

The old man was wheezing faintly, lying in a pool of blood.

"Yeah, doesn't look like he's going to recover from this anytime soon." Mayra told herself, watching him with indifference.

Lump stared at him with a mix of piety and ridiculous concern, his face lacking any deeper expression. The medallion, hanging from his neck like a cowbell, swayed sadly from time to time as he bobbed his gourd-like head, swollen with fungi.

"It's very important that you take this to the Hive," the old man said, holding out the opalescent object with trembling hands. "Take my medallion so you'll be recognized. They'll know what to do with it. The fate of everyone is in your hands." He eyeballed her.

"Important" was the kind of word that supplied the world with the most widows, Mayra thought darkly. There was always something important, always something that needed saving.

Nonsense.

She had no intention of touching the glyph with her bare hand anyway. She pulled on her gloves and took it from the old man's hand, stuffing it into a container while eyeing it warily. The itching in her new eye grew more insistent.

The old man had asked for her specifically. Lump had come, sweaty and worried, dragging her to the meeting place, muttering something she didn't bother to catch.

Truth be told, she couldn't stand priests. They were always tangled in incomprehensible schemes, and Mayra firmly believed they should be avoided at all costs.

Well...It doesn't matter. She'd done far stupider things for far less money.

From the first night of the trip, she realized it was a bad idea, probably one of the worst in the long string of bad ideas that had shaped her dream life, if anyone had ever dreamed of sleeping under the open sky while keeping an eye out for every unusual noise.

First of all, the damn glyph, even at a respectable distance from her body, flooded the clearing with luminescent filaments, making the mushrooms glow around her.

On top of that, there was the problem of tangled thoughts swirling in her head, like a whispered conversation answered by the crooked plants pressing in from all sides.

Her new eye seemed affected as well, somehow alive and alien again, joining the soft, endless rustling.

She curled around her pack and shut her eyes.

"It's time to get rid of her quickly," she told herself.

In the end, daylight came, but dark clouds were already piling up over her fragile optimism.

She raised the container to eye level and examined it carefully. The glyph's glow lit the inner walls, and somewhere inside it, something curled and twisted like a fish.

"What exactly are you?"

She shook the box gently. "It's just not the right time," she cut the thought short. The Forest of Desolation was close now.

Truth be told, she wasn't much of an analyst.

Her luck suddenly ran out at the end of the second day.

She began to cross the Forest of Desolation with her fluid and cautious steps, moving from one hidden place to another and trying not to step on or brush against anything. In the end, the constant rustling in her mind had made her careless. She saw the [Screamer](#) too late.

“What the hell is it doing here?” she wondered. The creature was far from its usual hunting grounds, drifting among the Columns of Vaerys. She knew of no one who didn’t despise this bubbling, grotesque sack.

The Screamer had its head retracted, filaments moving slowly within its mouth as it sampled the air. Fortunately, it had no eyes, but the ocelli scattered across its body could detect any minor shifts. It wasn’t fast.

Mayra retreated slowly, careful not to stand out, careful not to touch anything. She failed. A sudden crackling of branches made it turn toward her. With hasty movements, she gripped her spear and braced herself.

It roared. Her muscles tensed, her good eye filled with blood and her bladder betrayed her. She froze in place.

“Is she dead?”

“Don’t think so”, came a slightly hoarse reply. “She just blacked out”.

She opened her eyes and tried to gather her strength. It was useless.

“Are you a mage?” asked the owner of the low voice, an old hunter with a deep scar.

The hunters wore dusty, almost desiccated Screamer suits. „Bad sign”, Mayra thought. She looked at him, her gaze sliding over his filthy fur cloak.

“Did I kill your mother?” she grinned with the last of her strength.

The younger hunter let out a short laugh. “Dead, but proud.”

“Hunters” was too small a word for their kind. Adventurers, traders — that would’ve been closer. They hunted anything and searched for any artifact, as long as it turned a profit.

“I need to cross the forest”, Mayra said, failing to stand.

“Not like this. Not with that mangled hand. You need a healer.” He paused, thinking.

“Closest one’s in the Caves. Yonathar. Two days from here. We take you, the hide’s ours. You keep your trophies.”

She didn’t have much choice. She agreed.

She hated the Caves, from the grotesque statues at the entrance to the sea of people crammed inside. She loathed closed spaces.

“You’ll know the Healer when you see her. Hard to miss,” the old hunter said.

The Caves were exactly as wretched as she remembered. The hunter was right. The woman was impossible to miss.

