

PICK YOUR PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

# THE TEMPLE OF TEMPTATION

WRITTEN BY  
ABE E SEEDY

WITH ART BY  
ANGRBODA



18+

**ADULT**  
AUDIENCES



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# THE TEMPLE OF TEMPTATION

WRITTEN BY ABE E SEEDY WITH ART BY ANGRBODA

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## HEADS UP!

This story is **non-linear** - as the reader, you make a series of choices that branch off to result in different scenarios for the main character and her companion! It's intended as a loving send-up of the 90's adventure books we grew up with, but with a modern, adult twist. That said, the PDF format gives us one big advantage over old paperbacks: **each prompt is clickable** (the whole paragraph, not just the page number) and should jump you right to the section you want. At the end of each route, you can click on **THE END** to go back to the first choice. Of course, we numbered the pages so you can still flip through the old fashioned way for nostalgia's sake, but in case you want to jump right there, you can!

**It started with haunted dreams,** then grew into shared headaches and a gathering sense of pressure in the air. Now people are... off, in a way that no one can quite define, but teeth are sharp and tempers short. Tales of the Crown have always swirled in the background of the region, but now they have weight. Whatever wards the ancients set up to safeguard their mistakes are clearly failing, and it is time for more proactive measures.





When people need something taken care of, they hire you —

**Eliana,**  
the renowned tracker and ranger.

Your skills with a bow are almost legendary, and you're well-used to solving difficult problems. But, for as skilled as you are, Old Magic is outside of your experience. So, reluctantly, you've been forced to enlist help.

## Grace

looks up from where she's been securing the raft. "Cheery place", she quips, scribbling a few notes on a fresh piece of paper before cramming it haphazardly into her pack. "Thanks for bringing me along."



You have to agree with her sarcastic comment. Surprisingly, the temple of Vol'Surtoth was not hard to find. You'd been prepared to beat a path through an ancient and trackless forest, but with every tree in sight having blackened and died, the ruins were easily visible as you travelled down the river. Even the wind here seems dead. As much as it made the trek easier, it's hard to imagine that a mile-wide circle of withered plant life is a good sign. Still, if things were fine, you wouldn't have been hired in the first place.

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Walking carefully towards the temple, you reply to Grace without taking your eye off the undergrowth. "You were the only specialist in ancient rituals who agreed to come."

Laughing, Grace hefts her pack onto her back and scurries to catch up with you, her obnoxiously loud footfalls making you wince. "Oh right, right, my *degree*. That's all well and good, and I hope I can help translate like, any maps or instructions you find or whatever, but *I'm* here to get the next big book. Do you have any idea how well those people did with that Monster book? Enough to keep them in fine clothes for life, I hear."

You're halfway to the temple steps by now, and Grace still seems completely unconcerned. "If I recall correctly", you mutter, "they had to pay a lot for specialist tailors after that too."

Grace waves that concern aside. "Well yeah, if you can *avoid* turning into a horny snake person along the way, bonus, obviously. But still, at least they get to be *wealthy* horny snake people."

"Noted", you answer simply. "I'll keep that in mind."

The conversation dries up as you find yourselves at the temple entrance. You wave Grace on ahead of you, and after a few moments she gives a little start as she realises it's her turn to get to work. Scuttling forwards, her eyes flick back and forth between the inscriptions on the archway and the titles of the books in her pack. "Ah, got it", she says eventually. "Looks like a regional variant on Attyrian. Makes sense, and I think I can work with that. Give me a moment."

It takes longer than you had expected, but there's nothing you can do but keep watch while Grace works. Eventually she snaps her book closed so loudly that you can't help but shoot her a fierce look, which she completely fails to notice.

"Okay, done! It says..."

She clears her throat, deliberately adopting a deeper register as she intones,

“Within rests the Crown  
Within rests the challenge  
Your fear is your foe  
You bring your weapon with you.  
Only those who master themselves  
Can truly master others.”

You blink in silence, and Grace offers an apologetic shrug.

“I’m, uh, I’m sure it makes more sense in the original. Probably rhymes too, but I’ve no idea how to pronounce it so I can’t say for sure.”

Frowning, you mentally revise the way you plan to divide up the reward. “So, any clue of a curse, or anything practical we can use to help us?”

“Ah, well, that’s where it gets interesting!”

You arch an eyebrow. “Truly?”

Brushing the snide comment aside, Grace continues. “You see, there’s a lot more ambiguity than that might make it seem. The word ‘fear’, for example, that translation’s something of a best fit. The word is closer to like... something that makes you feel something, intensely. Somewhere between ‘fear’ and ‘excitement’. Same with ‘master themselves’. I’m *fairly* sure that equates more directly with an idiomatic phrase that lines up with, ‘come into your own’, but also... something like ‘embrace your truth’? Or even just ‘have a great time’?”

You give her another blank look. “And what does all that mean exactly?”

“No idea!” she answers brightly, putting her textbook away and taking out another notepaper. “But it’s something to keep in mind. If there *is* a curse here, then it’s probably somehow keyed to exactly what works on the person that’s trying to claim the Crown. I don’t think it’s going to matter for me, because it seems to only apply to the person whose, for lack of a better word, ‘quest’ this is. So it’s probably worth asking — what would you say is your biggest fear?”

Your first instinct is to dismiss the question out of hand, but something makes you stop. If not for something like this, why bother to bring Grace along at all? So you take a moment and genuinely consider it, before replying...

## **Getting corrupted by power** ---

You've worried in the past about how you're ever going to retire from adventuring. Are you going to wind up obsessed with power, hoarding wealth like the dragon tyrants of ancient legend? Or will you fall into the service of someone like that, shaped by their needs and content to live your life in their shadow?

*turn to page 10*

## **Falling for the trap of a pointless, domestic life** ---

After so long on the road, you don't know how you'd ever be able to settle down. A life of so-called domestic bliss would make you feel like some sort of pet rabbit, pampered and cozy in a snug little box. Even if you found someone exciting to be with you're sure you'd still feel like a rat in a maze, scurrying about with little more than base, instinctual purpose.

*turn to page 26*

## **Becoming distant from society** ---

It bothers you sometimes how hard you find it to connect to people, and how easily you could drift out of society entirely. On your worst days you fear you'd become some magpie of a forest bandit, gathering shiny baubles in your distant perch. At other times you feel a longing for green spaces, like you're a forest spirit trapped trying to pretend they can live among people.

*turn to page 51*

## **Being a brainless brute, used merely for brawn** ---

You know you sell your strength to others for a living, and when you think about it too hard, that feels uncomfortably close to being a beast of burden. Sometimes you feel like your clients would like you better if you were a draft horse that could shoot a bow. Then when you're not working, people expect you to be a wild stud of a party animal, and it's worrying how easily that description fits when you let it.

*turn to page 75*

## **Uh, I don't know, taxes? Let's just do the job** ---

Perhaps this isn't the time and the place for something as intense as all that. Maybe if you just keep your head down you can get the job done quickly, and be away laughing before anything can catch up to you.

*turn to page 101*

## Getting corrupted by power...

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“When I come into town, people already know what I can do. I can see the look in their eyes, how they *know* that if I decided to use my skills to get what I want, there wouldn’t be a lot they could do to stop me.”

You exhale, rolling your eyes even as you force yourself to keep talking. “If I had to name a fear, I *guess* it would be the thought of getting hung up on that, and letting it go to my head.”

Grace is staring at you. “Wow. That was... deep. I was expecting like, death or fire or spiders or something.”

Biting back a scoff, you break eye contact. “Yes well, normally I do things alone, so I have a lot of time to think.”

There’s a few moments of silence, and then a few moments more, until eventually it grows so uncomfortable that Grace breaks it by blurting out, “Well, mine is spiders! In... case that helps.”

It’s hard not to be grateful at least for the prompt to move things along, so you charitably respond, “Perhaps it will. So, now that we are properly armed with knowledge, perhaps we can continue? I promise I will keep an eye out for any spider-based challenges.”

Grace smiles. “Yes, and I’ll do the same for... uh... the temptation of power... challenges...”

Busying yourself in lighting a torch, you’re able to let that latest awkward comment go unremarked on, and instead you both step inside the temple, with just a barely audible sigh of relief.

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The interior of the temple is no small challenge to get through. While no living guardians still remain, there are more than enough fiendish traps to cut any unwary trespasser to shreds. Fortunately, you’re more than up for the task, easily spotting and avoiding the pressure plates that litter the endless corridors. The hardest part is making sure Grace doesn’t trigger anything herself, but fortunately she proves smart enough to follow your directions closely.

Eventually, it begins to feel like a game, half-remembered children's rhymes coming back to you as you skip your way past near-invisible tripwires. If this is all it takes to infiltrate a vault of ancient and magical power, you should have started doing this forever ago.

“Sea people *drift*, bad kids are *missed*...”

Your feet dance without really thinking about it as you mumble to yourself. You can only assume Grace is keeping up by the way you haven't heard her cry out yet. That said, if she can't keep up, then she shouldn't be here in the first place, and she certainly wouldn't be fit for a share of the treasure.

“Linger on the *shore*, gone *forevermore*...”

This isn't even the first ancient temple you've heard of. Every town from here to the coast has tales of Old Magic and a lingering relic hidden somewhere nearby, but everyone always assumes they're too hidden or well-guarded to find. Well, this place proves that wrong. If all it takes is some nimble feet to walk out with something priceless and powerful, surely it's better you do it than anyone else? At least you'll have earned it, rather than paying a horde of servants to push through with brute force?

“Rolling waves of *three*, call out to the *sea*...”

You'd practically be doing the world a service. But more than that, it would just be right, wouldn't it? These things are dangerous, and important, and you can handle that, but who else could? Not only that, but you *deserve* them. Ancient magical artefacts need a worthy owner, and who else could control them but you? Anyone else would let the power get out of control, instead of being their rightful master. So why should you turn this Crown over to that council of elders, just because they paid you? They *should* have paid you, *and* let you have the relic, and any others they've heard about. That just makes sense.

“Rich salten *crown*, brings those who *drown*...”

Another corner, another pitiful trap. Honestly it's almost embarrassing. How could anyone think that—

\*click\*

You whip around, expecting to see a guilty-looking Grace frozen with her foot on the pressure plate you'd just avoided. But instead of that, she's standing quite calmly at the side of the corridor, her hand cupping a loose brick she's just released from the wall by pressing a hidden

catch. Seeing your stunned expression, she gestures to the runes just above her.

“It’s subtle, but there was a reference in that text to a hidden treasure to sate the spirits of the area. Looks like I guessed correctly about where it was.” She finishes opening up the compartment and fishes around inside. “And we have... an ornate silver bracelet. Nice!”

You’re speechless. At first you think it’s just due to how she was poking around carelessly in a heavily trapped environment like this, but quickly you realise that it’s more than just that. It’s because *she* spotted it, not you. You’re guiding them both through this deathmaze, and she just casually reaches out and grabs a hidden treasure. That’s just...

Well, you stop for a moment and think about it. How *does* that make you feel?

### **You’re angry.**

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How dare she put you both at risk, reading some forgotten writing instead of paying attention and deference to you? That treasure belongs to you by right – without you she’d have died at the first pit trap.

***turn to page 13***

### **Honestly, you can’t help but laugh.**

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All your self-importance ebbs away with this timely reminder that just maybe you *aren’t* the most powerful person in the world. Knowledge can be power too, and perhaps you have some things yet to learn.

***turn to page 19***

## You're angry...

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“Hey, give me that!” you snap, snagging the silver bracelet out of her hand before she can slip it over her wrist. She gives you a startled look, but a fierce glare shuts that down.

“You can’t just *take* things from here”, you snarl angrily. Your brain is only coming up with the exact words a half a moment before you speak, but the feeling of them, the raw heat of your aggrieved rage flows through your throat cleanly. “Without even mentioning the traps you could have triggered, do you have any idea what any of this actually does? This is a temple of ancient and mighty power. Do you think just *anyone* can put this on and walk out okay?”

Grace looks away, suitably chastised. “Oh, yeah”, she mumbles, a blush reddening her cheeks. “You’re right, I’m... I’m sorry.”

Your nostrils flare with one last dramatic snort, but her genuine deference lets you simmer down. She looks so small and helpless, and now that the treasure she stole has been secured, you find yourself feeling less aggrieved and more protective.

Grinning down at her, you lift her chin back up with a curved finger. “It’s alright. Just remember to follow my commands, okay? That’s what you’re here for, and that’s what will serve you best for getting through this.”

She nods, her spine sagging as she leans just a little on your hand. “Okay”, she whispers. “That’s the best plan, you’re right.”

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The rest of the defences offer little challenge. The traps almost seem too scared to attack you. As you clear the final corridor there’s a concealed spear that jabs outwards so half-heartedly that it shatters against your skin, with the only consequence being a little lingering redness on your forearm from the impact. Scoffing triumphantly, you stride into the vault that forms the temple’s heart. Grace is a few steps back, keeping an eye out for any runes she could translate, but otherwise content to follow behind you. And then, finally, you see the altar, and in a circle of shining light, the Crown.

It looks so... small.

All the power that the local villages were afraid of, this great terrible thing that was locked away for a thousand years, and it's nothing more than a slim circle of gold with a dozen fat rubies studded in it. It doesn't even look large enough to fit on your head comfortably. As you storm up the steps and tear it from its marble cradle you can curl your hand completely around one side of it, feeling the tips of your fingernails pressing back against your palm.

This is it? This great test, this great challenge? It's nothing. You could have walked straight through here without breaking your stride if you'd been by yourself, instead of stuck escorting some weak-kneed academic. Speaking of which...

You sit down on the flat surface of the altar, the marble cradle smashing to the ground behind you as you make yourself comfortable. Grace looks even smaller at the foot of the steps, head bowed as she struggles to meet your confident glare. Twirling the crown casually around on one finger, you lick your tongue over your sharp teeth as you look down at her.

"So", you sneer, your voice rumbling the ancient walls of this long-quiet room, "it seems to me like I didn't really have as much need for you here as I thought..."

Grace whimpers quietly, face flushing red as she continues to avoid your gaze. "I, well, I read the door, didn't I? And I found you that jewelry!"

You generously allow her that, turning to consider the treasure she'd found for you earlier. It's settled nicely over one of the fingers of your left hand, which seems a little odd because you could have sworn it was a bracelet, but it must have simply looked bigger on her than it does on you. It *does* make for a very nice silver ring though, so that at least counts for something.

Looking back towards Grace, you nod approvingly. "That's right, you did. But still, I think there is more tribute due before you've *properly* earned your reward. Doesn't that seem fair?"

The blush has taken over her whole face, a deep dull red stretching from her scalp to her neck. "I, uh, I..."

She trails off, words failing her as you sweep forwards, covering the distance between the two of you in a single step as you lift her chin. You know in your bones that you have her now, but there's still something delightful in playing with her, toying with your prey just a little before you make your final move.



Wordlessly, you hook the tip of your finger around, catching her by the collar and dragging her forwards. She follows your silent commands without resisting as you climb back up to the altar, and stands a few steps below you as you sit down.

“You’ve done a lot of studying”, you growl, sliding your legs open and revealing how your clothes have slipped away. “Time for one last oral exam...”

You draw your hand backwards. A strip of firm leather extends from the choker that has settled around her neck, growing steadily until you can wrap the other end of it around your clenched fist for a better grip. And then you tug, and her face settles between your thighs without any hesitation.

Her tongue feels startlingly cold as it slides across your slit. The sensation makes your lips curl back in a snarl, your claws tightening on her leash for a moment, but you relent as she warms up. Soon your other hand has found its place on the back of her head, pressing her in encouragingly. With a little guidance her nose finds your clit, and your hips drift through a series of rhythmic movements the better to take advantage of her efforts. You can’t fault her for her enthusiasm, but really, all she needs to do is follow your instructions, applying her tongue exactly where you require while you rub her face into yourself.

Eventually you feel something on her head, and you open your eyes enough to confirm that a pair of small horns are curling backwards out through her hair, soon serving as convenient handles to better direct her service. As you shift your grip you catch sight of your own hand, now covered in deep red scales and tipped with sharp black claws. Looking further downwards, you see that the reason why Grace’s attentions have improved is because her face is stretching outwards into a reptilian muzzle, her tongue lapping out ever longer as it grows lengthy and forked in turn.

Confusion reigns only briefly. What is there to be confused about, when this is so clearly correct? Why shouldn’t you display the power and majesty of your true self, while your pet is remade to better serve you? She already seems even smaller, your one hand easily wrapping around her entire head, but surely that is only right. Your stature now truly reflects your status, and there’s nothing else to do but settle back on your shattered throne, shifting only slightly to allow your long lizard tail to stretch out behind you.

Dimly, you register a point of discomfort on your arm. Your nostrils flare in irritation as you bring your focus back to yourself. It seems like the Crown has settled just below your elbow, and as your body grows it’s fitting uneasily over your straining muscles. With a dismissive snort you flick it downwards, leaving the Crown to rest instead over your wrist. It fits much better as a bracelet, and you spend a few moments turning it back and forth appreciatively. With the silver

ring you found earlier, it's a nice start to the sort of hoard you truly deserve.

A change in Grace's pace brings you back to her, her face all but disappearing inside your slit as she redoubles her efforts. By now you can see her own tail swaying out behind her — nothing compared to the size and majesty of yours of course, but enough to let her keep her balance as her legs shift their configuration, making her all the better suited to leaning into you like this. You let out another rumble of approval, twin curls of black smoke drifting into view as your nose stretches into your own draconic muzzle. She's... you might have to keep her around if she's this good...

You grit your sharpening teeth as tension builds up inside you, your whole body thrumming with power as you approach some final hurdle. Sensing this, Grace focuses in attentively, her stubby little claws barely registering as she grips the inside of your thighs, dragging her pointed muzzle again and again along the length of your slit before finishing each swipe with a flick of her warm tongue over your clit. You can feel that tension peaking inside you; at the base of your throat, in the knot in your spine and most especially deep in your loins. It takes several long moments of obedient service to drag it outwards, erupting from your maw as a flame-tinged roar. Great red wings burst from your back, while between your legs Grace hums in blissful satisfaction as you finally orgasm.

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Graciously, you allow some time to pass for her to recover. Grace's rumbled breaths sound almost like a purr as she curls affectionately around one of your legs, and you idly toy with her horns as you look her over. She looks... small, clearly reptilian, but nowhere near the stature and power that you yourself have now accomplished. You're sure there's some sort of word for what she is now, but technicalities like that are for others to worry about. Far more pressing is the way *you* feel — powerful, magnificent, almost regal. The word comes to mind unbidden, sliding into your thoughts like the smile settling over your snout. Dragon. Creatures of myth even in the time of Old Magic, but with your powerful wings, fire-breathing throat and mighty, red-scaled body, there can be nothing else that fits. Perhaps this place revealed that truth, or maybe it was always dedicated to you, and was simply awaiting your coronation.

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You reach down, pulling Grace aside with a single hand that encompasses her entire body. If this place is to truly be worth your dedication, then there is plenty of work to be done. Your loyal pet can get this place in order, but you have a different task in mind for yourself.

Your mighty wings flap, bringing yourself effortlessly into the air. Above you the temple opens up, and in a single fluid movement you ascend, revealing the borders of your realm already starting to take root.

There will be time to shape the creeping boughs of the regrowing forest later. For now, you have an appointment with some village elders, to see about the first of your tribute.

