

*Obsidian*

by Peppintheshort

They recruited her from the city in the mountains made of obsidian, and named her Rat.

They didn't know her real name. Of course, they didn't care to know. Her purpose was singular, and her name was as meaningless as goat shit.

She was young and skinny, as many people from the city were. Not enough nutrients from the fallow fields of barley and beans, and not enough care after the plague that condemned fifteen thousand to death. Rat was partially blind; seamstresses rarely died with enough sight to sign their wills. It had to be read to them by blood mages clever enough to practice law.

Her nose was large for her face and she carried herself with the nimble carriage of a thrice-bountied professional assassin, possibly from her time spent thieving as a child. You couldn't teach that stealth to a grown man with perfect vision. He relied too much on it, and was, as a result, oafish.

Rat wore a somber tunic belted at her too-slender waist and muttered nothing as they escorted her from the black city.

Called Nyxos, it drank the slender light at day and reflected it at night, when the hunter's moons crept behind the volcano that created it. It stank almost always of sulphur. The citizens wore elaborate veils to conceal their complexions and, more importantly, nostrils from the noxious fumes, and scarcely left their homes, which were carved into the mountain and flat and chill to the touch. Nyxos survived by exporting stained glass to the Gray Lands and beyond. Besides blood mages, only glassmakers came to Nyxos, and nobody left, except in black shrouds. It had a dark reputation, but then again -- this was a dark time for all. Too much death.

There were few inhabitants there, hardly any children. They had perished in the plague, or of starvation during the famine years. Fearful of the pestilence, their parents left them on the street, after which men emboldened by greed and recklessness carried them to mass graves in the necropolis a mile from the city. The only building still open to the public was the Temple of Morda, the goddess of death, where citizens could watch the writhing of her seeresses who inhaled belladonna and wept. Visitors left laurel and monkshood on her altar. Some stole it and used it on themselves later.

"Keep her at it," barked one of her escorts.

Shaken from her thoughts, Rat turned toward him. She figured he meant her, but it soon became apparent he was commanding the driver to push forward their donkey.

Rat had never ridden anything, or been in the back of a cart before. Livestock, like children, did not flourish in the dry, dark waste of Nyxos. When they first revealed she would be carried to Way-upon-the-Dark, the only port to the Ignis Sea, she was terrified of the donkey. Around day three of the journey, she became fond of it, and often petted it after the men were asleep. Besides, they did not address her, or give her hints to her purpose on the journey, and she'd never conversed with grown men before, so she did not know what they'd have to talk about.

But she *had* spied on them. She was good at that.

There were five of them, the number sacred to Bahazeth, the god of life, who spurned the beautiful Morda's advances, whether they were in the guise of a lovely sea maiden, or a consuming succubus. Five was Rat's first clue. Their skin color, the next. Nyxosians had pale skin, called corpse chalk, mocked in festive realms elsewhere with party masks. These men had smooth skin the color of

copper. Rat knew there was a Bahazeth sanctuary a few days' ride from Nyxos: she knew it because most travelers stopped there for some gracious, life-affirming hospitality, and did not pursue Nyxos, where they'd find none.

She saw them bathing every morning, a seemingly sacred ritual to them. They even had fat-soap. Rat almost never washed her entire body except during blood moons, when it was permitted by the Nyxosian elder mages.

Nor did they attempt to rape her. She knew she was not desirable, none in Nyxos was, but she was still surprised.

They were all handsome to her poor eyesight, and carried with them iron broadswords, daggers, hidden potions and rations. They wore capes of red and polished plate armor of gold and all looked particularly splendid in the way a sun did, feverish and happy, when it retired behind the hills during summer, although Rat had never seen a summer sunset. It's what she imagined it would look like in her vague and warm imagination where cities of stone reached the sky and queens were just and pragmatic, and no one starved, and there were no mountains of fire or cities made of black glass.

Eventually they told her they were taking her to one such city. Across the Ignis Sea. Eight days' travel if they hurried. When she asked why, they said it was because her aunt died in Echwind, a lovely city promising gardens and villas and enough joys to satiate a lifetime, and she was the heir apparent to her aunt's estate. Naturally Rat was suspicious. Her mother, before she died of the pestilence, had never mentioned anything about an aunt living in Echwind. Then again, reasoned Rat, Ma didn't tell me much, or anything of my father. Perhaps it's his sister.

That's all the soldiers had said. She assumed they did not rape her because now she was a prominent person, a respectable citizen in Echwind. On the fifth day of their journey, she began inquiring about flowers (many of which she had never seen before) and their properties: which would thrive in Echwind's temperate climate, which were edible, which cured ailments. She already knew the ones used for poisons.

The bronze soldiers muttered. She got no clear answers, but hardly cared. She had a purpose now, and a grand one at that, one that took her far away from the ill-omened city, where the streams were rotten and the homes darker than dark, velvet black if not for their touch.