“Well, there go six months of treatment down the drain,” Mara said to herself while she waited, covered in blood, to recover....Then she slipped into unconsciousness.

“Now she no longer cared whether a healer was meant to treat her or not. She was paying for her, mistakes.

Back in time, as she remembered, the glyph seed seemed harmless. They said that once you used one, you gained power and only a small fraction of people were ever truly affected. It had felt absurd to imagine she might have some peculiar predisposition. She had been perfectly ordinary.

So she tried and she had torn the glyph out in frantic panic, praying nothing had taken hold.

For a while, she felt unchanged. Two days later, her eye began to darken. Her vision remained sharp, so she dismissed it as a minor nuisance. An allergy, perhaps... But when the structure of the eye shifted completely and half her body settled into a constant numbness, she understood.

It was bad luck.

She searched for cures and found charlatans. Each swore the others had been frauds. Coins slipped through her fingers, spent on rare herbs, strange concoctions, and captive creatures. The symbiote, however, seemed unbothered.

Her grotesque hand was merely another addition to her ongoing misery.

Of course she could see the healer. She could see all those touched by symbiotes. Around them shimmered a powerful radiance, invisible to ordinary eyes, its quality different for each host. The healer burned bright. Though the others couldn't see her radiance, the crowd always parted around her as she moved through it, like a herd splitting before a lone predator.

She caught the hunter's hand and began walking toward the light.

Mayra tried to reach the Healer, but her strength was already slipping, as if she were being pushed into a shadowed corner of herself.

Dark, muddled thoughts crept into her mind, and suddenly she became aware of the colors shifting around her. A heavy, damp scent filled her nostrils. The square dimmed, except for faint patches of light scattered across it. She recognized them without wanting to. Others like her.

Her tentacles twitched. Mayra tried to speak, but her jaw was locked and her tongue refused to move. Her words dissolved into meaningless babble, and her breath came in ragged, wheezy gasps.

The Healer leaned closer. As she watched Mayra's hand twitching with spasms, her aura flared, growing almost blindingly bright.

Mayra staggered backward. The Hunter looked at her with concern, gripping his spear tightly.

The few children in the square drifted away from their parents, drawn toward one another. The youngest tilted his head back and let out a high-pitched scream. One by one, the others joined him, matching his note perfectly, until the sound became continuous and uniform.

The Healer fixed her gaze on Mayra.

"It's not too late", she said. "but she needs me. "

"Of course she needs you", said the Hunter. "That's why we came."

"You don't understand".

She set her bag down and opened a pocket, pulling out a small bowl. She poured mushrooms and other ingredients into it, then spat over the mixture and stirred it with her fingers.

Mayra swallowed the foul mixture. In the square, the children fell silent. The sound dimmed, trickling down the cave walls until it finally faded.

Three days passed, and Mayra's arm began to regain its original shape. It no longer had anything human in it, but the parasite had used its mimetic abilities with unnerving precision. As long as it remained covered, it could pass for a perfectly normal arm.

The tentacles had withdrawn, twisting themselves into dense structures that, with a little generosity, could be called "muscles" and "bones". The creature was skilled, discreet, and lethal. If it deceived you long enough to get close, it was already too late.

The eye had slipped back behind the slit carved into her cheek.

It was far from fully healed, but the Healer seemed to have lost any interest in it. Although she visited periodically, she appeared neither worried nor particularly empathetic.

Aneva was not the sort to spend entire weeks at the bedside of the sick. In fact, she did not seem capable of concern for anything for more than three days. She was descended from a

long line of mages. She moved as though space folded around her, and not the other way around. When she laughed - and she did so quite often - her laughter was loud and contagious. In general, people tended to avoid her gaze, something that did not trouble her in the least.

On the fourth morning, she pressed on the remodeled arm and along the fine line that separated its normal consistency from the alien one. She declared it “stable” and moved on. Klera remained.

She was accompanied by another mage, named Klera Varn. She spoke little. When she did, she used short sentences, reduced to the bare minimum. Her words carried an inherent weight.

Klera insisted on staying beside Mayra, cautiously observing the evolution of the altered arm. She studied the cut on Mayra’s cheek carefully and memorized its shape.

The mages faced the usual hostility with which they were met by others. Aneva did not seem overly concerned., but Klera was far less immune. She would always, almost involuntarily, occupy the space between Mayra and any hidden threat - a gaze that lingered too long, a hand that moved without reason, a silence that deepened unnaturally.