**THE END**

## Honestly, you can't help but laugh...

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Your sudden laugh surprises Grace, and she visibly jumps in response. “Is, uh, there something funny about this bracelet? Oh no—” her eyes widen, and she very quickly pulls it away from her. “It’s not cursed is it? Is that something you’re used to seeing?”

“No, no”, you answer with raised hands, calming her down enough that she doesn’t risk panicking and *actually* setting off a trap. “It’s just — here I was thinking I could have done this whole thing by myself, and then you found something beautiful without my even realising it existed.”

She smiles, then follows your eyes to look down at the bracelet itself. “It *is* pretty nice, isn’t it? So ornately decorated, and with just a nice heft to it.” It’s over her wrist before she’s even finished the sentence, and only after it settles into place does she think to look up at you apologetically. “Oh, uh, is this okay?”

You nod. “Absolutely. You earned it.”

Looking pleased with herself, Grace adjusts how it fits on her wrist for a few moments before looking back up at you. “So, which way from here?” she asks, indicating the three different doors up ahead.

“Hey, you’re the expert here”, you answer, with an exaggerated bow of deference. “You tell me.”

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When you start off again, Grace is leading the way. You follow close of course, still pointing out the triggers for traps you’ll need to avoid, but ever since she noticed that treasure it seems like every twist and turn of the temple is covered with elaborate script, and it quickly became more important to know where to go than simply what not to step on. Considering the particularly... intense path your thoughts had been going down before she snapped you out of it, you’re happy to take a moment to step back and follow her lead, rather than festering in that suffocating pride. Grace seems to be enjoying the opportunity too, becoming increasingly confident in both her translations and the paths she proposes because of them.

This whole expedition seems to be really agreeing with her. She’s standing a little taller as she

strides through the winding hallways, carrying her pack easily over one shoulder as she almost dismissively points out and avoids upcoming traps. Surprisingly, even though you're supposed to be the expert in dangerous situations, you're pretty sure you're making better progress now that she's leading.

It's enough to make you think. Your whole skillset revolves around subduing or fending off threats, but you can only ever deal with things that are right in front of you. The knowledge that Grace has lets her react to things that haven't even happened yet; effortlessly analysing some new scrap of ancient text or another to know that one corridor is a dead end while another is the true path. What is a steady bow arm compared to that?

And yet, for all that, Grace isn't lacking in more conventional strength. You must admit that you'd been dismissive of her previously, blithely assuming that anyone who spends so long studying books must have let their muscles waste away. But you realise now, that's not the case. There's a liteness to her; her legs taut and toned as she walks ahead of you, and every time she looks up and lifts her hand to trace a line of script on the walls you're entranced by the curves of her body. Her physical power might not be as obvious as bulging muscle, but it's no less potent than the strength of her knowledge.

"Enjoying the view, are you?"

You look up, startled, finding her turned back to face you. She's not even looking where she's walking — somehow she's confident enough in this magical deathtrap to take her eyes off the path, and yet that fact isn't half as distracting as the cocky, teasing smile on her lips.

"I, uh", you mumble, breaking eye contact and struggling to clear your head. "It's — well, it's just nice to have some company on a job like this."

She grins wider, and for a moment you think she's going to press the issue, but she simply nods and turns back around. At the same time she puts an extra sway in her step, and your eyes can't help but flick down to her rear as she walks away.

She doesn't say anything, and your breath still hitches in your throat. What did you want her to say? Would you rather she lean into it, confront you and push you up against the wall, the redness of your cheeks obvious to both of you as she pressed her advantage? Isn't it better she just let it drop? Even if that means you somehow yearn for any kind of resolution, and your mind keeps spinning out a dozen scenarios to finish that aching, hanging sentence?

She's turned the corner, and you belatedly realise that your every thought for the past few moments has started with her and what she's doing, and you haven't even moved. Kicking your

feet into action, you follow quietly in her wake.

The rest of the trials pass in a haze. Grace does all the work, reducing you to little more than a servant, but you don't even mind. In truth it's exciting, or relaxing, or somewhere in between — having someone else to do the heavy lifting of planning and thinking, and you can focus purely on taking care of your assigned tasks and enjoying the congratulations that their successful completion brings. Once, after you clear out a particularly stubborn blockage from her path, she runs her hand affectionately over the top of your head, and your eyes roll back in your head as you lean into her palm. After that you do everything you can to stay right at her side, and with only a minimal amount of bending down you find that you can brush up quite naturally against her hand, triggering yet more absent pets as you walk along. She doesn't speak to you, doesn't bend down or reach up as you slide yourself into place, but she doesn't need to. The feel of her hand on your scalp, the way your hair parts effortlessly against her fingers — that's enough.

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Finally, you reach what can only be the central chamber. You distantly note the way the vaulted roof towers above you, but Grace's expression as you look up at her is unconcerned. She moves forward confidently, a domineering sneer on lips, the elaborately carved tiles cracking beneath her powerful strides. You scurry after her, your steps settling neatly into the deep, three-pointed impressions she left behind. The idea that you'd need to point out anything about this place to her is the furthest thing from your mind, instead you can only focus on watching her curved hips sway in front of you, a mesmerising extra motion you can't quite consciously put your finger on commanding your attention as she climbs the stairs of the altar.

You're startled as her voice breaks the silence, booming out suddenly in this ancient, empty space. "And so here it is. The Crown of Vol'Surtoth."

It occurs to you you'd never put together that that was its full name before, despite that being the name of the temple. Of course Grace knew that though. You're sure she could figure *anything* out.

She's still talking, and the sound of her speech brings your thoughts back into line. "Such a little thing. So small and yet so potent, causing such endless *trouble* to our neighbours."

The inflection she hangs on those words makes you suddenly realise how mad you are at this stupid, thoughtless artefact. How could it be causing such problems to the people that Grace cares about?

"Well", she continues, plucking the crown from its cradle with one hand before settling into a

regal seated position on the vacant altar. “We’ll have to do something about that, won’t we?”

You nod energetically. Further input from you is not forthcoming, nor, thankfully, required.

“I believe I have an idea about what to do.”

Of course she does. Who else would? If she needed the Crown smashed to pieces maybe that would be a task you could handle, but who could know what sort of problems that would unleash? Only her, clearly.

Instead of talking you through it, Grace simply acts. She moves to put the Crown on her own head, but stops when she realises it’s not going to fit. Clearly the Old Magicians didn’t expect someone of her stature to claim it, which only further proves their shortsightedness. Snorting dismissively, she slips the Crown over her left hand instead, letting it settle into place as a mere bracelet.

“There. Now I can make sure its power is put to good use. Speaking of which...”

She turns to face you, and your heart skips a beat at her undivided attention.

“Look at me.”

You do. Your feet move forwards without thinking, bringing you to the foot of the steps that now form her throne, and once there you stare up at her longingly. She’s so tall and powerful, her golden scales radiant in a pool of shining light. Her reptilian snout curls in an approving smile as you sink to your knees, the still-hypnotic sway of her long tail just visible behind her.

“Closer.”

You rise, but your head sinks even as your legs straighten, unable to spend too long staring directly at her. It feels rude, not your place, so instead you look down at where her claws dig into the stone, suitably awed by this incidental demonstration of her raw power.

“Closer.”



She shifts her legs open, and even without looking up at her face you know she's clearing a space for you. Taking a few more steps you take the position she's indicating, a steady heat building on your cheeks as you find yourself standing between her thighs, your blushing face perfectly level with her hips. You don't know where to look, and in desperation your darting eyes catch hers, and an almost physical weight stops your movement as you sink into her stare.

There's no words now. Her hand simply lands on the side of your head, and you feel her claws digging ever-so-slightly into your skin. She sweeps her fingers over you, tracing the curve of the horns that extend back from your scalp in a lesser mirror of her own. You can't help but smile as the tips of her claws play with your pointed ears, brushing over them affectionately as you bury your face in your chest with another ferocious blush.

Her grip shifts to the back of your neck, and you relax into her grasp as she lifts your eyes back up. When you meet her gaze her reptilian visage fills your whole world, the tiny heat haze formed from her flaring nostrils adorning her with a subtle smokey halo.

Still she says nothing, but she doesn't need to. She pulls you closer, and it just feels right to be here, pushing your own snout between the discarded scraps of her clothes and landing blissfully between her thighs. Your long tongue slips out unbidden, lapping at the warmth of her pussy obediently, your tail wagging happily behind you as you settle into place. Her claws move, pressing just hard enough to register on the dull red scales that coat your body, and you can both feel the heat and energy that builds up inside of her. You chase it down eagerly, matching your efforts to the subtle timing she gives you with the slow rhythm of her thighs, lapping ever harder at her growing slickness. There's nothing else you could want but to be here, in this moment, blissfully serving the mightiest creature you've ever known, wonderfully submissive to her power and allowed to assume an echo of her regal visage.

Finally, you feel her whole body tense, and with a sudden 'whoomph!' she flaps her majestic wings triumphantly. Now that your task is complete you settle backwards, almost delirious with subservient bliss. She looks down at you proudly, stretching her wings to their full length and bathing you in their golden radiance as the light from above makes her whole body shine.

"Well done, pet", she purrs, every word of that sentence making you squirm. "You know, I think this might be a good place to settle up while I complete my research. Maybe I'll even be able to write a book of my own out here. But to do that, I'll need material — items and treasures to write about."

She looks down at you, her eyes as bright and powerful as the light she glows with. "Do you think you could get that for me?"

Your legs move before your mouth does, before your brain even registers the question. “Yes my mistress”, you say as you scurry away, off to search for whatever could be worthy of her.

“What a good pet”, she answers with a satisfied grin, curling up in her perch for a well-earned nap.

**THE END**

## Falling for the trap of a pointless, domestic life...

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“I travel around a lot. I’ve gone through caves and dungeons, ancient ruins and bandit camps, and you know what I’ve seen more than anything else?”

Grace seems legitimately curious. “What?”

“Everybody else. All the villages and towns that are being threatened by the monsters or the robbers, all filled with little people living little lives.”

“That... that seems a little harsh.”

You shrug, turning away from her judging expression. “Hey, if it works for them, great. I’m just saying you’d never catch me shacking up with some idiot just because they were an okay way to break the boredom, living in a house I inherited from my parents and just waiting to die so I could give it to my kids. Besides”, you add, “I thought your big pitch for being out here was because you wanted to get rich. Aren’t you planning on enjoying that?”

Now it’s Grace’s turn to look away, but surprisingly it’s only a brief moment before she returns your questioning stare. “Maybe, but having fun doesn’t mean I can’t find someone and settle down. I could just... settle down in style. And even if I don’t, it doesn’t mean I think less of anyone who does.”

It sounds like you’ve upset her, which, annoyingly, does make you feel a little bad. This is yet another reason why you normally work alone.

“Look, you asked me to tell you truthfully what I was afraid of. I wouldn’t be out here, risking my life fighting monsters and dodging traps if I thought I was suited to a quiet life, would I? I’m sure if I could find satisfaction in... I don’t know, making small people and tall wheat, I probably would. But to me that feels suffocating, so instead I’m here, making a living putting arrows in things that scare people.”

Begrudgingly, Grace nods. “Yeah, okay”, she grants. “It’s fair to want to go your own way. Just... knock it off with that ‘little people living little lives’ stuff. People wanting to have families aren’t so bad. I happen to come from a long line of families.”

You laugh a little, grateful for the break in the tension. “Sure, I’ll keep it in mind.”

“And hey, you never know”, Grace adds, just before you set off into the temple. “Maybe you’ll meet someone and change your opinion.”

Your spine stiffens for just a moment at that comment, but in the interest of preventing a full-on argument from breaking out, you keep your response light. “I don’t know, I don’t think I’m going to meet too many attractive prospects hanging around in ancient ruins.”

“Well I wouldn’t say *that*”, Grace counters. “I don’t know if you got the version of that book I mentioned before with the engravings, but that snake-people enclave the author ended up founding was very...”

Even without looking you can hear her hands moving quickly in a series of emphatic gestures, presumably sketching out a series of appealing curves.

“Yes, well”, you answer over your shoulder, “if we run into anything that turns people into super horny creatures like that then you can be in charge of dealing with it.”

She pauses, and after another quick glance you realise she’s writing a brief note to herself. “I’ll hold you to that”, she says eventually.

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The two of you are mostly silent as you lead the way into the temple proper. There’s enough traps to hold your attention, and Grace seems content to move without talking. Every now and again you spare a moment to look back and check on her, and she’s either following in your footsteps diligently or, if there’s enough of a pause, casting what you hope is a knowledgeable eye over the murals and inscriptions that cover the walls. You have to imagine she’d call out if she saw anything worthwhile — to justify her coming on this job, if nothing else — but as you go through several complicated passageways there doesn’t appear to be anything worth bringing up.

That changes as you make your way into a small antechamber. You’re busy mentally plotting a course over the patchwork of crumbling floor tiles when a hand on your shoulder almost makes you jump, and you turn to see Grace pointing at an engraving up ahead.

“Oil of Enervation”, she translates. “Or... maybe the opposite of that? Like everything here it’s ambiguous.”

You look around, trying and failing to see any bubbling vats or concealed pools. “Where?”

“That... I don’t know.” She cranes her neck as she looks around the chamber, and you belatedly realise she’s trying to see as much as possible without moving her feet from the last spot you told her was safe. Perhaps she is wiser than you first thought.

“The context seems to indicate that that oil is what this whole room is for, or focused on. It doesn’t seem like a trap or a danger. It’s either a reward, or... a challenge?”

You narrow your eyes. “That’s a pretty big gap in meaning there.”

“Hey”, Grace counters, “if you want to try and translate a series of idiomatic devotional phrases from a long-dead language through an only somewhat etymologically related cousin language, be my guest.”

Sighing heavily, you concede the point with a wave of your hand. “Okay, no, I believe you. I could barely follow that sentence.”

She stands on her tiptoes for a moment, squinting at something further out. “I think there’s more writing that might give a bit more context, but I can’t quite make it out from here. I think I’d need to be in the room to read it.”

“Let’s hold off on that for now”, you answer, holding a hand up to her chest. “Let me take another look at the situation first.”

Turning back to the empty chamber, you take a long look at everything you can see, and with the added context of what Grace said there’s a few more things that come to your attention. What you first took to be age discolouration on the floor tiles might actually be old stains from whatever that oil is, and there are a series of small holes on the ceiling that could be where the oil is dispensed.

Putting that all together, you have a small chamber that you have to cross, and that also seems to be built around dousing the entire area in whatever this ‘Oil of Enervation’ is. As much as you’d like to think that oil would have drained away or lost its potency by now, there’s been more than enough still-working traps here to make you doubt it’s that simple.

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The room is only around a dozen feet across, so perhaps it would make more sense to cross one

at a time. That way if one of you does trigger the oil the other wouldn't get caught in it, and could presumably help clean it off, especially if it takes time for the reservoirs of the trap to refill. But that leaves the question — who should go first?

**You should go first.** 

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you're clearly better suited to avoiding traps, and you're sure you can make it across without stumbling into any tripwires or pressure plates.

*turn to page 30*

**Grace should go first.** 

---

you can guide her steps from here, and if she can read the writing then maybe she'll be able to solve whatever puzzle is required to get through safely.

*turn to page 39*

## You should go first...

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“I’ll go across first”, you say, looking the room over one last time. “Once I’ve found a safe path I’ll call you to follow, and hopefully we can avoid all this being an issue.”

Grace looks a little relieved, sinking back from her tiptoes while still keeping her feet planted safely in place. “Be my guest”, she answers. “I’ll keep an eye out from here, and call out if I see anything that might be relevant.”

You’re already planning your route through the room so you barely register her comment, just nodding absently as you drop to a sprinter’s crouch. Okay, there’s three tiles right in front of you that look safe, and then after that you can sidestep that pressure plate, brace yourself on the wall to get steady, then it’s a simple jump to get past the suspiciously barren patch of ground and catch yourself on the decorative column by the opposite door. Simple enough.

You go. With your path laid out there’s no more need to think, your movements flowing together in a careful rhythm as you spring forwards. Mercifully, the tiles you guessed were safe don’t appear to trigger anything untowards, and in a matter of moments you come to the pre-planned sidestep, your hands already prepared to brace against the wall as you tense to throw yourself left.

It is, of course, right then that Grace’s voice rings out from behind you. “It says ‘stand here!’” she yells, and that unexpected phrase catches you like a fist to the gut. Your legs lock up as you attempt to stand still, but your upper body is already jerking left, and the combination of those two things throws off what’s left of your balance. There’s a series of stumbles and missteps as you attempt to catch yourself, but in the end it leads to you falling backwards right onto the pressure plate. The impact knocks the wind out of you, and before you can catch your breath you see those slits on the ceiling start opening up, and you’ve got just enough time to close your eyes as the oil rains down.

The sensation isn’t what you expect. It doesn’t burn, and it doesn’t seem like any of the nastier contact poisons you’ve encountered. Instead it just feels... warm, insistently so, with a slow heat that seems to pour through your skin and seep into your bones. You gasp reflexively, allowing a portion of the liquid to slide down your throat, but aside from a brief coughing fit to clear it from your lungs, that only seems to result in an unpleasantly slick taste coating the back of your tongue.

It takes a few moments for the rain to finish, but once the last of whatever this was drips down onto you, nothing prevents you from getting back to your feet. After wiping a hand over your face to clear it from your eyes, you give yourself a quick examination and thankfully don't see anything wrong. You're slicker than a favoured tourist of the Goo People village, but aside from a tingling sensation everywhere it touches your skin, there doesn't appear to be any effect.

With that confirmed, you get back to the real priority — staring daggers at Grace. She wilts under the force of your glare, a weakly-raised hand pointing above your head. “I... figured out that it says ‘stand here’”, she clarifies.

“Thanks”, you answer, the word dripping with sarcasm just as much as you're dripping with mystery liquid. You sweep another clump of it out of your hair, then sigh heavily to vent some of the tension. “Luckily, it feels like this is just some kind of fancy massage oil, so we're probably safe.”

“Really?” Grace asks, her curiosity instantly overriding her previous guilt. “I suppose that does fit with the general theming of this chamber, but I wonder why they'd go to such an extent for something as simple as that. Are you sure there's nothing else to it? Let me know any other effects as you experience them — I'm sure they'd provide useful context.”

You glare at her again, but she seems far too wrapped up in this new mystery to care. “I promise if I start to dissolve, I'll let you know. But for now...”

Tapping the plate with your foot, you confirm that no more of the oil is left to dispense. “Can we get moving? I'd rather not spend longer marinating in this than I have to.”

Grace agrees readily, and falls in behind you as you cross the rest of the chamber. It's a *little* annoying that she can just stroll across after you got doused with gunk, but for now you console yourself by mentally re-dividing the spoils. This might have been annoying, but at least it's nothing that a few extra luxurious baths can't set right.

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As neat as that solution is, it doesn't quite keep your irritation at bay. This gunk is just *everywhere*, and it's hard to be calm when every single movement reminds you just how soaked you are. Surely massage oil is supposed to make you more relaxed, but the way this is pressing almost insistently into every crevice is hard to ignore, not to mention how it feels like your clothes have shrunk. Everything is tight and slimy and tense, and it's all you can do to keep at least half your mind on the job at hand as you slowly work your way forward.

The temple itself isn't helping. Stepping over tripwires makes your legs rub slowly against each other, and several times you're forced to throw yourself painfully against the wall to avoid a pressure plate after once again losing your footing. In all, the rooms after the oil chamber are a harder struggle than the entire trip before up to that point, and it's not long before you're muttering under your breath with frustration.

