantless, cheap, and helped keep her blood and guts on the inside.

The real problem was how she would deal with that magic user. She couldn’t deflect Spells without her adamantite staff, but she had faced hundreds of robed twinkle-fingers even before she got her hands on that Artifact.

“Lightning Bolt!”

That was how she was able to do the seemingly impossible and dodge the lich’s next attempt to electrocute her by jerking out of the way just as she was finishing her chant. The theory behind it was simple, but one needed considerable mobility and experience to pull it off. Having momentarily avoided the blast, Jen gained a bit of altitude until she was on the same level as Nora. She wasn’t a hundred percent sure if the technique would work with just one arm, but the angel nevertheless moved her left hand up to her face, pressing her index and middle fingers against her temple.

“Solar Glare.”

The Martial Art activated despite the handicap, producing a blinding flash of light that poured out of her eyes, causing the lich to recoil and wail as her vision went white. Unfortunately this move was something of a double-edged sword since it did the same to its user, but Jen didn't need eyes to hit a target that bloody big. Besides, she had already gauged the distance and the direction before using the Solar Glare, so she still managed to land a spinning vertical guillotine kick on the bone dragon's skull. The flying abomination had even moved of its own accord to try and bite her in half, but without its creator's guidance, it was no match for the physical incarnation of violent combat that was Jennifer Jackson.

Losing a head was not enough to kill the undead thing, but it would prevent it from using that troublesome breath. It was by no means its only weapon though. Nora, who had regained her vision far quicker than her human opponent, commanded her minion to rapidly flap its massive wings. The wind it kicked up was so strong that the still blinded Monk got swept away and spun around, unable to tell up from down.

She was forced to reign in her wings and let gravity claim her while her eyes recovered. And though she had regained her stability and orientation a few seconds later, her opponent had still managed to put a considerable distance between them once again. This was bad, as it was unlikely the Solar Glare would help her close the gap a second time. The pose one had to take to invoke it was really obvious, and defending against it was as simple as shutting one's eyes. To make matters worse, the massive skull she had gone through the trouble of shatter was currently being rebuilt at a fervent pace by the undead Necromancer.

One would argue that Jen should have just aimed that blind kick of hers at the lich's head instead of the dragon's, but even she wasn't good enough to pull something that absurd off.

Just as the Monk was formulating a new strategy, she caught sight of something small and glittering flying up towards the bone dragon. The transparent apple-sized object smashed against its underside with the sound of glass breaking, instantly coating the monster's rib cage in a layer of bright green acid. One that was so potent it made chunks of eroded bone fall off the dragon like a macabre snowstorm, while the hissing it emitted was so loud that even Jen could hear it. The damage inflicted may have only been superficial, but the nature of that Spell and the sheer size of the unholy abomination made it so it had a lot of surface to work with.

“Oh-hoh! Nice one, Spittles!”

Back on the ground far below the airborne battle, Opia was enthusiastically patting her pet hydra.

“Here boy, do it again!”

She handed the beast another armed Spell Crystal containing a Corrosive Splash Spell. Spittles grabbed it with the jaws on one of its heads, coiled the flexible muscles on its serpentine neck

and then whipped it upwards. The slingshot-like motion launched the solidified lump of magic towards the bone dragon, hitting it in its left wing. It wasn't a direct hit like the first one, but that didn't stop the angry acid from eating right through the slender limb and its sinewy membranes.

"What the shit?!"

The lich could only let out a surprise curse before her ultimate creation began plummeting towards the ground. Granted, the bone dragon was mostly being kept afloat by the wind magic of its Ghastly Flight Skill, but it still needed that wing to maintain it. With it in tatters, it could do nothing but flail about awkwardly as it fell in an uncontrollable spiral. Nora stubbornly clung onto it, as she was sure her undead form could withstand the impact. Being grounded against that Monk wasn't great since it would allow her to close in much easier than in the air, but it wasn't all bad. The lich still had a number of ground-based undead minions. Though her zombified hydra was demolished in an instant - and investigating that was why she was out here in the first place - she still had ten more of them at her disposal. That wasn't even counting the dozens of other undead at her beck and call.

Disoriented by the downward spiral and preoccupied with summoning her undead creations, Nora failed to consider that her initial opponent would not let her hit the ground. Jen flew into the spinning mass of bone and spikes, burying her foot in Nora's midsection before the lich could react. The force of the impact completely overwhelmed the undead's body, ripping it in two and sending her screaming torso flying away like a dishrag caught in a hurricane.

The angel wasn't quite done with her yet though, as she swooped in and grabbed the semi-monster by the throat. Jen accelerated downwards towards a random boulder sticking out of the Blight-infested ground and, for lack of a better word, buried the lich in it. The lump of solid stone was smashed to pieces, while the only thing remaining of Nora was a layer of foul-smelling residue on Jen's palm. As for the not-a-dragon created by her Ultimate Skill, it broke apart into a pile of gray dust and ash upon its own reunion with the ground.

Opia let out a cheer of victory before mounting Spittles and rushing over to where the angel landed. The Blight had already cleared much of the trees and vegetation in this part of the jungle, so she could easily see the dust cloud her flashy landing had made.

"Hey Jen! You alive in there? Oh, nevermind."