Mayra wasn’t nearly as convinced as Aneva that her arm was “stable”. Truth be told, she had no idea what to do about it.

The limb was still hard to use, given that her nervous system hadn’t fully accepted it. Aneva swore rest would fix it. Maybe. But Mayra didn’t have time to play invalid, not with the glyph whispering in her skull, a new voice in the chorus of her thoughts. What she really needed was Aneva’s presence or, more precisely, her fluids.

Fate, as it turned out, had a twisted sense of humor. Her luck shifted unexpectedly, thanks to the Hunter.

His name was Marteen, and his defining talent appeared to be persistence. For days he trailed the two mages, repeating his request that they join him on an expedition to the Scarecrow Fields.

He needed to recover a glyph from the neck of a fallen comrade. Honor, he said, would not permit him to return to his clan without it. His comrade had been unlucky, one of those poisoned by the cockroaches during a recent raid. The Angloos weren’t wasteful; they didn’t bother killing their victims outright. Poisoned, the unlucky lost all mobility. As their will faded, so did their thoughts. The Angloos herded them, docile and pliant, to predetermined spots around the Pillars and left them standing to rot. They were useful that way: their excrement repelled the Screamers and could even serve as bait

Truth be told, the cockroaches were terrified of Screamers. Their howls paralyzed them for a split of a second - an eternity for creatures that relied on glitching for surprise. That vulnerability was enough. So they tried to keep their scarecrows alive as long as possible, feeding them whatever they could scavenge. Over time, a fair number of these unlucky souls accumulated, staring at the Pillars with blank eyes. Hence the name: Scarecrow Fields.

Marteen had tried repeatedly to convince the mages to join him, but he was always met with Klera Ven’s cold opposition. The reason was simple: they lacked a third. The third member wasn’t exactly eager to meet new people, let alone risk to face city’s hate. Besides, the Triad members weren’t bound by warm feelings. No serious raid was attempted without three. And no serious raid succeeded without mages. Mages were utterly dependent on Angloes’ fluids. They used it to keep their own parasites alive. A few grams cost a fortune, and left to their own devices, they would never have had the strenght to harvest it themselves.

Aneva was dangerous. "Healer" was a convenient lie. She was more an efficient killer. Her body was a map of deliberate wounds and her reflexes were astonishing. Klera was quieter and, in many ways, more essential. Angloos did not move; they displaced. One instant here, the next elsewhere, like a film skipping frames. Klera did not predict their movements. She read the fracture in possibility just before it sealed. The absent mage masked their presence. A necessary skill against creatures that were blind and navigated by vibration and chemical trace.

They were built as Triad. It didn't always work, given that the entire field was the result of "unforeseen circumstances."

"We're outnumbered", Aneva repeated, more to end the discussion than to persuade. Marteen's opaque stare did not waver. He was compulsive; obstacles existed only to be overcome.

Suddenly, Mayra flexed her altered arm. The tentacles pulsed, rippled, then folded back into place.

"Then use me!" she said. "I can sense them through walls and such."

A heavy silence fell. Aneva studied her carefully for the first time, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes.

"You know what? It might actually work." She ignored Klera's disapproval.

They left two days later, during which the two hunters equipped themselves, armoring up in suits stitched from exotic hides - layered plates meant to deflect venom, puncture and unpredictable weather. Though effective, it was far from invulnerable. Nothing in Vaerys Field was.

On the road, it became increasingly clear that Aneva was... different. She talked constantly. That she laughed was disorienting. Mages did not laugh, as their emotions usually swung between smugness and caution. Yet she seemed genuinely astonished by the way the land stretched, unbroken, toward the horizon.

When they passed Gatherers under the watchful eyes of the peasants, Aneva's eyes sparkled.

"When this is over, she declared, I'm getting my own Gatherer."

Only blind luck spared her from being flattened by the herd.

Her ease was just as unnatural within the Triad. Affection was a luxury but, somehow, Aneva and Klera had something resembling it.

Klera, however, did not surrender easily to Aneva's buoyancy. While Aneva sketched improbable futures like private Gatherers, pastoral fantasies, Klera watched her with a concerned gaze. Poetry was not her thing.

The permanent sunrise washed the landscape in thin gold, carving long shadows behind them. Aneva's laughter followed, along with her grandiose plans, filling the silence. Ahead, the Scarecrow Fields began to take shape, and beyond them, rising like ribs from the earth, stood the Pillars of Vaerys. If one ignored the rot carried on the wind and the distant, unmoving silhouettes, the vista might have looked almost scenic.