It's at this point that, once again, Grace pipes up casually. "So, how are you feeling now?"

You round on her, spinning a little more than you intended as your slick heel slips on the stone. "How am I feeling? Well, I'm covered in slippery oil, which isn't *great* for delicate footwork, but hey, thanks for asking."

She shrinks back a little, but you can see her curiosity win out as she can't help but ask another question. "Do you think I could take a closer look at it?"

"Sure", you answer, and before either of you can react you've placed your hand firmly over her mouth. Grace looks at you, eyes a little wide, but despite how much you've surprised yourself with this, you don't let go. In fact, you hold her a little tighter, stepping close as you stare her down.

"So, how does that feel?" you ask, sliding your fingers over her face to drill in the point.

She doesn't even try to answer. You don't realise at first that you're leaning over her so forcefully that she's had to prop herself up against a wall for balance, and it's only sheer luck that you've avoided triggering another trap. Grace doesn't know that though — as far as she's aware, this was all deliberate, and you were proving how even in this deadly temple, you're the most dangerous thing around.

That thought is enticing. There's something about the combination of power and surprise, of being unexpectedly powerful, able to pivot from sneaking to striking in an instant but not losing any fierceness for the flexibility. It's something you're familiar with in general, of course, but not normally in this particular context. The results however, make you wonder why you've never mixed these particular talents before now.

You slide forwards. You can't say for certain at what point you leaned in so far that you couldn't keep your footing, but now suddenly you're only still standing because you're pressing down against her, resting your other arm over her chest as it rises and falls. Her breath is on your skin, hot enough that it drowns out all the discomfort from the oil. There's just her, eyes wide, panting into the palm of your hand.

There's something about this that just feels warm, and somehow right. Every part of you that rubs up against her feels just a little better than the parts that don't. It's all you can do to keep from falling on top of her, and it's only the thought of how much of a bad idea it would be to tear off her clothes in the middle of a trap-filled maze that holds you back.

Long moments pass. Eventually you figure that if going further isn't an option, the only thing to do is back down. You slowly release your grip, letting Grace go as both of you breathe properly for the first time in a while.

"I hope that answers your question", you tell her firmly.

Her response is just a nod, but you catch a redness on her cheeks that can't just be the result of the pressure of your hand. Recognising that makes you grin, and that in turn makes her reflexively lower her eyes. Wordlessly, you continue onwards.

After that, the slickness seems to have either sunk in or rubbed off enough to no longer be much of an issue. There's just a slight tingling sensation left behind, which makes you think that maybe it was just massage oil all along. In any case, you're able to put it behind you as you make your way through the rest of the temple, sidestepping the remaining traps with ease. It's good to feel your nimbleness coming back after having been hobbled and distracted by the oil, and you settle into a ready crouch as you dance past another set of lethal pressure plates. Somewhere between doing a freehand wall climb to avoid a pit and a backwards somersault to dodge a swinging blade you're forced to admit you might be showing off a little, but what's the harm? It feels good to let loose, and clearly whoever built this place wasn't trying to defend against someone of your skill.

About the only thing that's still nagging at you is some tightness around your breeches. You're pretty sure that the oil must have shrunk them a little, which is hardly the worst outcome for getting caught by a trap. And besides, if your clothes are a little tight, that just gives you all the more opportunity to play off of it for Grace's benefit.

You're not exactly sure why you're teasing her so much, but as you go through the last few rooms of the temple, that becomes your focus entirely, rather than actually making progress. If at first you barely gave her a backward glance, now you're finding every opportunity to stop and walk her through things, pressing up close as you slowly manipulate her legs to get past a 'particularly difficult' tripwire. Grace takes all this in good spirits, letting herself be moved whenever you deem it necessary, sometimes closing her eyes as a smile drifts over her face at your touch. Eventually she can't help but twitch her nose as you come near, reacting to your mere presence in a way that she can't entirely conceal. It is, all said, rather a nice way to get through a mission.

Finally though, you find yourself at what must be the center of the temple. The winding corridor opens up into a massive room, in the very middle of which rests a golden crown on a simple pedestal. The rest of the room is far from simple though. Spinning blades, jabbing spears, and yawning pits crowd the rest of the space, and you can barely even see the Crown for all the hazards that flash past between you and it.

For a moment, the two of you stop, confronted by just how absurdly lethal this last chamber is, especially compared with how easy of a time you'd been having recently.

"Oh", Grace says eventually. "This seems... to be a problem."

You nod, but even so, you're already scanning the room and getting a sense of its timings. You can do this. You've gotten this far, and you feel better now than when you started out in the morning. If anyone can make it through this, you can. You just need to be smart about it.

"Stay here and look around for any signs or instructions that could give hints about turning all this off", you tell her, before belatedly adding, "but this time, make sure you only say something about them *before* I start."

She blinks in surprise. "You're going out there? Really?"

"Really", you answer, swinging your arms through the air a few times to loosen them up. "Only this time, I'm going to be prepared for everything I need to do."

Grace swallows nervously, but doesn't say anything else before she starts studying the inscriptions on the walls. For your part you step a little to the side, rubbing your palms dry as you study the room.

There's space between those first two pits, and several beats where the gap between the blades all line up. You'll have to leave your stuff behind though — there's no sense in carrying your weapons in here if all they'll do is risk throwing you off and getting you killed. You shuck your bow and lower it with your pack to the ground, rotating your arms once again as you free them up.

Further out into the room there's clearly a part where a dozen tripwires converge, and you'll have to be on top of your game to avoid that. It's been long enough since you had to push yourself that you decide to stretch and massage your legs — after all, even a momentary stiffness could be the difference between life and death. Settling onto the floor you extend yourself carefully, rubbing the length of your thighs in a slow and deliberate manner.

That feels better, but your armour still feels too constricting. The straps of your armoured chest

piece might just catch on to something they shouldn't, and to be honest, you're sure you're most nimble when you're barefoot. So, without further consideration, all that goes too. Immediately your chest feels freer, while at the same time your long toes wriggle happily as they're removed from your boots.

You go to stand back up, but you're caught off-guard by the tightness around your waist. Your leggings being tight was fun before, but now it's dangerous — you can't risk anything that might restrict your movements if you're going to be dodging three blades in mid-air. So, really, there's only one solution.

Grace is so preoccupied in the etchings she doesn't even notice as you slip them off, adding them to the pile in front of you as you stand and gratefully stretch. After a moment's hesitation you lose your top too, as without everything else to keep it contained there's too much loose fabric that could cause problems. Finally, you're left in just your underclothes as you stand back up, your hands rubbing idly at your newly exposed muscles while you consider the situation.

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It's tricky. Getting to that crown will require all the skill you have, but you've done everything you can to give yourself the edge you need. You've limbered up, there's nothing weighing you down, the only thing left to do is go for it. Placing your hands on your knees to steady yourself, you're briefly surprised to find more fuzz on your thighs than you'd expect. It has been some time since you've splashed out for a full-service bathing session, you reflect, but at least the lingering sheen from the oil has kept you nice and smooth regardless. If anything it feels even better than normal to run your hand across the inside of your thigh, the almost furry texture giving an interesting counterpoint to your bare skin elsewhere on your body. Stroking your fingers along yourself feels... distractingly good.

You don't make a conscious decision to keep going. If anything, it's the fact that you don't make a decision to stop, and without that it just keeps building. Quite naturally your hands move from something that could arguably be called a massage to something that definitely could not, your fingers tracing the edges of your underwear. That feels nice, but annoyingly, now even they feel too tight, and you could swear they're all but bulging outwards on both sides. Could the oil have gotten to them too?

As you go to pull them aside, something stops you. Your eyes cross a little as you tug at the fabric, because it presses back against your body in new and unfamiliar ways. The surprise of that moment quickly melts beneath the enthusiasm it provokes — yes, this is different, but it's a *good* kind of different. And really, what else have you learned on this whole expedition if not for the

fact that it's worth exploring new things like this when they come up? Teasing Grace, showing off with the traps, even your unexpected massage oil treatment — they were all opportunities for fun that wouldn't have come up if you didn't open yourself up to them. So, why stop that now? Why not keep things going, and see how this could develop?

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It's some time before Grace gives up on the inscriptions, reluctantly turning back to you with a disappointed shake of her head. "While the three-part proverb here is probably fascinating, I don't think I'm going to..."

She finally registers that you're completely naked, and a moment after that she realises even from behind you that your movements aren't quite that of someone just preparing for physical exertion. "...figure it out..." she finishes.

On that cue, you turn around. By now, you're unabashedly pleasuring yourself, but then Grace notices that the way your hands are moving speaks to something else, and a moment later the last of your underclothes fall away, revealing both the sudden growth of fur blossoming out over your body and, even more urgently, your still-lengthening cock. Instantly your fingers curl around it, drawing a satisfied moan from your lips as you start to sweep up and down.

Her eyes go wide, but you've done so much to prepare yourself for action that this just serves as a change of focus, and before she can do anything more you pounce on her, sending the two of you tumbling to the ground just outside the trap-filled room. You come up on top, pinning her to the floor effortlessly with your increasingly inhuman feet. Curling over her, your spine bends almost fluidly as you settle into a comfortable crouch, and it's only when Grace sees the pink, hairless tail rapidly growing in behind you that she's able to start putting things together. She sputters out some words, but the increasingly fuzzy paw that your hand has become lands heavily on her lips as you lean down, your own vision momentarily distracted as your muzzle and whiskers grow in.

"Don't worry", you chitter, pleased to see that her own ears are already starting to point upwards. "I think I've figured out what we need to do."

Reluctantly you pull your remaining hand away from your cock, then skitter upwards so that you're positioned over her face, your almost-dripping tip just barely above her nose. You can tell from the sticky coating on your claws that the scent of that slickness matches the oil you were doused with earlier — cloyingly sweet and enticing. It's enough of a hit to make you pause for a moment, and you can tell it has an even bigger impact on Grace, as she stops even trying to

talk and instead starts drifting up towards your exposed cock. You hold off for another heartbeat or two, making her strain herself just enough to prove to both of you that she wants it, and to reinforce exactly who is in control here. And then, with the situation established to your satisfaction, you press downwards, sliding your shaft firmly between her lips.

The feeling of her mouth closing around you is intoxicating. Her tongue curls around your cock and adds another layer of delicious slickness, while at the same time you can feel your growing balls swinging against her chin as the last of your formerly feminine slit closes over. Distantly your feet raise up and reform themselves, giving you a digitigrade stance that you only really notice because it gives you an easier point of leverage to continue thrusting into her. She reshapes rapidly beneath your attentions; maybe it's the concentrated dose you're giving her, or maybe it's just how powerfully you're sharing this with her, but the important thing is that already her face is sliding outwards into a muzzle better suited to engulfing the length of your cock, and her increasingly clawed hands are gripping tightly at your waist as she holds herself close. You lean back, enjoying the sensation of the last of the soft black fur washing over your body just moments before Grace is wrapped up in her own white coat, then, with a triumphant hiss you press down and cum, pulsing your thick, corrupting fluid straight down her throat. She swallows it eagerly, her tongue wrapping around your shaft and coaxing as much of it as she can get, then slowly lying back in a blissful stupor as you pull free.

That lasts for a few moments, until suddenly she once again tenses, and you see her curl in on herself with an urgent but undirected energy. There's clearly something going on, but whatever it is is hidden by the clothes and possessions that still cling to her, having not yet been fully shed by both your flailing claws and her own changing body. Still, they're damaged enough that it's a trivial matter to cut them away, and when she's completely naked you see her own leaking slit begin to close. You give it a single encouraging lick as it seals up, then you sit back to watch the new growth coming in to replace it, her hips sputtering forward in off-beat rhythm to this demanding development. Soon it's large enough for her to wrap her claws around, while her spare paw kneads at the swelling patch of flesh that soon gives way to her own churning balls.

All of this you watch with a satisfaction you can't entirely pinpoint. There's a pride in how much she's leaning into it, but wrapped around that is an egotistical enjoyment of just how much you've changed her — how you've taken a reserved intellectual out into the real world and corrupted her into a horny rat creature with a dripping, aching dick, ready to obey your commands so long as they include the permission to cum over and over again so that this corruption can be spread yet further.

You decide to test this last point, pushing your muzzle almost entirely into her twitching pink ear and whispering the perverted plans that you've already come up with. She pants breathlessly at your words, and every description of setting up your new warren sends her whole body

shuddering, but for as slick as you've made her she's still clearly holding back, obediently waiting for your command.

Mercifully, after only a few more moments of exquisite anticipation, you relent. "Cum", you whisper, and immediately she does, her newly-grown tail whipping around behind her as the climactic orgasm hits, leaving an ever-increasing pool of her own oil beneath her as she stiffens and releases.

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For a time you let her recover, taking in your surroundings. The path to the Crown is even more obvious than before, but now that you stop and think about it, that just doesn't seem to matter. The promise you made to village elders belongs in a previous life, and you can hardly be held to it now. Besides, if the Crown was actually important, then it wouldn't have been left here in the middle of a dark and empty temple, abandoned by every living thing for countless years. Trinkets like that are the past, you reflect as you look down at Grace lying blissfully beside you, her nose twitching just a little as you affectionately scratch her chin with your claw. You never could have had an experience like the one you've just had if you were alone, no matter how many golden crowns you hoarded around yourself. After all, maybe spending time with others doesn't have to involve 'settling down', exactly. Not if you found the right people to spend time with, or perhaps simply the right *amount* of people.

That warren idea you came up with in the heat of the moment has a certain amount of appeal, and clearly it's something Grace found intriguing. Maybe you could find a place up by Candle Cove. Surely the wererats there could use, and would provide, some interesting company. Maybe they'd need some dedicated recruiters too, which is a role you'd be more than happy to try on for size.

Grace begins to stir as you gather up the still-useful parts of your gear. You've got a long journey ahead, but for once you're truly excited to think about all the friends you'll make along the way.

**THE END**

## Grace should go first...

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You're still considering it when Grace pipes up from behind you. "I think I should do it."

Turning around to face her, you see a look of determination on her face to match the one she had when you first recruited her for this job. "Really? You sure?"

She nods, then starts listing points off on her fingers. "One: I think there's instructions in the inscriptions, so if I can read them I'll be better able to get through than you. Two: you can keep an eye on me from here, and make sure I don't step into a tripwire or anything. And three..."

There's a pause as her mouth catches up to as far as her brain had gotten, and she hurriedly searches for a final point to add.

"Uh, I gotta earn my pay somehow, right?"

You raise an eyebrow, but far be it from you to stand in the way of someone wanting to step out of their comfort zone and take a risk. "If you think you can handle it, well, be my guest. I'll keep an eye out from here, and call out if I notice anything from my side."

"Great!" Grace answers. She starts forwards, then stops, shucks her pack to the ground, tightens up a few of her belts and pouches, and squares her jaw. "Okay, ready!" she says firmly.

A moment passes as you wait for her to move. You tilt your head to the side slightly, then cough. "Uh... go whenever you're ready."

Oblivious to your misgivings she struts out confidently, and you can tell it's only once she actually gets out of the entrance that she remembers she's supposed to be looking at the inscriptions rather than making her way through the room on pure bluster. Her head quickly snaps upwards, and the back and forth trail of a finger shows that she's working on a particularly promising line.

"For the ceremony to commence", she reads, largely to herself, but thankfully loud enough for you to follow along, "the initiate must make... their way through the path of 'future promise'? Enhanced prosperity? Abundant... social engagement? Hm."

She's leaning ever further to the side as she reads what must be text along the ceiling, so even though she's only a foot or so away you clap your hands to get her attention. "Watch where you're standing, huh?"

Aside from a brief start at your clap, Grace largely ignores your interruption. "The path of the participants is... here", she continues, flicking her head up and down to confirm a seemingly ordinary patch of ground. "So, naturally, all I need to do is *not* go that way, and instead go... this way, along the path of the... um, well, the other path. This way."

She steps confidently to the side, although you can tell she's bracing herself just a little as she lowers her foot to the stone. When she presses down and doesn't hear the click of a trap being triggered, she brightens up. "See?"

You give her a respectful nod. "Well done."

Smiling, she slowly and deliberately moves forwards as she keeps reading along the ceiling. "See, there's a whole story being told here, and over on that side is where the people stand who are... watching? Huh? Why is *this* the object and that the subject? Wasn't that tense..."

"Stop!" you yell at the same time her distracted stride finishes, and you both hear the echoing click as the tile she landed on slides downwards.

Grace has just enough time to say "oh", and given that she's already looking up she can see the slits open in the roof as a mist of oil sprays down.

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Your first instinct is to knock Grace out of the path of the trap, but you're too far away. You just have to watch as the shining liquid rains over her, while the best she can do to defend herself is shrink backwards and shield her eyes. She quickly loses her balance, and the only stroke of good fortune is that she doesn't trigger any more traps as she falls to the ground.

It's all over in moments, and as soon as you have a clear path you dart forwards, hurriedly inspecting Grace, who has shrunk into a protective ball. There's no burning or bubbling, mercifully ruling out some of the nastier options for what this could be, but that doesn't mean she's out of danger yet. You force her to uncurl — now that the spraying is done, there's no sense risking rubbing this on herself further by closing up, and besides, she needs to straighten so you can get off her clothes that took the worst of it.

She opens her eyes again as you're tugging at her top, and blinks for a few moments before saying anything.

"I'm... alive?"

A dozen pessimistic answers run through your head, but you manage to push most of them aside. "Yeah. Maybe it lost potency with age?"

Frowning, she waves you aside, forcing you to give her space as she gets to her feet. "No, I mean — *if* I'm alive, then the meaning of these inscriptions must be more about a reward, or a reward-trial, and not the punishment interpretation I was thinking..."

Incomprehensibly, she's going right back to reading along the ceiling, going so far as to raise one still-dripping finger to trace her path along the text.

"No", you say firmly, and you put enough weight behind it you manage to take Grace's mind off her decoding work. "Leave that for now. Let's get you cleaned up back where we know it's safe. I never should have let you come out here first to begin with."

You can tell Grace is planning on arguing, but when you tug forcefully on her arm she rolls her eyes and sighs. "I'm *fine*", she protests, "but if you insist, then we can go and sit down. I really need to take some notes anyway."

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There's a few benches just outside the doorway to this room, and after taking longer than you probably needed to make absolutely sure they're trap-free, you lead Grace over to the largest one. You then spend a few more moments going between sitting opposite from and standing protectively over her, unable to decide what conveys the correct impression of care while avoiding being overbearing.

This whole thing is new to you. This is *why* you don't bring people into dangerous places, damnit. You know you can look after yourself, and even if you do slip up, it's only you that gets hurt. Now there's someone else who can weigh on your conscience, someone whose feet you can't trust to dive out of the way at the slightest hint of trouble, and whose earnest little face just fills up your mind as you work to wipe off the goo you got her sprayed with.

You shouldn't have done this. Not just letting her go into that room first, although that was a whole new tier of carelessness, but bringing her to this place at all was your biggest mistake.

What's the use of having someone who can read the writing if they're just going to walk into traps anyway? How could you expect th—

“Uh, do you mind?” Grace interrupts your racing thoughts, and for the first time in a while you look at her and see something other than a furious collection of all your failings. So you finally register that you've been all but jabbing her in the nose with the cloth you're using to clean her, which, judging from her awkward pose, had been stopping her from taking notes like she intended.