The hydra-riding Druid looked through the rubble while yelling, but almost immediately realized that was a wasted effort. She could clearly see the Monk sitting on a chunk of shattered rock, and though she was definitely alive, she did not seem to be well. She was leaning forward with her elbow on her thigh and her face in her palm. Though her scratched up hand and unkempt black hair obscured her expression, the lack of tension in her shoulders and the long drawn out breaths she was making painted a picture of someone who had given up.

"What's wrong, Jen?" the elf asked. "I didn't splash you with my magic, right?"

“... Why do you care?”

Even the woman’s voice was unnaturally shakier than her usual monotone.

“Because we’re partners. Sort of. And I would like to know if I can count on you to do your part.”

“Heh.”

It was a dry, emotionless, mocking chuckle, one that Opia couldn’t help but interpret as an insult.

“So would I.”

However, Jen’s next words made it clear the one she was looking down on was none other than herself. That lich should not have been anywhere near as much trouble as she had been. She was a Monk, a natural enemy to the undead, yet she let one of those toss her around so easily. And it wasn’t due to her lack of high-end equipment or her missing limb. It was because she was unfocused and hot-headed. That nagging voice inside her that begged for a good fight clouded her judgement.

In retrospect, she didn’t even have to confront the lich and her bone dragon directly. She just had to keep evading her while tracking down her phylactery. Needlessly putting herself in danger like that was why she could never find anyone willing to work with her long term. The last bunch that put up with her reckless thrill-seeking were the team of Hilda, Faehorn and Lichter. Even Edward was reluctant to give her anything other than solo assignments because of her violent nature.

And though Jen knew all that and recognized that this behavior would one day get her killed, she still indulged in it.

“You do realize I was joking, right?” Opia stated. “If anything I’m going to be the one dragging you down. It’s the first time I’ve seen someone as strong as you in action, and I know for a fact I can’t keep up with you.”

The Monk lifted her face out of her hand, threw the elf a blank look then stared off somewhere beyond the horizon.

“... I’m not that great.”

“Like fuck you’re not! You took a lightning bolt to the face like it was nothing! And then when the skeleton dragon- And I repeat, the skeleton. Fucking. Dragon! -tried to smack you with its tail, you snapped it off like a twig! Do you have any idea how amazing that was?! I could never do that in a million years!”

Hearing that deluge of excitement pour out of this stranger caused Jen’s cheeks to blush a little in embarrassment. It had been a long time since someone had acknowledged her so bluntly and openly, so she couldn’t help it.

“And then you broke that dragon’s skull like it was made of paper!” Opia continued. “All with one hand tied- Well, with one hand. I didn’t know any better, I’d think I was tripping balls on this guy’s spit! Shit, maybe I am! Snek, that all happened, right?”

“Snek,” the house mimic nodded sagely. “Snek, snek.”

“See, even Snek’s impressed! And lemme tell ya, that’s not easy with how much shit this smartass has lived through! To be honest I only butted in because I couldn’t do nothing after watching you zoom all over the place! I can’t wait to see what sort of ridiculous things you’ll do once we get you that new arm!”

“We? New arm?”

“Well yeah! You obviously don’t wanna remain a cripple, and I know a guy who can help you out with that!”

“You can get a Rejuvenation Potion?”

“Uh, no? Do I look like the sort of girl that can pull diamonds out of her ass? No, wait don’t answer that.”

The elf’s hype had calmed down by now, allowing her to continue with a calmer tone of voice.

“I’m talking about Limbroot seeds. We plant one of those in your shoulder, let it drink up your blood and nutrients and you’ll have a brand new arm in less than a week. One that you can move around and even use Martial Arts with just by thinking. Granted, it’ll be made of vines and bark, is technically a parasite, and now that I think about it will probably be ripped to shreds if someone like you throws a serious punch with it, but it’s a start.”

Jen hadn’t really considered that. True, a Rejuvenation Potion would be the best solution to her short-handedness, but it wasn’t the only option. Even a temporary arm was better than no arm, as it would allow her to once more wield a staff. While her hand-to-hand techniques were pretty strong, staves were without question her specialty. Having one would’ve been a huge help against that lich, even if it wasn’t the indestructible adamantite rod she lost in Watford.

Feeling reinvigorated by Opia’s words of praise and wisdom, Jen stopped sulking and rose to her feet.

“Come. We should find the phylactery before the lich reconstitutes herself.”

“That was a lich?! Damn, no wonder the Blight’s so strong around here. Come to think of it, don’t you Monks have absurdly high resistances to diseases and poisons?”

“Affirmative.”

“Nice! Then I can just run wild and not worry about you getting caught up in my Desolation magic while you do your thing!”

“Reporting that res-”

“This is gonna be the best team-up ever! Let’s go, Spittles, we have a phylawatchamacallit to find! Wahahahaha!”

‘Resistance does not mean immunity’ were the words that Jen had failed to get out before the freshly excited Druid rode her pet hydra off into a random direction while cackling ominously. The angelic Monk was already having second doubts about this arrangement, but in the end she followed after Opia all the same. Even if it was a partnership that was unlikely to last long, she was going to make the most of it while it did. She truthfully wouldn’t mind a bit of friendly fire every now and then if it meant she got to play with Spittles some more.

Besides, after witnessing a certain murderous chest’s explosive growth, she couldn’t help but wonder if that ‘little’ hydra might one day also grow strong enough to challenge her.

“HRSHAAA!”

CRASH

“How the shit did you trip, Spittles?! You have three damned heads to watch your step with!”

Okay, maybe not.