The cart, she noticed, was loaded with bags of obsidian. Rat wondered if they were stopping at a trading post, for Nyxos obsidian was priceless in the Outer Realms.

Instead they came into Way-upon-the-Dark at twilight. They brought her into Firehiss Inn and bought her watered wine and a meat pie with the freshest lamb she had ever tasted. They rented her out a private room and told her chambermaids would wash her.

Rat couldn't believe it; she'd never had a tub bath. When the dainty chambermaids came, they helped her undress and led her to a large wooden tub filled with bucketfuls of water heated from the hot springs nearby. Remarkably they did not reek of sulphur. They smelled of otto of roses and lavender and pumice.

As soon as Rat accustomed herself to the luxury, they began scrubbing her body of dirt with a harsh but effective lavender soap. They anointed her nipples with an erotic flowery scent she couldn't place, combed her hair and braided it in a crown above her brow. She had never felt so desirable, or so important. It overcame her like too much good wine, or a series of orgasms with a talented concubine, and she slept so soundly on a featherbed that she actually dreamt.

The only event that spoiled it was her dream: she was thrown into fire, and the God of Life let it happen. Rat shook this omen off. Dreams, she was once told, were the farts of gods and bore no signet on your destiny.

The red-and-gold soldiers woke her early. One, seeing her bathed and pampered, even smiled her way as he offered to help her onto the cart.

On the way, they passed a smoking village. Rat coughed as they drove the cart through, the soldiers careful to keep their paws on their broadswords for hungry, desperate men. She saw foggy shapes of orphaned children, a charred corpse, a naked woman squatting and pissing. The village reeked worse than Nyxos. She wondered what had happened, and asked the soldiers quietly.

“War,” the kind one who had smiled at her earlier said. “The flayers sacked Outremort a few days ago, by the reports.”

“Death is everywhere,” Rat said.

“Not for long, Rat,” he said. She wondered what he meant by this.

They came to their destination the seventh day. The brief stop at Firehiss had slowed them down. Rat could only make out a lone and seemingly barren keep, black as charcoal.

“This isn’t Echwind,” she said. “Echwind is a city of flowers and sun and...”

“Just a stop,” said the kindly one. “We have a quick errand here, then we’ll be off to Echwind by nightfall.”

She sensed something desperate in his tone, but decided to ignore it. Soldiers, she supposed, were like this.

They led her into the keep, which smelled musty and like old forged copper. She could barely see, and was forced to rely on her sense of touch and sound to follow the soldiers, like a true rat, or some other disgusting subterranean creature. At the last winding staircase she noticed the kindly soldier had brought the bag of obsidian. Perhaps they were trading it with some palsied, bed-ridden lord of the keep.

They yanked her into the final room, which was softly glowing with an eerie turquoise light. Although she couldn’t see clearly, she saw a series of glowing symbols on the floor, cast within a circle of salt and brown blood. There was no need for candles.

“Bahazeth, keep the shadows, keep the rot, keep the lepers, keep the blood, keep the hunger, keep the cold...” intoned the kindly one.

Another bright soldier, looking so formidable in the sickly magelight, laid out the obsidian slabs around the salt circle in a five starred pattern she did not recognize. Then again, she grew up with Morda as her protectress, the balancer of death, the stewardess of corpses, and in her fear, Rat dropped to the floor and began sobbing incantations to the lady. The floor seemed to open like a great maw, with shadows falling into its caverns, darker than dark, darker than the walls of Nyxos and the velvet she’d once seen at market and the sky during the dark moon and she began screaming.

“You’re safe, Rat,” said the kindly one. “Drink this, and it’ll all be over. This is something we must do, then we’re off to Echwind.”

In her frenzy, Rat gulped down the earthy drink, realizing too late it was poisoned in some way, with some alchemical substance she couldn’t place. She tried picturing flowers the best she could, and warm summer days, and a court filled with poets and maidens and knights sworn to chivalry...

When she awoke, all was silent save her breathing. She could not believe she was alive, nor did she otherwise believe in mortality any longer. Her senses were as numb as her eyesight, which observed finally a large, looming figure of the universe, clad in the blue sky-shapes of a blood mage’s lab, a

constellation. Flashing above her was all manner of alchemical shapes, giving precedence to triangles, and what appeared to be a violent tearing away of the upper heavens.

A faraway man's voice, like honey over bark, called for ignis slant...something about a Nether...something about an obsidian sacrifice.

"Don't be frightened, Rat," the kindly soldier said, though he was nowhere to be found. "You are a life-giver."

"No life-giver, that one, just some orphan girl," said another faraway voice. "All we really needed was the obsidian, and the girl, a small price to pay for good crops and healthy children."

Rat glimpsed the gaping universe and, paralyzed, resigned herself to her fate, for what else could she do against the god of life, the girl who came from the city of death?

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