Biting your teeth together, you mumble a quick apology, turning instead to wringing the wetness out of her hair. She allows that without complaint, eventually shifting so that she's lying face down, with her arms dangling over the end of the bench so she can still scribble into her pad on the floor. You dry her hair as best you can, and then move down the rest of her body, and for lack of a better idea just start rubbing along the length of her back. She stretches and wriggles a little, clearly not minding your actions, which, presumably, is a good sign.

Not all contact poison is fast-moving, but anything that would rely on drenching someone like this would normally have some sort of initial reaction to track it by. On top of that is the scent, which is a lot sweeter than you would expect for something toxic. It smells of flowers, soft and enticing, and it would be unusual if something this enjoyable to inhale was dangerous. But then again, nothing about this temple is usual. Because if this was... fancy massage oil or something, why would this place be set up to spray it on people just walking through the room?

“Enervation”, Grace says beneath you, once again bringing you out from your thoughts. She's talking to herself, tapping her pencil to the page as she thinks aloud. “That's the key.”

Genuinely curious, you lean forward a little, even as you keep up the rhythm along her back. “How do you mean?”

“The whole room is focused around the ritual, but it's not about punishment, or penance. It's a... channelling, I think. The energy isn't gained or lost, but focused. The observer is as important as the observed, the participant equal to and sharing with their audience.”

You consider all that. “That's... good?”

“It's *interesting*”, Grace counters, rolling onto her back as she flicks her attention back and forth between her notes and the ceiling above her. “There's a repeated use of a collective noun here, but it's not one I'm familiar with. It's informal, and I think it indicates a high level of intimacy, but it could be ‘clerical congregation’ just as easily as it could be ‘orgy’.”

That gets your eyebrows to shoot upwards, but before you can say anything Grace sits up a little and looks at you directly. “I didn’t say stop.”

You look down, realising that ever since she flipped over your hands aren’t rubbing over her anymore. “I thought you said you were fine?”

She meets your playful accusation with a wry grin. “Well, I thought that too, before I started getting a massage. Now I think maybe further research is needed.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh yes”, she answers with a definitive nod. “I think it might even be dangerous if you stop now.”

You laugh. As much as she’s playing things up, you can’t really be mad at her. If anything it’s a relief to make light of all this, given how recently you were worried that she was in real trouble. “Well, so long as it’s for research, then I suppose I *have* to give you a massage.”

“Quite right”, she says definitively, reaching up to pat you briefly on your head before relaxing back again, face down on the bench. That action makes you feel... something, but it’s hard to place exactly whether it’s a good or a bad feeling that runs up and down your spine as she casually tousles your hair.

You decide to look past it, and just keep going with the massage. It’s nice, and considering how much your heart was pounding just recently, it’s not a bad idea to relax a little. The temple has been here for hundreds of years, it can wait a bit longer. All that oil has made Grace smell very nice, and it’s been far too long since you had someone in your hands like this.

That thought gets your mind wandering. It *has* been too long since you had company. The downside to never settling down is that you always have to go out of your way to find companionship, whether it’s picking up someone cute from a tavern or finding some reliably disreputable place to indulge yourself. It’s a lot of work, and it’s exhausting to have to do every time, especially if you’ve just finished up with some big, dangerous mission. Having someone just *there*, when you need them — someone who you can feel their warm skin against your hands without having to go through the whole dance beforehand, well. It’s hard to deny the appeal entirely.

Admittedly, you’re not used to being the one giving the massage, so you try to just give the sort of attention you’d like to receive. Your hands make long, slow sweeps along her spine, pressing and kneading as best you can through her clothes. She picks up on that interruption too,

shifting around a little before turning up to look at you.

“Would you mind if...” she starts, tugging at her top with one hand.

You shake your head. “No, go ahead”, and almost immediately she’s unbuttoning her straps, peeling aside the uncomfortably wet leather of her top. She manages to do it at just the right angle to preserve her modesty, although that seems to be more accident than intention. With that done she lies back down, tensing just a little as her bare skin touches the cold stone of the bench beneath her, but soon she’s relaxing once again into your massage.

Honestly, it feels good to do something nice for someone like this. For as long as it’s been since you’ve received intimate attention yourself, you begrudgingly admit it’s probably been even longer since you gave it to someone else. Maybe it shouldn’t take someone almost being killed for you to do this again in future. Maybe if you actually got to know someone properly, that would be more of an option.

Speaking of getting to know someone, you’re surprised to find your fingers brushing against something fuzzy. Looking down, you realise both that your hands have wandered further south on Grace’s body than you were planning, and also that you seem to have encountered the white, furry underwear she’s wearing. You didn’t think she would be the type to wear something like that, but she doesn’t seem startled to have that uncovered. If anything she seems even more relaxed, having abandoned her notetaking entirely to stretch her spine out blissfully beneath your touch.

Well. If she’s enjoying it, then no sense in stopping.



You push further, enjoying the way she gives a little happy shiver every time you brush up against the fuzzy line at her waist. Whether it's the thrill of pushing boundaries or if it just translates through to her as a pleasant tickle you're not sure, but in either case it's fun to play with. A few inches more and your fingers sink into the fur entirely, and for a moment you're distracted by how soft and thick it is. No wonder she's wearing this underwear if it's this nice.

Grace catches you off-guard as she rises up suddenly, but when she turns towards you her unexpected movement is the least of your surprises. Her face has changed. Her nose has pushed outwards slightly, widening and brightening to form a pink button. Half a dozen whiskers spread out a few inches from her upper lip and her front teeth seem a little larger, while a light dusting of the same white fur you were just playing with is spreading outwards from her growing muzzle.

If she knows this is happening she doesn't remark on it at all, and there's no explanation for you in the surprisingly fierce expression she adopts. "I think I've rested enough", she says, her voice somehow huskier than it was just a few moments ago. "Now it's time for me to pay you back."

She moves again, and your only response is to freeze. Normally you can trust your feet to pull you out of trouble without thinking, but something about her piercing eyes just sticks you in place, and before you know it you're flat on the floor, with Grace firmly on top. Her knee is on your chest — not hard enough to hurt, but enough that you know that it *could* hurt if she wanted to.

Talking in this situation is difficult, but you manage to get a few words out. "What... what is happening?"

Grace shrugs, and the expression of nonchalance is somehow the most domineering thing she's done so far. It makes it feel as though this whole sudden reversal is just *nothing*, like she had it in her all along, and just casually decided that now was the time. "I'm feeling like I've got a whole lot of energy to burn off", she answers. "Perhaps you'd like to help me with that?"

You swallow heavily, struggling to hold eye contact with her but equally unable to look away. "For more, uh, research?"

She leers down at you, and something in your spine tries to both lock up and melt at the same time. "Oh, I think we're done with research and theory."

Her hand lands heavily on your forehead, and she slowly and deliberately tilts your head back to line herself up for a kiss. "Time to put things into practice."

Your lips meet, and there's nothing you can do but sink into it. A feeling of warmth just pours out of her, rushing through your body and making your eyes roll back in your head. The sensation is overwhelming, at once flooding you with energy while at the same time leaving you completely and utterly drained. Your vision tightens and narrows, and all you can see is Grace moving to stand over you, her predatory smile filling your whole world.

By now her whole body is different. That soft white fur has exploded across her chest, running over her breasts, across her shoulders and out towards the ends of her arms. Her grip on you shifts, and you gather that she's only holding you down with a single foot, but that point of contact is changing as her toes plump up and slide outwards, while her heel rises up along her leg. Soon it's clear that she's standing on paws, the pressure of her body perfectly aligned to press down into the center of your chest, and as she reaches up to shake out her hair her ears unfold upwards, standing almost half a foot above her head in the space of moments.

The sight of a little puffball tail appearing emerging behind her completes the picture. Somehow, she's become part rabbit, her nose twitching slightly as the last of her fur coat slides into place.

Words, unsurprisingly, fail you. This isn't a situation you're used to, but in truth you're not even sure how you want to react. This is unbelievable, but at the same time, the feeling of being pinned here, lying beneath Grace as she stretches and celebrates her new form — it's oddly freeing. All the times in the past when you've been with someone, even when they were doing the work, it was you that was calling the shots. This time however, the iron-rod strength weighing on your chest makes it clear that that's not the case.

Grace doesn't give any impression of being thrown by what's happened to her, and once she finishes the full-body stretch and settles into her new stance, she seems even more energised than before. In a single, fluid movement she drops onto all fours, quickly disappearing from sight as she slides down the length of your chest. It doesn't take long for you to realise the destination she has in mind.

Your armour is no defense. Her fingers seem thicker and less nimble than they were before, but there's more than enough power in her grip to just tear aside the leather straps holding it all together, leaving your whole waist bare as she closes in on her prize. She presses her muzzle into your pussy, and you can feel the very tip of her teeth dragging just slightly along your lips as she opens her mouth and slides her tongue along your slit. Her nose keeps twitching, only now you can tell because it's trembling right up against your clit, while the inside of your thighs are tickled by the soft scratches of her whiskers brushing back and forth.

There's no elegance or restraint to her approach, just an abiding hunger and a seemingly

bottomless energy. She simply will not stop. As your legs flail mindlessly, your hands going from clutching at her hair to slapping down at the cold tiles below you, she just keeps going and going. When you cum for the first time she doesn't even slow down. She maintains the same steady rhythm as she licks at you mercilessly, gripping firmly at your waist, and seemingly pressing her face further and further inside your body as she goes. Eventually you feel almost adrift, everything below your waist increasingly drowned out by the cacophony of sensation. It's only slowly that you realise there's more going on than just Grace eating you out.

A warmth spreads up over your body, moving outwards from the point of contact between the two of you. Weakly you lift your head to inspect it, and see the same fur that coats Grace climbing up over your chest, itching as it burrows beneath your remaining clothes and raises them outwards. It's even the same colour as hers — a deep, snowy white, already thick and lustrous almost the moment it emerges from your skin. The feeling is surprisingly pleasant, like being wrapped up in a warm blanket: a perfect, relaxing counterpoint to Grace's more targeted attention. The sensation spreads further, and you hear a distant series of small noises as your joints pop and readjust. Your heels shift upwards as your feet transition into soft paws, while at the same time your fingers thicken and plump outwards. She slows her tongue down for just a moment to press hard against your clit, and you feel your face stretch outwards into your own rabbit muzzle even as you grit your growing teeth. Your flailing paws brush over Grace's ears just as your own stretch smoothly upwards, and despite how it throws off her angle you have to raise your rear just a little to allow your own tail to push out behind you.

It's a snowstorm, everything building on everything else and making it even more unstoppable. It's not just the changes, or even the sensations those provoke, it's the way Grace is making you feel. She's still just as tireless, and there's a promise behind her limitless energy. This can just keep going. Not just now, not just in this session, but this can be something you do. You can spend your evenings buried inside her slit just as she's in yours now, and you could wake up the next morning to her doing the same to you. Your life can revolve around that boundless satisfaction, giving and receiving over and over, the pair of you perfectly matched to fulfill this bottomless desire. All this time you were so worried about settling down, so afraid and reluctant to be *with* someone — was it just because you didn't know it could be like *this*? That you could be endlessly, inescapably excited to be with the same person over and over again, that the thought of fucking Grace one more time could turn you on so reliably that you'd never need to think about anything else.

Her paw digs into your fur, and it feels all at once like being stroked, comforted, and claimed. You tighten your thighs around her body but she will *not* let you go — you don't want her to either, but the knowledge that the need goes both ways is yet more fuel for the fire. She needs to be with you just as much as you need to be with her, and you can tell from the way her own body moves that she's pawing at herself too, desperate to feed off the heat and hunger you're

both sharing. As the last of the changes wash over you feel your whole being tense and release, trembling through one last climax as Grace finally falls back, momentarily satisfied.

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It's some time later when you help each other to your feet. It takes a little longer for you to figure out exactly what the correct stance is — now that your heels have raised you're walking on tiptoes by default, but apparently with no loss in dexterity as you pad cautiously around the room. Somehow, the temple doesn't seem so frightening now. It's not that you can understand the inscriptions yourself, or that there aren't still traps, it's just that what must surely be this place's greatest trick has already been pulled, and if you're past that then there's nothing left to worry about. Eventually you're both standing there, stretching your now-unfamiliar limbs and looking around, each of you wondering just how you break the silence after something like that.

“So”, you try, “some stuff happened...”

Grace cuts you off by holding up a single padded finger. She turns back to her stuff and digs through it for a moment, giving you the time to consider your own torn and tattered clothing. Do you try and save what you can, or just rely on your fur to cover things enough, or...

A sharp tapping noise interrupts your thoughts, and you look up to see Grace jabbing at a page of her notes. You raise an eyebrow in confusion. You're not sure she can entirely tell beneath all this fur, but regardless, she reads out what she's written by way of an explanation.

*“And if we run into anything that turns people into super horny creatures like that”, she quotes, “then you — meaning me, Grace — can be in charge of dealing with it.”*

You start to respond, to say that you shouldn't be held to some off-the-cuff joke about something which couldn't possibly happen and yet inexplicably did. Before you can though, you're stopped as your tail and nose twitches uncontrollably in anticipation, but mostly with the way your cheeks flush so red that you're sure it's visible through the fur. Your protest dies in your throat, stopped by the sheer force of how much you don't *want* to protest. Her being in charge, if it leads to more times like you just shared, sounds like a very good idea indeed.

She snaps the notebook shut, then looks you square in the eyes. “Any questions?”

Shuffling your large feet, you look away. “Uh, no.”

Grace nods and turns to lead you out of the temple, but stops as you tap her on the shoulder.

“Wait, what about the crown?”

She shrugs. “Based on my understanding, the problems it was causing were due to a buildup in its energy. I’m confident that that should be resolved with our recent interactions”, she says, gesturing over the both of you, “so it should be fine to leave for now.”

“That’s... quite a big conclusion to reach”, you say, unable to stop yourself from frowning. “I thought this was caused by the oil, not by the crown. And why do you think it’s just safe now after this anyway?”

In an instant she’s pulled you close, and your whole body feels warm where your fur brushes against hers. “You’re right, I think we’ll need to do a lot of testing to confirm that conclusion. Would you care to help me with that?”

Wordlessly you nod, your whole body shivering as she moves to whisper in your waiting ear.

“Good girl.”

**THE END**

## Becoming distant from society...

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“I spend a lot of time out in the wilderness”, you answer slowly, picking your way through the question with a care that surprises even you. “And out there, away from the towns and the people and the quiet life, I’ve seen some... things. Not the beasts, but the people — the things the bandits and petty warlords fall into when they decide that kindness is weakness and they deserve whatever they want. The longer you have a sword in your hand, the harder it is to hold on to anyone else.”

Grace looks at you, wide-eyed. “Oh. Is that why you use a bow instead?”

“What? No, it’s...” you look away, struggling to put into words the thoughts that haunt you late at night after unpleasant jobs. “I just... I don’t want to stop being able to connect to people, I think. I can take care of myself just fine, but if I ever find myself thinking that I’m the only thing that matters, or that everyone else is just a burden or an imposition, well. I’ve seen where that can lead.”

“Huh.” Grace nods respectfully, taking that in. “That’s... a heavier answer than I was expecting.”

Shrugging defensively, you sigh. “Well yes, you asked me for my greatest fear. Sorry that it’s not fun. Ask for my favourite food next time.”

“I’ll make a note for the next ancient temple prophecy”, Grace replies, cracking a smile as you start to move on.

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Despite that warm note, for the next while you travel in silence. There’s enough traps to demand your attention, and Grace is smart enough not to interrupt as you pick your way through them. Eventually though, you’re forced to stop.

In front of you, a massive chasm has torn clean through the corridor you were travelling. Although the path clearly continues on the other side it’s too wide to jump across, and given how long the chasm is it doesn’t seem likely backtracking will let you find any other way around.

You're still considering the situation when Grace speaks up. "Even the roof is missing", she says, pointing up at the ragged hole you can see up above. "I don't understand. We saw the outside of the temple before we came in. It shouldn't even be big enough to fit this in it."

"I wouldn't be surprised if this came into being after we entered, just to get in our way", you mutter darkly.

Grace is shocked, looking for a moment as though she's been slapped. "What? But an alteration of reality to that degree, in that amount of time, without any external signs — that should be impossible! How do you know that's what happened?"

"I don't", you sigh, "but from the few brushes I've had with Old Magic, that's the sort of thing you have to expect. Whatever would be the most elaborate, least sensible pain in your ass is bound to be what happens."

Grace just splutters wordlessly at that, so you take a look around. There doesn't appear to be anything nearby you can use to bridge the gap, nor can you see any hidden switches or levers that might open up the path. As far as you can tell, the only way you can go from here is down, and given that you can't see the bottom, that doesn't seem particularly appealing. Although... maybe that *isn't* the only option.

Taking care to steady yourself as best you can, you lean out over the pit, craning your neck upwards. It looks like if you were careful, you could pick your way up the side of this cut, and climbing up the 10 feet or so onto the roof of the temple you'd probably have enough height to make the jump across. Maybe.

Seeing the calculating look on your face, as well as where you're looking, Grace puts your plan together. "Uh, no way. I couldn't possibly make a climb like that, let alone that jump afterwards."

"Good, because I'll need someone to stay here to give me a boost up to start off with."

"What?" she says simply.

"For whatever reason, the cut here is too smooth to grab onto", you answer, sticking one hand out of the corridor and running it along the wall over the chasm for emphasis. "But it doesn't look like that's true above us, so the only way up will be to go straight up."

"So, what, you want to use me as a glorified footstool?"

You smile to yourself. "I don't think I said anything about it being particularly glorious."

“Ha ha”, she says flatly. “But really, there’s got to be something more I can do than just *that*.”

Considering her question, you take one last look at the scene. “Unless you want to make the climb and do the jump yourself?”

Grace huffs, stalks over next to you and, very carefully, leans out to look up and down herself. “Well, what if we climb down? This pit has got to have a bottom, so if we go down, we can walk across and come back up. At least that way we can go together, rather than me getting left behind.”

“And what if that bottom is a pool of lava?” you counter. “Or thrashing, living spikes?”

Blanching, Grace’s eyes flick downwards. “Is that possible?”

“With Old Magic? Anything is. At least we can *see* what’s above us.”

Still, you can tell by the way she’s squaring her shoulders that she’s not entirely convinced, and you quickly realise that unless you want to argue about this forever, you’re going to have to decide firmly which approach you’re going to take.

So, you consider, what should you do?

### **Go with your plan:**

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getting Grace to give you a lift upwards so you can climb up, then jump over the pit. She’ll get left behind until you’ve gotten the Crown, but at least you’re confident you can do it. You’ve done harder things before, and better to rely on yourself than risk facing whatever unknown fate waits below like Grace suggests.

**turn to page 54**

### **Go with Grace’s plan:**

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the two of you climbing down carefully to the bottom of the pit before walking across. It might take longer, but you have to admit that it’s a smarter plan than yours.

**turn to page 63**

## Go with your plan...

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“No”, you say firmly, already swinging your arms to limber them up. “It’s not worth risking it. Help me up, then you, uh, stay here and wait till I get across.”

“And then what?”

“And then... we’ll see. Maybe there’s a lever or something on the other side I can use to lower a bridge.”

By now Grace is pouting openly. “And what if there isn’t? Are you going to bring me all this way just to sit on the sidelines while you go through the rest of the temple by yourself?”

Staring her down, you answer simply, “You’re welcome to try making the jump across too, if you’d like.”

She looks over the chasm, then up towards the roof, and for a few moments it’s clear she’s genuinely considering it. Eventually, though, reality gets the better of her, and she sighs and rolls her eyes. “No, I guess I’ll... just be here.”

“At least here is safe”, you try, putting what you hope is a comforting hand on her shoulder. “And hey, if I come across any words I need translated on the other side, I promise I’ll yell them out to you.”

Grace chuckles, but it passes quickly as she exhales slowly. “Okay, *fine*”, she sighs, then braces herself to give you a lift up. “Ready when you are, I guess.”

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It’s not the most elegant approach you’ve ever taken, but with Grace’s help you manage to get a firm enough handhold on the wall above you and pull yourself up. From there it gets easier, but even so it’s still more than hard enough that you can tell doing this yourself was the best decision. It was nice to have help earlier on in the temple, but right now she’d just be dead weight. A lesson for next time, you suppose — just because a job involves Old Magic doesn’t mean that it’s not going to come down to muscling your way up a shear wall, and perhaps it

doesn't actually matter if you can't read all the little inscriptions along the way.

Fortunately while the climb might be challenging, there's not too much distance to actually cover, so before too long you pull yourself up and onto the roof. All you have to do now then is take a running jump, and clear about a twenty foot gap across and about half as much down. Easy.

You tense your body in preparation, then pull back and relax. Maybe you should be a little bit smarter about this, rather than just throwing yourself off the roof at the first possible moment. You just finished a challenging climb after all, so it's probably wiser to give your aching arms a break.

Calling down your intentions, you can see Grace's worried face staring up at you from below, but for what it's worth she nods her approval. Shaking out your muscles, you realise for the first time that you'd been so focused on getting back down that you hadn't stopped to take in the view. It's quite something. You're standing around the height of a tall tree, but that's hard to say for certain given the circle of withered vegetation that the temple sits in the middle of. The dead zone is so wide that you can barely see the still-living trees at the edge of it, and even the river you travelled down looks pale and sickly now you can see it in full.

Turning your attention back to the temple, not only does it now feature this massive chasm, but the building itself looks even bigger than when you arrived. So who's to say whether anything you can see now is an accurate reflection of reality from the outside, or if this is just part of the trick the temple is playing on you. Or, perhaps you've been disconnected from time entirely, and a hundred years have passed while you and Grace poked around through ancient corridors.

You shake your head to clear out that particular thought. Something like that surely isn't impossible for Old Magic, but it's not something you can afford to get hung up on. Regardless of what exactly is going on, it just goes to show that your decision was correct, and that the only way to deal with it is to push on as quickly and directly as possible.

Still, for all that, standing here on the roof of the temple itself is surprisingly nice. There's a pleasantly warm breeze blowing up from the rift in front of you, which seems odd, but must just mean that there's something really hot at the bottom of that pit. Yet another reason why climbing down would have been a bad idea, you suppose. From up here though, all that's left is a steady, welcoming heat, encouraging you to linger a while and enjoy it. After all, it's been a long time since you've enjoyed the relaxation of a heated bath, and this is as close as you're likely to get while on a job.

You self-consciously do a few more deliberate stretches, but a quick glance downwards shows that Grace isn't looking up at you anymore. She's probably back to reading, or perhaps she's found another indecipherable inscription she'd love to make a detailed series of notes about. In either case, you've got time. Besides, you're the one that calls the shots on this trip, so if she's having to occupy herself while she waits for you, well, too bad.

Another gust of the breeze blows up from below, and you find yourself sitting down as you breathe it in. Why not take the time to relax, if you have it? As you stretch your neck to release the tension you didn't realise you were carrying, your eyes drift over the horizon. Now that you look at it again, maybe the forest around here isn't as dead as you first thought. Sure, the big trees are gone, but from above you can make out the tell-tale traces of new life poking its way through the withered undergrowth. Just beneath the cover of what you took to be a smothering blanket of decay there's eager regrowth taking root, and from the wisps and flecks you can already see it looks infinitely more varied than the simple greenery it's overtaking.

It's a surprisingly pleasant thought. After all, there's countless forests throughout the land, each thick with ordinary trees and common creatures, why couldn't there be space for something different here? Something vibrant and exciting, powerful and driven enough to push aside what came before and assert itself in its place. When you really think about it, is that any different from what you do? You ride into town, get pointed at whatever's squeezing them dry, then cut back the problem so life can prosper again. Maybe you're assisting the same process here, somehow. Perhaps there'll be a hidden trove of riches you can uncover in addition to the Crown, and then with that and the reward from the townsfolk you could set yourself up for as long as you want. Unless the Crown itself is valuable enough that maybe you could just take it for yourself. You're still solving the problem if you simply take it out of here, after all, and why shouldn't you be able to have it yourself? It'd be safer in your hands than anyone else's, and at least you could retire with it somewhere secluded enough that no one would turn up their nose at the changes it makes. That too is a nice thought.

Reluctantly, you climb back to your feet. You can't simply think all day, or else you'd be no better than Grace. Eventually you're going to need to take action, so you can get that Crown and make whatever decisions you need to with it. But, when you turn to look down at that chasm once again, you still can't bring yourself to make that jump. Maybe there's still more preparation you should do first.

You place your hands together and breathe in slowly, focusing on just being still and seeking to understand exactly what you need. There's a million other distractions and considerations, but to pull off a feat like this the only important thing is you, and what you can do to meet the path before you. A moment later and you feel your left foot shift slightly, sliding backwards within your boot, and you smile as you understand. Clearly you can't expect to have

the grip you need while wearing these boots, so the only solution is to take them off.

Your boots wound up being only the first thing you stripped away, and before long you're standing in little more than your undergarments. You could tell yourself the reason was lowering your weight, or reducing the amount of things that could shift unexpectedly and throw you off, but if you're being honest it just felt good to be up here, standing in this breeze and feeling the full light of the sun on your skin. It's invigorating, like a dip in a clear, cold stream. It gets your heart racing as you jog lightly on the spot, a sharp shiver running up and down your spine as the wind picks up for a moment. That's the final slap to the face you need to push you forwards, and you start running almost without thinking. Just a few short steps before you throw your arms outwards and leap, launching yourself out into the open air.

The wind greets you, wrapping around your body so comfortably that it doesn't even feel like you're falling. There's nothing left to do now, no active thought required in these few moments between leaving the ground and rejoining it, so you find yourself smiling as the breeze tilts you forwards. There's the weirdest mix of contentment and exhilaration, and the only thing you can tell for sure is that you feel better than you have in years. Your whole body tenses, or relaxes, or both, and your mouth drifts into an open grin as the walls blur around you.

For an instant you see Grace's shocked expression as you flash past, but her concern can't find any purchase on you. You're diving now, arms fully above your head as you spear down through the chasm. The wind has you, or, actually, you have the wind. The shift was so subtle you couldn't tell when it happened, but instead of the air washing over you of its own accord, now it feels like you're moving and shaping it naturally, directing it without thinking to where you need it to go. And, just like the breeze that surrounds you, your own body responds to your unconscious demands.

You feel it on your back first, some new growth taking root and spreading quickly over your chest. It's somehow both light and strong in its purpose, and almost as soon as you notice it you can tell how much easier the course of the air around you is made by this pattern of sharp black plumage. There's a hitch in the base of your spine, and you grit your teeth for the briefest time, but the unstoppable pressure of the wind whirling around you just floods over it, pressing another part of your body outwards. A moment later and an almost foot long tail stretches backwards, each of its sturdy black feathers flexing to keep up the effortless flow around you.

The click and pop of your joints draws your attention forwards, and you turn to see your arms lengthening too. The breeze pushes on your hands, but instead of painful resistance they simply give, curling inwards in elegant counterpoint to the pressure. Your fingers stretch and grow, sweeping out into graceful talons, the length of each arm burnished with long feathers of their own.

The ground is in view beneath you, but by the way your body moves, you can tell it has no power over you any longer. You curve, your lower half kicking out even as your feet harden into talons, your claws brushing against the dirt as your new wings steady, then flap. And then you rise, every part of you feeling both light and powerful — perfectly primed to simply soar. The wind is at your back now and you can't help but laugh as you streak upwards. Soon you can see Grace up above you, still looking down in panic, and the expression on her face swiftly changes as you come to meet her.

Your talons curl around each of her arms before she can react, and with just a few deliberate beats of your wings you're back in the air, and you feel her go limp as the shock of the moment takes hold. Then you fly away with her carefully cradled in your claws, heading to somewhere you find yourself drawn by new instincts and old habits — somewhere nice and secluded and defensible where you can truly settle in for comfort.

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You're quite sure the temple didn't have a tall tower when you arrived, but you're thankful enough for the suitable eyrie not to question it now. The space is little more than a large alcove scooped out of the brickwork, but there's thatch, shelter and a good view of the lands around you, and that's more than enough for your purposes. Grace starts to stir just as the two of you set down, and while she rouses herself you clack your way over to the lonely, windswept stump that forms the closest thing to furniture.

By the time she wakes up you're seated triumphantly on your perch. As she raises her head slowly you've made sure she'll have to take in every part of your new body, appreciating the plumage that's only gotten thicker since you first took flight. Your limbs are long and lean, with a dull yellow coating that looks like scales going from your talons to just above your knees, and from the feel of it the same coating stretches from your clawed hands up towards your shoulder, although the thick feathers that converted your arms into wings cover up most of that. Your stance thrusts your hips out as you peer down at her, and you smile as you see her react to the way the downy fluff on your front doesn't quite conceal your slit. It *certainly* doesn't cover your chest, trailing away to nothing but elegant decoration to draw even more emphasis to your nudity.

Finally she looks you in the eyes, and you find yourself curious to know just how different your face looks. You certainly feel a little sharper, and there's a firmness around your mouth that at least suggests a beak, but there's nothing reflective enough here to know for sure. Still, that's hardly a concern. You *feel* good, and that's all that matters.

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You're interrupted from your musing as Grace stammers something out. "Wh... what happened?"

Reflexively you tilt your head to the side as you consider her question. In truth, you can't rightly say exactly what happened, or how. But things like that are what she cares about, not you. You're far more partial to considering where you go from here, so with that in mind you take the first step. It just so happens that the first step is firmly on her chest, pressing her down into the ground as you stare imperiously at her.

In your mercy, you don't make her suffer in silence for too long. "There's been a change in plans. I don't think the Crown is the most important thing anymore."

Grace processes this, and, to her credit, asks the most important question. "What is?"

"Whatever I want", you answer simply. "I've decided to settle down for awhile, and I'll need some help in making this space a proper nest."

You shift your stance deliberately as you say that, emphasising your chest even further. You swear your breasts are larger than they were before, or maybe it's just the fact that the rest of your body is lighter, but clearly whatever did this knew what was important. Grace swallows heavily as she looks up at you, and even without releasing her from beneath your foot, you can tell that she gets the message.

"So good news", you continue casually, "even though the previous expedition is completed, there is still a position available to you. One that continues to be... comfortably under me."

Before Grace responds, you see her eyes flick to the ledge behind her. "And... if I say no?"

For just a moment you close your talons tighter, then open them with an easy chuckle. "Well, then you can go. I'm even generous enough that I'll give you a ride back down to the ground. But then you'll never get to see all the trinkets and artefacts I plan to gather, all the shiny little toys that will truly make this a home worth living in."

Grace shifts, and you can tell that shot landed. "But before you make up your mind", you add, "let me show you another one of the perks."

You step back, moving to rest your back on your tree trunk perch. Opening your legs as you slide down to a sitting position, you wave one of your winged arms over yourself to cool your reddening face.

“I could feel it growing as soon as we got up here”, you say, even as your eyes start to glaze over and your hips settle instinctively into position. “And as nice as it feels just shifting around inside, I think it’s time to move things along.”

Looking confused, Grace props herself up on her elbows to get a better look. “What do you mean, what’s going on?”

You don’t answer with words, and you probably couldn’t even if you wanted to. The sensation of deep, stretching movement deep inside yourself is just far too much to compete with. Your mouth closes tightly as you lean into it, and there’s a brief moment where the clenching of your new beak provides another weird feeling to be distracted by, but that passes quickly as the tension inside you grows. Even though you’re forced to use one hand to keep yourself upright the other quickly dives to your crotch, your feathers brushing deliciously over your skin as you hold your slit open. And then, torturously slowly, the egg inside you presses out.

The feeling is overpowering, so much so that if your sharp talons hadn’t bitten into the stone beneath you there’s a good chance you’d have collapsed entirely. As it is your head lolls backwards, your beak falling open as you let out a series of distracted, blissful coos. It’s a feeling that’s at once completely unfamiliar and comfortingly natural, an intoxicating mix of being completely filled and the relief of this large object sliding through you. But more than just that — it feels right. Powerful. That you can bring yourself such pleasure regularly, without needing anyone else to be a part of it. Of course, you add to yourself as you look back up into Grace’s extremely flushed face, you can *choose* to bring someone else into this, if you like. There’s no dependency there, no need for anything more than a helpful servant for as long as you each care for one another. And then you can each move on, perfectly content in your own private nests until you choose to cross paths again or bring in someone new.

The last of the egg slips free, landing in a slick puddle as you press against your clit and squawk out an orgasm in response. After a few moments to shake out the last of the lingering tension in your muscles, you look down and see it for the first time, with two realisations fighting for priority.



The first is that it's large — no surprise you suppose given what it felt like, and how you're used to seeing eggs laid by much smaller creatures than you. Still, no wonder that something the size of both your fists pressed together had such a dramatic impact on you, even if you do suspect your pussy changed along the way to accommodate it.

The second thing you notice is that it's gold. It can't be solid gold, surely, but whatever it's made out of, it's certainly shiny enough to helpfully decorate your nest. Perhaps you could even use such things to lure others with the promise of further treasure, then take their belongings or service as your rightful tithe.

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It seems effective enough if the way Grace's eyes fix on it is any judge. You're not sure if she's desperate to find out how such a thing could be possible, or enthusiastic to try it herself, but in any case she can't hide her interest. "Where do we start?" she asks simply.

You grin, and as you step forwards you use one foot to pull her towards you, leaving her kneeling just in front of your still-dripping slit. "Oh, I think I have an idea about that", you coo.

**THE END**

## Go with Grace's plan...

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You can feel your jaw clenching, but you take a breath and force yourself to relax. There isn't any need for you to prove yourself here, and you shouldn't avoid the smarter approach just because you weren't the one to suggest it.

"You're right", you answer with a sigh.

As you deflate, Grace lights up. "Really? You agree?"

You manage to muster up a polite nod. "Yes. I'm sure I *could* make that jump, but if we take it slowly and carefully, climbing down would be better. Even if there *is* something bad down there, we could just climb back up and we'll be no worse off."

"Exactly!" Grace answers. "And maybe we'll find something interesting down there! Maybe this chasm has opened up some ancient catacombs or something, and we'll find inscriptions and artefacts dating back even further than what we've been seeing so far."

She's already digging through her backpack, so she doesn't see you roll your eyes. "Let's not get distracted. We're just trying to find our way across, we're not going to go spelunking, no matter how intriguing a grave hole you find."

"Hey, no promises", she counters.

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The climb isn't hard. You were a little worried it would be more than Grace can handle, but between the equipment she's brought with her and the generous handholds on the craggy rock wall, she's able to follow along without much problem. Unfortunately for her though, this route doesn't seem to be anywhere as interesting as she'd hoped. It looks like everything below the floor is just dirt, with not even any foundations to provide an interesting view of the building's construction. The only thing of note is an increasingly thick tangle of tree roots poking out into the air, looking surprisingly hearty given the air of decay outside the temple, and despite having been pulled apart when this chasm opened up.

Eventually you call for a halt. You've just reached a particularly large outcropping that should be a good place for a rest, and from the heavy breathing coming from Grace you're better off taking a break for now than trying to push on. She doesn't argue with your assessment, slumping thankfully back against the wall as you break out your supplies for a rest. You take a quick drink while she catches her breath, then pass the waterskin to her.

She takes a deep swig before mumbling a quick "thanks" and handing it back. For a while the two of you sit together in silence, until eventually Grace gathers herself enough to make conversation.

"So, is this just what you do, really?" she asks, indicating the crevice around you with a lazy sweep of her arm. "Just... hauling your ass around whatever obstacle some person with enough money wants removed?"

You shrug. "Yeah, pretty much. Sometimes there's more fighting involved though, so that livens things up."

"And this is really what you want to do? This is why you don't want to find somewhere nice to settle down? Because this is better?"

You start to reply, but for just a moment the words hitch in your throat. Is it? For as much as you can depend on yourself out here, and you can know you're living your own life, exactly the way you want, how much do you actually get from that? Is it really so bad to find somewhere nice where you can live with good people? Or have you just shrunk away from that because it's what everyone else does, and you insist on doing the opposite?

"I don't know", you answer eventually. "It's what I'm good at though, so maybe it's what I should be doing."

Grace tilts her head sympathetically. "Maybe. Maybe this Crown will be enough that you can, I don't know, find a different path."

There's a few moments of silence, and for the first time when someone offers a suggestion about how you should live your life, you don't just reject it out of hand. Maybe it would be nice to at least take a break, even if not properly settle down. Whatever that means.

Slapping her knees loudly as she stands up, Grace pulls you back out of your thoughts. "Well, c'mon", she says. "I'm ready to keep going down if you are."

The going is even easier here, with the walls narrowing towards each other the closer you get to the ground, leaving you with a less-challenging slope to traverse. The last part of the climb is almost more of a cautious, diagonal walk, but eventually you hit what has to be the bottom.

It's no wonder you couldn't see it from above. Fog lies heavily over the ground here, thick enough that you can feel it tickling your nose as you push through. You can taste it too, right on the back of your tongue; a peaty, thoroughly damp taste that makes the whole inside of your mouth unpleasantly oily. It's a good thing that the climb wasn't too taxing — you wouldn't want to be breathing heavily in this. Grace finds the situation similarly distasteful, but at this point there's nothing to do but push through it. It shouldn't take too long to walk across the gap after all, and then you can get up and out and be done with it.

That's the theory at least, but every time what looks like the opposite wall emerges from the fog, it proves to be something else. Somehow the plant life down here is titanic, with each great green vine or gnarled brown root looming large enough to dwarf the both of you. There's a thick brush underfoot too, and you imagine this place is probably quite a sight when it's not completely shrouded in fog. You turn back to Grace with raised eyebrows, but her only response is to shrug, not even bothering to pull down the impromptu mask she's tied over her face. "Sometimes plants grow weird", she says. So much for a scholarly perspective.

Time passes, and eventually you're forced to conclude that things aren't as straightforward as you'd assumed. Maybe you've found your way into a cave system, or perhaps you finally found those catacombs that Grace was hoping for, but in either case you've been going for long enough that there's no way you're still just in the same fissure you climbed down. Not only is the fog so thick that you can't be sure how far you've come, you're only relatively sure you're still headed in the same direction. If you tried to turn around there's every chance you'd just wind up walking in circles, so there isn't anything more to do but push on.

There's a sound behind you that catches your attention. At first you think there's a danger — maybe some creature is sneaking up on you, but as you turn around you catch Grace flinching away, her brow furrowed. Suddenly you realise that she's cursing herself, muttering under her breath about how you're both lost and it's all her fault.

You stop walking, and Grace is so deep in her head that she almost collides with you. Reaching out to put an arm on her shoulder, you force her to stop and look up at you.

"Hey, it's okay", you say. "These things happen."

Grace gives you a fragile smile. "Really?" she can't help herself from asking, eager for reassurance.

“Yeah. If I had to count all the times I got lost in unending fog, I’d... uh...” You trail off for a moment, then rally. “Well, I’ve certainly had worse times.”

There’s a little laugh from Grace, but she’s struggling to look you in the eyes. You start trying to say something else comforting, but she sees your expression and beats you to it.

“I’m fine”, she says firmly, chewing her lip a little as she collects herself. “I just... I thought I was ready to go on a big adventure, that I was done with hiding in the library and reading about other people’s adventures, but...”

She waves a hand around vaguely to indicate the endless fog that surrounds you.

“...I guess I should have just stayed at home, where I belong.”

You move to grab her by both shoulders, staring her full in the face until you force her to meet your eyes. “Hey, that’s not fair. We’re not done yet. So we’re a little lost? So what? We’ll reach one side of this chasm eventually, and then we’ll climb out. Problem solved. This fog can’t last forever, and I’m sure we’ve passed more than a few berry bushes, so it’s not like we’ll starve. This is just a delay, nothing more.”

Grace brightens a little more, and she takes a big breath to center herself. That proves to be a mistake, the thick mist curling her nose as the overpowering scent of it hits her again. To take her mind off it, you keep speaking.

“Don’t sell yourself short. Just like you were telling me earlier that I shouldn’t write off settling down somewhere, *you* shouldn’t write off that you can do something else if you want to.”

That gets her to genuinely grin. “Thanks, but if this is what your life is like, I think I might just stick to my plan of getting a nice, comfortable home to enjoy myself in rather than walking around in dank pits forever.”

Now it’s your turn to sigh. “I mean, they’re not all *this* dank, but that’s a fair point. And after this job, I might just join you. Now come on, I think I can see something up ahead. Maybe we’re closer to the end of this than we thought.”

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You weren’t. The shape you saw turned out to just be a little raised outcropping, a clump of

earth that rises up enough for the top to be an island above the fog. You clamber up it all the same, hoping that at the very least it will let you see the way to go, and on that front there's both good and bad news. The good news is that from this vantage point you get the distinct impression that it's tilting upwards. So long as you keep going the way you're going, you'll eventually get back level with the temple, and from there it's just a matter of finding your way back to where you need to be. The bad news is that you still can't see all the way out, so there's clearly some way to go.

Relaying all this to Grace, you collectively decide that it's best to post up here up out of the fog and have a proper rest. The sunlight filtering down is starting to die, and you can't imagine stumbling around here in the dark is a good idea. So you help Grace up, then settle in as best you can. There's not a lot of flat space, barely enough for you to lie side by side with your packs under your heads, but at least the dirt beneath you is soft and the air surprisingly warm. Grace winds up dangling half-over the side, trailing one leg and arm into the fog, but from the way she quickly starts snoring that's apparently okay enough for her. It takes you a little longer to get comfortable, but eventually you manage to doze off.

Your sleep is restless, the fog playing at the corners of your dreams. You're haunted by a feeling of being lost, but over time the pit that's pulling at your stomach starts to soften. Eventually the fear and confusion ebbs away, and in its place is just warmth and acceptance. The mist melts into the cool earth beneath you, while above you the sun is so strong and powerful, filling your body with energy as you rise up to meet it.

There's a pressure on your leg, and hard-won instincts quickly wake you up. You're already sitting up by the time you realise it's only Grace, your hand still reaching for the closest weapon.

"Oh", you say blearily, shaking yourself back to alertness. "What's up?"

She doesn't respond right away, and it's only then that you notice she's not looking at you. Once again you flinch, thinking that maybe she's focused on some other threat, but a quick glance around confirms that nothing has changed. You're still on a raised outcropping surrounded by fog at the bottom of a pit, the only difference seems to be that it's gone from early evening to just after dawn.

None of that explains why Grace woke up, and it certainly doesn't explain why her hand is still on your leg, her face looking past yours with a thousand yard stare.

You clear your throat loudly, and that finally seems to get her attention. "Uh, Grace? What's going on?"

She breathes out slowly, making goosebumps race over your skin as you somehow feel warm and cold all at once. “I think I’ve figured something out”, she says eventually.

“Oh, was there an inscription you found somewhere? A little illustration with precise directions of how to get out of here and up to the Crown, maybe?”

Still mostly looking away from you she smiles, but it’s a few moments too late to line up with your joke. “Not exactly. But I figured out what I should do all the same.”

You’re not sure what to expect from that, but it certainly isn’t for Grace to curl forwards over you, bringing her mouth to yours and planting a lush, wet kiss on your lips. Your first response is confusion, but before you can get to anything else, you feel the same warmth from your dream seeping through your connection to Grace. A moment later and your eyes have drifted closed, your back arching slightly as you rise to meet her touch.

When she pulls away you fall back to the ground, the tension that was holding you together cut. Smacking your lips briefly, you raise an eyebrow as you speak. “Not that that’s ever a *bad* way to start the day, but what brought... this on...?”

You trail off as she stands up, and you get a good look at her for the first time today. Almost the entire right-hand side of her body is... green. Her entire arm seems some shade of this new colour, dotted here and there with leaves that seem to be sprouting from her skin. The same is true of her right leg, but whatever this is, it tapers out around the middle of her body, ending with a series of questing vines that curl around her like veins as they grow towards her core.

Part of her face seems to have undergone this same change, with one shining green eye staring deep into you. Slowly, you realise that the part of her that’s changed must have been what was hanging over the side of the island while the two of you slept.

“I couldn’t sleep”, she says dreamily, seemingly unaware of your surprise, “so I got to thinking. I was thinking about where I belong, about what I want from life, and where home is. And then I started to wonder — what if it was here?”

You blink in confusion. “Here? In this hole?”

“In this hole with *you*”, she corrects you. Her hand traces over your chest, and your eyes widen. You’re not sure what’s more surprising — this whole situation, or the fact that as soon as her fingers touch your skin the weirdness of it is entirely outweighed by how fast your heart starts beating.

Before you can recover she grabs your chin in one hand, holding your head steady as she stares you down and licks her lips. Were they always so full, or has the change reached there too? And why does it make her look so good?

“Besides, it’s not like we’re alone”, she adds.

Her finger circles your mouth, but then once she’s got your attention she gestures behind you. Following her direction, you turn to look over the side of the outcropping.

As you watch, the fog breaks up and drifts away, revealing beneath it an astoundingly lush carpet of greenery. You were right in your guess earlier — it’s a beautiful sight. Flowers of every shade and colour decorate a field of thick green grass, while a dizzying array of fruits and vegetables grow wild throughout. Not ten feet away there’s a patch of melons large enough to feed a village, and almost entirely surrounding your makeshift dirt bed is a ring of what look like roses, the bulbs of which are comfortably bigger than you are. Now that the mist has cleared bees quickly take wing, contributing a soothing buzz as they flit peacefully between flowers.

Grace’s hand falls on your cheek, gently turning your face back to hers. “Don’t you see?” she says softly. Her breath is warm on your skin, and there’s a sweetness to the air that seems to seep through your pores and set your body to relax. “There’s a place for us here now, so why not enjoy it?”

She takes your hand, delicately swinging her legs over the side and stepping down towards the ground. You’re half-sure that one of the flowers rises up to catch her, forming organic steps that she leads you towards. You go with her, pulled along in a state that feels like sleepwalking. The very ground cradles your feet, and you see the tip of the vine curled around her other arm extending an inch or so from the base of her palm, twisting and stretching as though in time with the rhythm of the life that surrounds you.

Echoing your dreamy smile with one of her own, Grace takes you fully into her arms as you finally step down to meet her. Heat radiates off of her as she wraps you in a hug, and for a moment you feel connected to everything, from the roots in the earth deep beneath you to the sun in the sky, and even the directed chaos of the insects swirling around you both. And then she steps backwards, hands parting with yours reluctantly as she retreats into the enormous open bulb of a bright red flower, which closes around her as neatly as a cloak drawn around a bather. Very briefly you feel confused, but before your thoughts can move from that towards concern you’re distracted by a sound like a forest taking a deep breath. With a speed that feels somehow protective rather than threatening you see petals close up around you too, and in moments the rest of the world is sealed away by the vibrant greenery of this all-encompassing flower.

It's warm in here. Rather than feeling trapped, you feel sheltered, wrapped up in a comforting embrace. You feel yourself relax, the walls of the flower gently supporting you. Dimly, you're aware of the last of your clothes sloughing off, everything but your undergarments already left behind where you were sleeping. You should feel vulnerable, but it just feels too comfortable for that. It's like slipping into a lovely, warm bath, so why shouldn't you be naked to better soak up the heat?

As you sink into it, you start to become aware of a new sensation. There's something sliding up the side of one of your legs, some long thick tendril moving in a steady, spiralling stretch. It feels like a hand tracing around your muscles, once again comforting in its closeness even as it slightly constricts. It must be like the vine that Grace had on her, some part of your mind puts together, and that realisation is enough to make you stiffen slightly. There's something going on, some process being undertaken, and that's something you should... you should probably have an opinion about.

You start to stir, but almost immediately there's a response. Another vine curls down organically from above you, only this one has what looks like a seed pod at the end of it. When it reaches level with your face it opens up, and releases a hazy yellow burst of pollen. You jerk backwards instinctively, your nose curling before you sneeze two times in succession. By the time you recover, you can't remember what you were just thinking about. There was something important, but you're so warm, and the vine curling up around the inside of your thigh feels like a delicate, tender massage. The inside of your mouth feels almost fuzzy with sweetness, and you lick your lips slowly as you settle backwards once again. The pod withdraws from in front of you, and in its place you can see only the petal wall, the rich green colour seeming to glow as it soaks in the light from the sun.

The vine presses just so and your legs fall open, a smile playing at your lips as it coils ever upwards. This is beginning to resemble some of the better massages you've had in the past, and your heart beats a little faster as you start to urge it on. You *were* relaxed, but now you realise just how horny you are, and whether it's the sensation against your skin, or the warm embrace of the plant around you, or even just how thick and intoxicating the air in here is, but you can't think of anything better to do than guide the tendril towards your crotch. You gasp as it slides in smoothly, your hips getting pushed back ever so slightly before you slowly move them forwards, grinding blissfully against the flexible vine. It curls around just below the tip, forming a slight bulge that moves to rub over your clit, and that kink somehow stays level even as the rest of it presses slowly further into you.

Your eyes start to roll back in your head, but your attention is caught by the movement of something else descending from above you. At first you expect another burst of pollen, and your mouth starts to water a little despite the fact that you're still practically swimming in it.

But this time the vine lacks the seed pod the previous one had, and instead there's a yellow liquid dripping from its simple tapered tip. For a moment you look at it quizzically, but before you can regard it further it slithers down and pushes between your lips, making your jaw go slack as it fills your mouth.

You feel yourself lifted up bodily by the tendril pressing into you from below, while at the same time the one between your lips makes your spine go stiff as it straightens you out. Between the two of them they rock you back and forth slowly, alternating their rhythm with tender care, and you can feel every tiny ridge and curve of the vines as they push in and out. It should be too much, but somehow it all still feels blissfully relaxing. Every time the intensity of it all makes the breath catch in your throat, there's another flood of pollen just waiting for you to inhale, and the tingling sensation that it provokes drowns out everything else. It's like your brain is sinking into a nice warm bath, letting all your cares and concerns melt away, while at the same time your body is being massaged and tended to like clothes at a cleaners.

Distantly, you become aware of a growing sensation of fullness. It starts as your jaw widens a little, the tendril bulging as something starts to travel along it and pulse into you. There's no discomfort accompanying it, whether it's so far down your throat already or you're simply so relaxed that all your automatic responses are subdued, but in any case your only reaction is a slight 'glk!' noise as you swallow, the warmth suffusing into your core as you drift into a blissed-out smile. At the same time, the vine at your crotch starts to pick up its pace, making your thighs clench around it as it suddenly starts bucking in and out with enthusiasm. You can feel yourself stretch deliciously, but even as the plant tugs and probes at your inner walls all you can do is ride it, your eyes now completely closed as the sensations of all this finally overwhelm you.



Your mind is adrift, but regardless, your body responds. It pulls you back down into itself, making the connections that need to be made and showing you what's important with your instinctive reactions, letting the absent thrusts of your hips clue you in on your tasks. The heat in your stomach floods outwards, and you can feel it mingling with the rest of you, gifting you with some things and taking some instructions from you to pass on to others. It pleases you to put the word 'cross-pollination' to the concept, but in truth your understanding of it is much deeper and broader than a simple term. It means symbiosis, contributing to a greater purpose by taking what you need and gifting what you have. It means, you realise slowly, truly making this place your home, just as it is making you a resident.

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Time passes. Enough liquid pours into you to make you feel groggy and filled, and you find yourself drifting to sleep as your body processes and incorporates the energy from it. All the while you're being rocked slowly back and forth, but even that level of stimulation isn't enough to keep you conscious as your mind just floats away. Thinking isn't important right now, and you're so tired and full.

It's hard to say when you wake up exactly. The whole situation is so dream-like there's not a lot of difference between asleep and not, and so your awareness dials up slowly rather than simply snapping into place. The key thing that pulls you forward is the distinct feeling of approaching climax, a flush that builds deep in your core before sliding steadily downwards. Your spine trembles, and then with a sudden, full-body tremor you cum, your hips grinding urgently against the vine still embedded in your crotch. When you gasp out loud it's the first time you realise the tendril has been removed from your mouth already, but the one in your pussy seems to be twitching and curling the better to provoke a bigger climax from you, a tactic which proves heartily successful.

By the time that vine withdraws from your crotch you're sagging bonelessly against the walls of the plant, feeling utterly satisfied. The fact that your head is slumped downwards means you catch sight of the vine as it slips away, and you smile to see the end of it looks to be coated in some bright pink liquid of your own, the buds already soaking in your well-earned fertilisation.

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Not long after that and the petals around you part. You blink as the unfiltered sunlight pours in, but the scent of fresh air and the buzz of bees around you is invigorating. Already you feel

energy returning to your limbs, and you step forward out of the cocoon the plant made for you with a smile.

Grace is waiting for you, her own transformative flower already deflating behind her. She looks gorgeous. Her skin has a rich green hue, while red roses nest throughout her flowing, golden hair. She too is completely naked, although there are a few leaf-like adornments that highlight her willowy figure without depriving her body of the warmth of the sun. She grins as she takes in how you've been changed like her too, her full, red lips traced with golden sap of her own, while a knowing glance downwards confirms the tell-tale traces of pink from her own pollination.

You meet in each other's arms, embracing wordlessly as the life around you grows and strengthens. She sweeps you into an eager kiss, and with a laugh you let her sweep you off your feet, bowing low before collapsing together into the riotous undergrowth.

"Home", she says simply, and you can't agree more.

**THE END**

## Being a brainless brute, used merely for brawn...

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“It’s hard not to think of myself as a blunt instrument sometimes. I show up somewhere, people point me at a problem, and pay me to make it go away. I guess I’m afraid that eventually I’ll get a little too comfortable with letting others do the thinking for me. And then by the time I realise what’s going on, I’ve signed up with the wrong people and I’m in too deep to back out, so I spend the rest of my life serving as... unthinking muscle.”

Grace nods, taking all that onboard. “Well”, she says eventually, “I guess there’s an easy solution at least.”

You tilt your head as you turn back to her. “Oh?”

“Yeah, just don’t sign up with the wrong people.”

That makes you laugh. “Sure. I’ll keep that in mind. Now come on, let’s get this Crown and be done with this.”

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Grace follows behind you obediently as you make your way deeper into the temple. You’re prepared for traps, but there’s a lot fewer of them than you’d expect. Instead, most of the challenges are weirdly physical sorts of puzzles. They start off with moving a set of heavy but differently-sized rings in a set order from one spindle to another — something you’ve seen enough of in the past to do in your sleep — but eventually you’re having to go through complicated sequences of interactions hidden all around each room.

As it turns out, It’s good that Grace is with you, because some of the patterns you need to go through are only obvious from the center of the room. Soon you settle into the routine of having her stand in place to decipher what’s required, while you clamber around fulfilling the tasks. What you’re doing varies from room to room; sometimes you’re pulling levers, sometimes you’re pressing in raised crests, and once you even have to use elaborate pumps to manipulate the amount of water in three separate rooms so you can swim to the next exit.

In all, it certainly works up a sweat. So by the time you reach a chamber which Grace relays is

called “The Midpoint of the Procession”, you’re not exactly thrilled at the prospect of dealing with at least as much work again. It must be the early evening already given the growing moonlight through the windows, and your tiredness isn’t helped by the especially annoying trial this room promises.

Grace indicates the situation with a wordless sweep of her arm. Three giant levers stand in a line in the middle of the floor, each at least as tall as you are and wide enough that you could only barely fit your arms around them. At the opposite end of the room is a large, solidly-closed door, and the only other decorations are some pillars in the corners and beams along the roof, all of which are elaborately carved with faces that you’re sure are mocking you.

Grace finds an engraving on the nearest pillar, which she quickly uses to interpret what’s required. “You’re not going to like this”, she sighs, “but according to this we have to pull each lever three times, one after another, before that door is going to open.”

Now it’s your turn to sigh heavily. “Of course. What is *with* this place? Why set up all these stupid tests if any idiot can solve them with a little elbow grease?” You pause for a moment, rubbing your tired muscles. “With a *lot* of elbow grease, I guess.”

“Maybe that is the point?” Grace volunteers. “Maybe the goal is to select for physical strength and stamina before allowing access to the Crown? Or maybe they just want to see how much meaningless toil the applicants are willing to put up with.”

You scoff. “Well, they’ve found my limit on that score, because I’m not straining my way through pulling those giant levers back and forth by hand.”

Grace taps on her chin, her eyes darting about the room for a moment. “Actually... maybe we don’t have to.” She rummages through her backpack, pulling out a hefty length of climbing rope. “I bet if we looped this rope through here and here...” she says, pointing out particularly sturdy-looking arches near the ceiling and floor of one of the corners of the room, “...then we could just set up a pulley system, making it so we could do all the work this puzzle requires with a minimum of physical effort!”

She looks especially pleased with herself, but any plan that still has you hauling these massive levers around doesn’t sound great, even if you do have some smart trick helping you out. That said, it does give you an idea.

Looking above you, there’s a beam that runs several feet along the ceiling of the room. The beam itself is solidly built and several inches thick, but it’s secured at each end with pretty flimsy, decorative sculpting. You should be able to pull it down and use it as a battering ram,

letting you break down the door and get around the stupid levers entirely.

When you talk through your plan, Grace frowns. “I mean, it might work, but are we sure we want to ignore what the builders of the temple had in mind? Maybe there’ll be a punishment for skipping the puzzles?”

“Grace, the builders have been dead for hundreds of years. If they ever cared about people skipping their little tricks and jokes, they’re not in a position to do anything about it now.”

She doesn’t look especially convinced. “Well, even if they *don’t* have some old curse set up, are you sure the place is still sturdy enough to survive us just battering down the door? What if we bring it down on ourselves just to save a little time and effort?”

You have to admit, that’s not a bad point. The beam doesn’t look loadbearing, so it shouldn’t make a difference if you pull it down, but is it a risk worth taking? Then again, if you go through all this hassle with these giant levers only to find another set of *even larger* levers on the other side, you might just die of sheer frustration. At least if you get this battering ram going, you can keep using that same solution on pretty much every door going forwards.

So then, what do you do?

**Use your approach:** \_\_\_\_\_

**pulling down the beam and using it to bash open the door. If the builders of this temple wanted to test your strength and determination, then they should have expected people to break their way through rather than put up with all these frustrating puzzles**

***turn to page 78***

**Back down and use Grace’s approach:** \_\_\_\_\_

**taking the time to slowly and carefully do the puzzle the ‘right’ way**

***turn to page 90***

## Use your approach...

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You consider Grace's objections, and with a shrug, reject them. "This place has been messing with us ever since we came in. We're not here to prove ourselves 'worthy', we're here to get the Crown. If there's a more direct way to get to it than going through all these ridiculous tests, then that sounds like the better plan to me."

After eyeing up your approach for a moment, you jump up to the wall, then kick off to grab onto the beam above you. With a single, powerful wrench you pull it loose from its mounting, rolling away smoothly as it lands on the ground. "Besides", you add as you heft it back up into your hands, "maybe that's part of the trials? Maybe they *want* us to find another solution, and the tests will just keep getting more and more difficult until we do."

Grace looks unhappy, but, well, tough. You're here to do a job, and playing around with silly puzzles isn't it.

Steadying the weight in your arms you find the point of balance, then ready your feet. Without any further discussion you start running, slamming the solid stone beam into the door with a satisfying 'thud'. The room shakes a little but nothing worse than dust falls on either of you, and you can already see some significant cracks starting out from the point you hit. "Progress!" you hiss triumphantly, before rocking your improvised ram back for another strike.

Out of the corner of your eye you see Grace flinch, but whether it's because she's still afraid of a collapse or just not thrilled that you're destroying parts of an ancient temple you don't know, because before she can speak up the door shatters as you hit it again, leaving you to hurtle through. Unfortunately for you, the next room starts with a large pit, and you're off-balance enough from your sudden entrance that you find yourself stumbling helplessly into it.

In the end, it's the length of beam you're still holding that both saves and dooms you. The weight of it keeps you from regaining your footing as you fall forwards, but it just happens to be long enough to reach all the way across the pit, so you find yourself clinging to it with both hands as it sticks dangerously over the gap.

How deep the pit is you don't know, because it's so full of a thick, green fog that all you can tell is that your feet can't touch the bottom. The fumes reach up to about your waist, clinging

wetly to your legs as you try desperately to avoid slipping further into it.

“Oh!” you hear Grace say from above you, her cheery face poking through the shattered remains of the door you left behind. “What luck!”

You grimace. “How do you call this lucky?”

“Well, you didn’t fall *all* the way in the pit”, she volunteers chirpily, before adding with a mischievous grin, “and it’s an impressively short distance between you making a bad decision and me getting to say ‘I warned you’.”

Your first response is a heavy sigh, which you cut short as you notice a wisp of the fog curling up towards your face as you breathe in. “Okay, yes, now help me up.”

Seeing you’re not in any immediate danger of falling further, Grace takes the opportunity to rub it in a little more. “Well gee, there’s no way I could possibly pull you up myself. Unless... why, if only there was a really smart way a person could easily lift more weight than they normally could...”

This time you settle for rolling your eyes dramatically. “Point taken. But if you could just gloat *and* help at the same time, that would be great.”

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It’s hard to be too mad at Grace for her caution in getting you out, given how clear she is that rushing your rescue could send you both falling into that trap. Then again, if she’d just helped you with the battering ram there’s no way you would have *both* fallen in, so your generosity quickly fades. When you’re finally back on solid ground, the whole bottom half of your body feels soaked. Whatever the mist was seems to have seeped through your clothes and saturated your skin, leaving you fighting some shivers as you finally lie down and relax.

“We’re making camp here for tonight”, you announce from face down on the ground. “And then maybe tomorrow we can figure out a better way to work together as a team.”

There’s a few moments of silence that clearly indicates Grace has some opinions on that statement, but she wisely keeps them to herself for now. “Sounds good, boss”, she says simply. “You, uh, might want to at least wash that stuff off though. If it hasn’t started burning already it’s probably not a contact poison, but I wouldn’t want to sleep with it if I were you.”

“Way ahead of you”, you answer, as your leggings sail through the air past her and land on the opposite wall with a wet slap. Grace looks away with a blush as the rest of your damp clothes soon follow, and a short spritz from your canteen lets you at least wipe off the worst of the residue sticking to your body. By the time you’re done Grace has gotten a small fire going, apparently calculating that the room has large enough windows that the smoke won’t be a problem. Or, perhaps she just wanted something else to focus on aside from your impromptu sponge bath, what with how she averts her eyes until you’re safely settled into your sleeping bag.

“See, now this is teamwork”, you say approvingly to the back of her head, as you shuffle up next to the fire. “If we can keep this up tomorrow then maybe I won’t have to throw away the rest of my clothes, huh?”

Her cheeks flush red, something you only get the briefest flash of before she even more deliberately looks away. That sight leaves you grinning, with an idea in your head for just how to keep the two of you working together. If the leash fits, you suppose sleepily, you might as well make her wear it.

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Sleep comes easily, but your dreams are intense. There’s no particular story that you’re stuck in, instead it’s a series of sensations, a flowing river of vague thoughts and feelings that you’re drifting in and out of.

For all of the vague sense of disconnected dream logic though, there is a focus to it. It takes a while to resolve, but eventually you find yourself once again submerged half in and half out, only this time it’s in this river rather than some pit in the temple. The water rushes and swirls between your legs, far more active in its motion than that green mist ever was, and the sensation of it quickly makes your eyes drift closed. There’s an intention here behind the sweeping current, and it pulls insistently at you as you float along.

You relax into it, your legs kicking absently as you no longer seem to need to work to keep yourself afloat. Instead there’s the sensation of stretching, like working the stiffness out of a muscle after a workout, but across your entire lower body at once. Your back curves, and then every part of you below your waist grows.

It feels like a mix between a dedicated massage and a particularly toe-curling yawn; a flood of mixed messages travelling up and down your spine like bubbles escaping from spring water. You’re briefly shaken from your drifting stupor by a sharp crack as your body twists

abruptly to the side, your bones snapping into new positions with surprisingly little protest. And still that stretch continues, the very weight at your core sliding smoothly into some other configuration. With a sudden twitch it feels like your legs split in half, but instead of getting lost in the stream they simply flow into place further behind you as your new muscles swell and shift. There's one final kick as some part of your body remembers you're supposed to be working to keep yourself afloat, but you feel that command answered by four distinct limbs one after the other, travelling around in some slow circuit as your brain hazily interprets the new connections. Then you feel your heart beat faster, the sound growing into a drumming, galloping rhythm. When it reaches its climax it drowns out everything else, until finally your eyes snap open and you wake up.

Light is filtering in through the windows as you yawn and slowly raise your head, but your whole body is so stiff it feels like you've barely slept at all. You must have been lying funny, because your sleeping bag is kicked to the side and your legs feel numb. Great. What a perfect way to start the day.

You bend forwards to rub some life back into them, and stop as your spine hitches. You're trying to curl over to reach your waist, but somehow the angle is off, and you just wind up twinging the muscles in your side as you flex awkwardly. Blinking in confusion you pull the bag out of the way, but stop as your fingers close around a handful of loose stuffing. You hadn't simply fallen out of it, you realise with a slow-dawning concern, but somehow shredded it as you slept.

That's enough to jolt you upwards, but once again your back just doesn't bend in the way you're expecting. Instead of sitting bolt upright you're curled over on your side, which can't be right given that you can feel the numb mass of your rear beneath you. But still, a fact like that doesn't make the angle of your spine make any more sense. Now in genuine panic you throw the remains of your sleeping gear out of the way, and tilt as best as you can to get a view of what exactly is happening. Even then it takes a few moments to register it all, so you go through a series of realisations as things slowly become clear.

You're sitting on a horse, which is curled up obediently beneath you. Actually it's not a real horse because the head is missing, so someone somehow tucked a stuffed body below you as you slept. Actually it's joined to you, they've sewed some bizarre clothes over your waist without waking you to make it look like you're wearing the body of a horse like oversized pants. Actually you see the tail behind you twitch, and you *feel* it slap back down sharply on the horse's flank.

It can't just be an elaborate costume. It's you.

Every one of your new limbs starts kicking at once. You're trying to stand, but you can't figure out what instructions you need to give to make that happen, so instead there's just a panicked, scrabbling, clopping noise. Grace shoots upwards from her sleeping bag, and you can't help but notice that *she's* perfectly fine.

"What's going on?" she blurts out, before adding, "wh... where did you get a horse?"

Finally you get it together enough to scramble to your feet, all four of them. Grace's eyes only get wider.

"Why are *you* a horse?"

You struggle to think of a response. "Because *you* didn't pull me out of that pit sooner!" you eventually come out with.

It's hard for Grace to get more surprised, but she somehow manages. "What?"

"Think about it, you left me hanging in there for way too long, with that weird magic fog coming up to, oh, I don't know..." You put your hand at your waist, right at the line where your perfectly normal human torso melds into your new horse body. "...right about here?"

That hits home to Grace, and the fight drains out of her face, leaving her looking genuinely apologetic. A few moments later and she's making a puppy dog face, with a quivering lip and everything, and it's enough that you can't help but wave her unsaid apology away with a dismissive snort.

"It's fine", you sigh heavily. "I mean, it's not *fine*, but it's not the end of the world. Clearly this is just the punishment for falling into one of the traps, so all we have to do is get to the Crown, and then I'm sure this will all be fixed. And hey, at least now I'm not likely to fall into any more pits, right? I mean, I don't think I'd even *fit*."

Grace laughs a little at your joke, clearly relieved that you're able to move past it. For now, you're happy enough to leave it at that, with no real appetite for an argument about whose fault this is when you're still trying to figure out exactly what *this* is.

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It takes a little while, but eventually you manage to get yourself walking. You're not sure how you'll climb around any of the challenge rooms like this, but thankfully most of the rest of the

tests limit themselves to simple puzzles. From this point on, it seems, it's all finding patterns and pulling levers, which you're still more than capable of.

Physically capable, at least. Mentally, it's not long before your attention starts to wander. Getting the right order of switches to throw, or lining up all the pictures on a rotating board might be engaging enough for Grace, but you can't help starting to get bored. More and more you're content to leave Grace to work out the solutions, while you just take care of what's needed when she gives you the signal. That's not too different from what you were doing before after all, only now you're happy to leave all the puzzling to her rather than trying to occasionally pitch in on solutions. That then means that you have time to start thinking about something else, and there's nothing that presses for your attention as much as your new body.

It's... different. Grace seems to have pretty much entirely written it off, focusing on getting through the temple and treating this change as a minor hurdle on the path to success, but it's harder for you to ignore. From the waist up you're as you were before, although the height of your legs means you stand a little taller, which makes for an interesting shift in perspective.

Below the waist though, you're really different. There's a ring of fur just above your pelvis where your horse body joins with your human body, looking like enough of a seam that you still have to remind yourself that it's not some costume you've just stepped into. But the fact that you can feel the muscles in each of the four legs below that, the way you can feel the pressure as you lift one hoof and press down on another, or the loose-haired tail that rises behind you as you turn your attention towards it — all of that adds up to very clear evidence of just how changed you are. But it's only after spending some time in this form that the weirder parts of it really make themselves known.

It's not the fact that walking is a different motion, or the way it feels like every time you breathe in there's two different chests you're filling with air. Those are plenty weird enough, but the part you can't stop coming back to is the way some of your important parts have been... moved.

You get the impression that your butt is just under your tail, which, fine, that makes sense. You wouldn't really want it anywhere else, considering. But twitching your tail has also made it clear that your pussy is just below that, and a few subtle swipes of your fingers through the fur at your waist confirms that you don't somehow have two. That means your original pussy either closed up or just moved to the back of your body, out of sight and extremely out of reach of your hands. Which would be fine, if not for the fact that every time you walk up and down stairs your back legs make the lips of your pussy rub teasingly against each other. And, of course, now every test seems to involve nothing but stairs.

It's maddening. If you had anything else to focus on you might be able to put it out of your mind, but all you're doing is entering a room, standing with Grace while she figures out the puzzle, then climbing up and down stairs to reach all the switches and buttons that need to be pressed. And that's it, just that sequence over and over again, as the day stretches on and as your spine starts to vibrate with barely suppressed tension. It's almost enough to make you want to take over solving the puzzles yourself, but in a weird way, you can't bring yourself to give this up. You both want something else to think about, and also can't bring yourself to want to think about anything else, all at once.

In the end, the outlet you stumble into for this energy is to share it with Grace. That was your idea last night after all, and it's only gotten more urgent. True, there isn't any more need to encourage teamwork, because Grace is already doing her part by solving all the boring puzzle parts. But even though you have a very different reason for teasing her, it's still a good solution. When she looks at you and blushes it makes the tension inside you just a little bit more manageable. It helps you feel in charge, both of her and yourself, and that little reinforcement gives you just enough strength to keep going forwards.

So as you go through the rest of the rooms, you start subtly changing the way you act. Nothing too big at first, you just spend more time standing over Grace and looking down at her, carefully arranging your face into a stern, commanding expression. Soon you notice that it takes her just a little bit longer to get to the solution of the puzzles, and you catch a few beads of sweat on her forehead as you casually angle your chest directly into her eye line. From there you start needing more and more of her instructions repeated, just happening to pause halfway up the inevitable stairs, your flicking tail drawing her attention towards your exposed slit.

You're pleased to see just how flustered all this gets her. It's hard to say for sure how much she's playing along with it — you're sure she's tugging on her braids more than she was yesterday, but you don't know her well enough to know if that's a nervous reaction or just how she flirts. It's cute though, especially with the way the pinkness of her cheeks shows through her glasses as she looks up at you, and if nothing else her reactions are a strong signal that she's not unhappy about what you're doing. Which is good, because you certainly don't want to stop.

The next room is quite narrow, and you take advantage of that by 'forgetting' how large you are, casually pinning her to the wall as you turn around. You manage to lift her off the ground while keeping it just short of hurting, reducing her to a breathless squeak as she struggles to attract your innocently distracted attention. When she timidly taps you on the flank you look down at her with another haughty expression, before deigning to step aside with a sharp 'tssk!'.

"Oh how careless of you", you sigh as she sinks sheepishly back down to her feet. "You'll have to watch where you're going in future, or I might end up sitting on you."

You see her cheeks blush even more fiercely at that, and she blinks as that apparently takes even her by surprise. Apparently you could say just about anything to her right now and as long as you get the tone of voice right she'd still have that reaction. Good to know.

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The room after that is large. There's no real challenge to it, just a lot of levers and buttons that have to be pressed one after another, with a diagram showing exactly the sequence required set up right by the door. They're all laid out on opposite sides of the room, making you work up a sweat as you trot back and forth. A large set of stairs right in the middle forces you to climb up and down too, which only makes you more wound up as your rear legs keep up their maddening rubbing.

After the twentieth lever in this same sequence, you've had enough. This isn't a puzzle, it's just a set of instructions, so if the temple is going to mess with you, then it's only fair for you to do the same.

Wandering past Grace after the latest pointless button press, you raise a hand wordlessly to stop her instructions. It's gratifying to hear her immediately fall silent, but as you keep your hand raised for a few long moments you sense her confusion. Turning to look at her directly, you put it simply.

"I've been doing all the work for awhile now", you say, staring down at her intently. "If we're supposed to be a team, then you'll have to do something for me too."

Grace looks taken aback. "But... I've been solving the puzzles, right?"

"Oh that", you answer, waving that away with a dismissive twitch of your hand. "That's nice, sure, but that's not real work. I think you owe me something a little more... physical."

She doesn't answer, unsure of what exactly you're meaning, but the way her face goes beet red lets you know she has at least some ideas. To really make it clear you walk slowly backwards, your hooves clapping loudly on the stone as each step brings the two of you closer together.

"There's a lot of advantages to this particular form", you continue, stretching your back to emphasise how much taller than her you are now, "but there's one drawback I can't stop focusing on."

Your tail flicks against her face, and she stares blankly forward as you bring your puffy, equine

sex right up to her eyeline. “Time for some teamwork, don’t you think?” you finish, shaking your rear just a little.

You see her stiffen as she finally puts it all together, and for a moment you’re genuinely not sure if she’s going to step away and you’ll have to huffily call all this off. But instead you can *hear* her bite her lip, and then she’s leaning in. She happens to be at the perfect height too, and you can feel the heat of her breath against your sex as she gets closer. “That’s it”, you say quietly, speaking just as much to yourself as you are to her. “Give me the servicing I need...”

She obliges, her tongue sliding slickly over your folds as a tremor runs through your curved spine at her contact. One of your front hooves taps impatiently as she sets up a slow rhythm, but you quickly find her restraint holding you back. There’s just such a distance between you and where she is, or maybe it’s that your new equine anatomy is just less sensitive due to the sheer size of it, but her delicate motions are doing little more than working you up further.

After a few moments of this, you snort in frustration, drawing her attention enough to make her pull back. “I said I need to be *serviced*, not teased”, you huff. “I suppose it’s only fair — if you directed me during the temple challenges, then I’ll just have to direct you during this. So!”

You step forwards, leaving Grace swaying a little as she steadies herself after your sudden withdrawal. “Arm up!” you command.

Once again she obeys wordlessly, lifting her right arm and holding it straight outwards.

“Now make a fist”, you add.

She does, still a little confused, but as you raise your tail and line yourself up she once again belatedly catches on.

“Oh”, she says, lowering her arm and looking between it and you with a questioning expression. “Is this... is this okay for you?”

You struggle not to roll your eyes. “Grace, the one thing that’s been made abundantly clear to me over the course of today is that my...” you trail off for a moment, before indicating your rear end with a wave of your hand, “... *situation*, is very different.” Another expressive gesture takes in your smooth front as you turn back to look at her. “I couldn’t get myself off even if I wanted to, do you see? And I don’t think half-measures are going to cut it for me anymore.”

It makes you frown a little to say it out loud, but you can’t argue with the situation, and Grace apparently needs it spelled out. “When I say I need to be serviced, I am not kidding. I need to

be *filled*. Nothing less than that will do. So unless you're hiding something substantial in your pants, then this is not only okay for me, but necessary. Now, arm out!"

She jumps back to attention, her fingers clenching into a fist as she braces herself on the wall behind her. Her face is once again a deep red, but you can tell from the way she's biting her lip again that she's anticipating this just as much as you are. Maybe the temple has changed both of you, bringing all these desires to the surface, or maybe that's just an easy thing to tell yourself. Maybe in truth you always had a thing for being in charge of people, for commanding others to do exactly what *you* need to get off, but now this just makes it all the more heightened. Now you're disconnected from it completely, you can't face her while she services you even if you wanted to, and you have to take your satisfaction like an animal even as you tower over her. And from Grace's side, what better for a clever little academic than to learn exactly how to look after a big, powerful creature like yourself? Why shouldn't she enjoy pampering and taking care of you, so you can pay her back by galloping down her enemies and charging through all opposition?

Perhaps if she does well enough you'll even let her ride you. Perhaps.

You're distracted from that line of thought as she finally makes contact, and you barely manage to hold back on the urge to buck as her hand presses into you. She's moving slowly, but she's also not stopping, and the way it makes your pussy stretch as she fills you just feels perfect. You breathe in sharply, tail flicking as you stamp your feet.

The pressure continues, and even without looking at her you can tell that Grace is up past her wrist inside you. It's thrilling, made all the more powerful by how different and unusual it feels. This just wouldn't be possible with your old body, but it's more than just something new. Even beyond the sensations, it's how primal it feels; how deep and animalistic the interaction you're having is. It just keeps coming back to that one word — it feels like you're being serviced. Like you're an animal in the field, unable to settle as the need comes on too hard, and you have to get someone to take care of you. And whether it's someone with four strong legs to pin you down and thrust into you from behind, or just someone like Grace: a nice obedient assistant who can roll up her sleeves and fill in, the end result is the same. It's all about driving you slowly to the knees of your new, outsized body, panting and moaning as every curve of you is explored, the heat pouring out behind you almost as fiercely as it burns in Grace's cheeks.

You'd swear she's up past her elbow now, and you can *hear* the sound your body is making as she presses slickly inwards. Her other hand grips your flank, clearly searching for leverage as she moves slowly in and out, but you barely even feel that. She's started up a rhythm now, having reached in far enough that you're finally tight around her, and you can't even rationally

follow where in your body the sensations she's provoking are coming from, but it's more than enough to leave you speechless as the first of many orgasms roll through you.

It's impossible to say how long it goes on for. The shadows are long on the walls by the time you feel your body start to give way, but you can't say for sure if the sun was low in the sky before you started, or if you really have been at this for the whole afternoon. All you know is that when Grace finally withdraws her hand it's dripping wet, and you feel that same slickness drawing a thick line down the back of your rear legs as you slump to the floor.

You fully expect a long moment of silence, but not long after you've slid off of Grace and hit the ground, you hear her clear her throat. "Um, how was that?" she asks quietly.

"Not bad", you answer, your voice still a little hoarse from all your earlier moaning. "Not bad at all."

She leans against you, trailing her other hand absently through your short, coarse fur. "Good", she says with a smile. "I'm glad."

There's a pause. "Um", she adds eventually.

You raise an eyebrow, but say nothing until she continues.

"Do... do you think you could do something for me then?"

With a deep breath, you stand up, making Grace slide off your flank and onto a sitting position. Stepping up close, and you watch as her eyes rise slowly up your body, going from your hooves that rest right next to her folded hands all the way to your leering face as you stare down at her.

"I might be persuaded to do that, yes. After all, we're a team, aren't we? And after you did such a good job, it's only fair for me to repay you. But I want one more thing from you first."

She gives you a brief confused look, but nods for you to continue. In response you kneel slightly so you can take her chin in your hand, holding her firmly as you drill your eyes into hers.

"Come with me when we're done with the temple. I'll need someone to keep me serviced", you hang on the word just a little, for your own benefit, "and I can't think of a better person for that role than you."

"But, wait, once we find the Crown, won't you change back? Isn't that the plan?"

You shrug. “I don’t think it is”, you answer honestly. “I don’t know how or why exactly, but this”, you indicate your new body, “somehow already feels more *right* than I ever felt before. Even if we deliver the Crown to that village or whatever, I don’t think that’s going to change anymore. Why, would you want it to?”

She pauses, and you can tell she’s genuinely thinking through her answer. “No”, she says finally, with a smile on her lips. “Putting aside just how fascinating this whole thing has been, I don’t think I can pass up having a girlfriend that I can ride and feed carrots occasionally.”

“Ha ha”, you laugh dryly. “I don’t remember saying anything about *girlfriend* exactly, but...”

Looking down at her cute little face, you can’t help but have your domineering exterior soften a little. You lean in towards her, sweeping her in to a long and lingering kiss. “I suppose that’s one of your better ideas...”

**THE END**

## Back down and use Grace's approach...

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You sigh heavily, reluctantly lowering your eyes from the tempting beam on the ceiling. “Fine, you’re probably right”, you admit. “If we have a clear path to keep moving that *doesn't* involve breaking the place down around us, we should probably do that. But as soon as we lose that, then you just try and stop me from going straight back to the battering ram.”

Grace laughs, and seems genuinely pleased that you’ve taken her suggestion on board. “Agreed. Now, help me with the rope here, this will take a while to set up.”

Even with all that set up, it’s hard work. The levers seem to be almost rusted in place, while at the same time oddly slick enough that no matter how tight you make your knots the ropes keep sliding off. So Grace winds up being the only one pulling the rope like you planned, while you have to grind the levers loose enough to let them actually move.

By the time you’re done you’re both exhausted, and your hands are thoroughly stained with whatever ancient grease those things were steeped in. Not only that, but by now the light coming through the windows has died almost entirely, so you wordlessly agree it’s time to make camp. A quick look through to the next room confirms there’s nothing dangerous waiting for you, so the two of you settle down to have some rations from your pack. You get about halfway through the meal before realising that Grace is shooting you dirty looks, and you roll your eyes as you belatedly wipe your hands clean. She nods approvingly, and the both of you settle gratefully into your sleeping bags to rest.

Despite how tired you are it’s hard to get to sleep, and when you do drift off your dreams are restless. You’re surrounded by a voice, but you can’t place whose it is, much less figure out what it’s saying. All you can tell is that it’s demanding, but in a weirdly comforting way, and the more you listen to it the more you sink down into it. It’s like a heartbeat, pulsing and rhythmic, and you can feel it echoing through you, rocking back and forth through your body as you take it in. Then slowly it starts to solidify, the reverberations focusing as they build in the center of your chest. Except no, it’s lower than that — whatever this sensation is you can feel it slide downwards, and you shiver as it slips below your waist.

It’s pounding now; a deep, rattling feeling that goes beyond sound to become just pressure and release. And yet despite that there’s still words in there, or at least the *idea* of words — even as your chest just rises and falls to its rhythm, you can feel that there’s some intent lying

underneath it all. There's a desire, or possibly a command, and whatever it is it feels like its seeping into your body like the warmth of a bath. You grit your teeth unthinkingly, your spine stiffening as you stretch and strain, and then finally you feel it all release as a weight, something pulling down and out between your thighs and sending you tumbling into the need that opens up in its wake.

You wake with a gasp, feeling the last trembles of that uniquely intense dream shaking out of your limbs. But somehow, that's not the only thing you feel.

There's a weight between your legs, familiar from your dream but completely unfamiliar in your waking life. Grace seems to still be sleeping, so you take advantage of the light just beginning to seep into the room to slowly peel away your clothes and take a look.

You'd found yourself hoping that a loose bit of equipment had fallen between your legs, or fearing that you'd find some horrible hidden injury, but instead what you find is truly a surprise. Deep beneath the shelter of your underclothes is, unmistakably, a cock, with equally sizeable balls hanging below it. It stirs to life as you look at it, and you realise two things in very quick succession.

Firstly, it is decidedly non-human. You're no expert, but from the size, shape and colour, it looks like something you'd see on a horse. Secondly, it's a *part* of you, a fact driven home by the sudden injection of heat you feel as it stiffens and grows at all your attention.

Your eyes go wide, and you hurriedly wrap yourself back up in the sleeping bag. That might have stopped Grace from seeing it, but the pressure just drives home to you how much it's still there. In fact — you move your hands around a little, prodding and pressing awkwardly — not only do you have a cock now, it very much feels like you *don't* have the junk you had when you first came into the temple. Try as you might, your probing fingers can't find any hint of your slit. There's just the weird, sensitive orbs of your new balls, and beneath that, smooth skin all the way until you hit the thick shaft of your dick.

This is a pretty big thing to wake up to. For a little while you just breathe in and out slowly, trying to focus on whether or not you're still dreaming. When you try slapping yourself you only succeed in making Grace wake up, and her slow stretch as she drifts out of sleep makes you hurriedly put your panic behind you.

“Good morning”, she says blearily. Taking in the light through the windows she stifles a yawn. “I suppose it's time to get up. Did you sleep okay?”

You nod silently. It's hard to say exactly why you don't tell her what's happened, but then

again, what would you even say? ‘Oh, my sleep was okay, except for the part where I grew a big cock somehow’? And even if you did tell her, how would she help? She’d probably find it *fascinating*, and want to sit down and document everything about it, and you’re... not sure how you’d react to that right now. No, clearly the best option is just stow this away, and keep pressing on towards the Crown. If this was a part of the Crown’s tests, then retrieving it would surely release you from this curse. So for now all you need to do is keep going. And how hard could that even be? The puzzles so far have been a breeze with Grace’s help, and it’s not like you’ve been struggling to keep out of each other’s pants along the way, so surely it won’t even come up.

A quick grimace passes over your face as you feel your cock slide a little further across the fabric of your clothes, provoking a bizarre set of sensations that fizzle against the base of your spine. Belatedly, you realise you still haven’t answered Grace’s question.

“Fine!” you yelp quietly. “I slept just fine.” Coughing to regain your composure, you slowly get to your feet. “Uh, let’s... let’s get going then?”

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You eat breakfast quietly, then move to take on the next room. Thankfully it’s simple, and even better, it doesn’t have any more giant levers to deal with. It is a big room though, and the button presses required to make your way through see you going back and forth from one side to another, and that’s a pattern that repeats over the next several chambers. The puzzles themselves are time-consuming but simple, and in fact before too long they even have pictures of the solutions required displayed on the wall right near the entrance. That means all you have to do is have Grace stand there and call out what’s required, while you walk back and forth across the room actually pushing the buttons or whatever.

All of that would be fine — at least you’re making progress — except for the way that all this working is making your new equipment rub against your previously comfortably snug clothes. On top of that, you’re both getting bored.

You’d prefer Grace was focused on the puzzles because that would mean there’d be less chance of her seeing the stiff-legged way you’re walking, but your mind wandering is a lot more of a direct problem. The confusing signals that your body is sending you are giving you *ideas*, and there’s nothing else for your mind to do but run through them. What if you celebrated after a successful mission by going to a fancy bathhouse, and after slipping into the warm waters together one thing led to another? Or what if on the way back to the village a sudden, dangerous blizzard blew up somehow, forcing both of you to bed down together for warmth? Or maybe you could just pin her up against the wall right here and now, the need to get her opinion

on what's happened giving you just enough excuse to tear your clothes off, and then see where things go from there?

"No, the *red* button!" Grace calls out from behind you, and you shake your head as you pull back from that daydream.

"Uh, right, sorry", you answer, stepping back from the pedestal and trying to get back on task. Annoyingly, you realise this means you're going to have to climb up a completely different flight of stairs, and from the first step you feel another point of discomfort. As much as you try to stealthily shift yourself around, you can't seem to stop your belt digging into your back, right at the base of your spine. That's not ideal, but at least that gives you something else to focus on aside from those dangerous daydreams, right?

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Three rooms later, and you're sure the pain in your back wasn't just a result of your newly wide-legged stance. There's something else going on with your body, aside from your cock and balls rubbing maddeningly against your clothes. By now you can feel something else pushing out from behind you, and from where it is it's not difficult to guess what it must be. It's only a small little nub for now, but you can tell that it's trying to be a tail. That means that whatever it was that changed you while you slept, it isn't done.

The thought gets your mind racing, so it's good that with Grace's instructions to follow you don't need to think about what you're actually doing. Any sort of critical consideration of the task at hand is being helpfully done for you, which means that it's pretty easy to hide how distracted you are. All you need to do is walk from one button to the next, climbing over whatever features of the rooms are in the way, and using the occasional bit of elbow grease to deal with any of the heavier things you need to move around. That last task is always a bit annoying when it comes up — quite why the builders of this place wanted you to prove how smart you are by shifting big rings around on a set of three poles is beyond you, but at least with Grace's help it's just a matter of you going through the motions to unlock each new door.

By the time it gets to the late afternoon though, you're starting to struggle. You can feel what must be fur all down your thighs, and while that's hidden beneath your leggings for now, there's only so much strain that fabric is going to be able to take. Worse still, although it's subtle right now, the changes are starting to creep up your body. You could swear your chest is stretching out your tabard, and there's an endless itch at the end of your nose that you can just *tell* is a symptom of it getting broader and flatter. You try to keep facing away from Grace as much as possible, but if your face becomes the big, horse-like snout you bet it's heading towards, you're

not going to be able to keep that hidden for long.

All you can do is keep pushing through these puzzles, hoping to get to the Crown and stop this before it goes too far. Which would be fine, if it wasn't for the fact that these rooms seem to be *endless*.

Eventually Grace calls for a break, and as much as you might grumble under your breath, you can't really come up with a good reason to argue. She's trying to be kind after all — you *should* be tired, given all the running around you've been doing, but how is she supposed to know that the reason you're sweating isn't from overwork? Besides, your teeth feel weirdly large and unwieldy in your mouth, so you're not sure how much you'd be able to say without revealing everything anyway. So instead you sit heavily on the floor, making a big show out of digging something out of your pack to explain why you're not facing her, and then when you finally pull out your canteen you have to figure out how to subtly drink from it when you swear your lips are twice as large as normal.

By the time you manage it, Grace is looking curiously in your direction, so you cover yourself with a fake cough then lie back on the floor. "Tired", you say simply, forcing your tongue and teeth to form the word clearly through sheer effort. "Quick nap."

From the way you're facing as you lie down you can't see her expression, but your ears prick up a little at what you hope is the sound of a shrug. "Okay then", she answers. "I'll work on some translations, you just rest up."

You try. You try as hard as you can to relax, but you just wind up feeling more tense. Not just tense actually — pent up. Now that you've stopped moving you finally realise just how much pressure is building up somewhere inside you, and it has nowhere to go while all you're doing is trying to lie still. You grit your teeth, but all that does is let you feel how much your mouth has changed, with everything in there feeling weird. Even your nose seems wider and longer — you're pretty sure that by now just looking in Grace's direction will give everything away. And that's not even mentioning the bulge threatening to tear your pants in two.

It's hard to focus on anything else. You keep your head buried into your chest and your tongue idly plays over your increasingly long front teeth, but that's all just a distraction from the weight between your legs. After you shuffle over a little you find your shoes just fall off, and pulling up your legs you see your feet have solidified into simple hooves. And still, even that only manages to keep your attention for a few moments at best.

There's just so many different things coming together, all focusing perfectly on your crotch. The weight is a part of it; this weird, pulling sensation that keeps tugging right up through

your spine whenever you shift impatiently. But on top of that is a heat, and you could swear the whole thing is just... *throbbing*. Is that normal? Is that something dicks do? Not in your experience, but you've never had one attached to you before. But the worst part, the part that makes it so maddeningly distracting, is just how *good* it feels.

The ideas running through your head are endless, and even more overwhelming now that you don't have any physical activity to focus on. Taking a rest was clearly a mistake, but it's too late to protest it now. You know you should, you know you're on a slide that's only going one way, but that throbbing has its claws in your spine, and it's all you can do to fight against giving in. So you're stuck, barely suppressing an endless whine as you pant and huff, your nostrils flaring in the heat that's pouring from your crotch.

You don't know how much time goes past. You're certainly not getting any rest, and you dread the point when Grace is done with her work and you have to act like you're fine to keep going. You're not fine, your whole body feels like it's stuck; with this weird, overpowering orgasm locked inside your strange new junk that you can't begin to relate to but you *desperately* want to experience, except that would be giving in and then it would be obvious, so you can't, but you can't *not*, and you're frozen right on that knife's edge, every muscle you have shivering with perfect tension.

There's a sound from behind you, and it comes so suddenly that for a moment it snaps you out of it completely. "Undress", the voice says simply, and your hands are fumbling with your clothes before you even fully register that Grace is the one talking.

By the time you turn to look at her, you're completely naked. It was so much effort to keep your clothes on that getting permission to remove them was almost all it took, and the hardest part was not simply tearing them all to shreds as you finally freed yourself. But still, it means you're completely revealed as you look up at her, biting your thick lip impotently as you see her staring down at you.

"H-huh?" you stammer.

"Please", she sniffs, somewhere between amused and annoyed by your confusion. "I've been keeping an eye on you ever since this morning. I thought maybe I should just give you your space, but if you're going to wind yourself up in knots, then I guess I'll just have to talk you through taking care of it."

It takes a few moments to get your mouth under control enough to answer back. There's something else taking up space in your throat, and you can't tell if it's just the heat boiling in your core, or your body is so different that it's making it hard to speak. "Haw-how, would you

know what to do?” you manage.

Grace rolls her eyes. “I mean, it’s not a complicated problem”, she says, pointing at the cock now straining almost a solid foot out from your crotch. “And besides, you remember that book I mentioned? Something similar happened to someone in the followup. In fact, I think they wound up being able to sell their produce for a pretty tidy profit as an alchemical component. So hey, that could be us. You could be the Chimera that lays the golden eggs!”

Your eyes shoot open. “I’m going to lay eggs?” you gasp.

“No dear”, Grace sighs. “Well, probably not. But anyway...”

She kneels down, leaning in with a leer as she looks over you.

“...Let’s take care of the problem at hand. After all, you’ve done so well following my instructions so far today, haven’t you?”

You don’t know how to react, but thankfully Grace makes that decision for you. “Close your eyes, and wrap your hand around your cock.”

Without thinking, you obey. After spending so long today pushing buttons and pulling levers when she tells you to, it just comes naturally. But not only that, there’s a relief in doing what she says. You’ve been fighting against this need for so long, finally being able to give in to it is intoxicating. Biting your lip, your fingers sink just a little into the stiff flesh of your shaft, and for a long teasing moment all you do is hold it there. It lasts long enough that you can feel a growing slickness beginning to seep over your knuckles, your fingertips sliding ever-so-slightly as you fight to keep yourself steady.

Finally, Grace speaks again. “Now, slowly, start moving your hand up and down.”

It’s not like you don’t know how to do this. You’ve had enough encounters with them to know how dicks work, even if you’ve never had to deal with one so personally before. But even so, having her set the rhythm, the way she’s telling you exactly what you need to do and your only thought is to follow her instructions — it means something. It’s showing you how good you can feel to just lean into it, to let yourself be just a powerful body that’s utterly controlled by her. That thought makes you shiver even more in anticipation as you welcome it.

Your body takes the next step for you. As if answering some call she hadn’t made yet, you feel your fingers stiffening, their tips becoming oddly clumsy and hard.

“Oh, interesting”, Grace says, and you can hear the enthusiasm in her voice. “It looks like you’re not done changing. Open your eyes, you should see this too.”

Blinking your eyes open, it doesn’t take long to see what she means. For a start, your mouth is now so stretched forwards that you can’t help but see your new snout in the bottom of your vision. Below that your naked breasts are undeniably larger, your nipples pointing out from your skin as your chest rises and falls with shallow, panting breaths. At the same time you can feel your straining tail whipping over the cold stone floor, but something about it seems somehow... off. You look up at Grace in confusion, some weird weight pulling your head off-balance as you do so, as though your ears are somehow several times larger than they should be.

She looks down at you with an amused grin, and, one last time, solves the puzzle for you. “It looks like you’re not becoming a horse after all”, she whispers, leaning in close in a way that makes your whole body tense. “That tail, those ears, those teeth — you’re a donkey.”

“Huhh?!” you blurt, but there’s an edge to it that proves her point, your voice hanging naturally over the sound in a particularly donkey-like way.

Grace treats your reaction to another indulgent smirk, patting you on the flank and casually running her fingers through your coarse fur. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? A beast of burden. A creature that’s very good at exactly what it does — a good, strong body to fulfill whatever needs that are brought before it.”

As if on command, your cock rises up towards her, filling your vision until you can’t focus on anything else.

“So, what needs could you possibly fulfill now?”

You don’t even change your pace, it’s just that question that sends a rod of iron straight down your spine, ricocheting at your waist and making your shaft spasm helplessly. It’s all you can do to keep from climaxing entirely — somehow you know you don’t have permission for that yet, but even just the feeling of your thumb running over the newly-developed ring around the middle of your cock is enough to get your nostrils flaring with barely-suppressed need.

Seeing you struggling, Grace steps back and turns away, her distance making the moment just a little easier to handle. “You have been good today”, she says, seemingly to herself, “and I must admit I’m curious to see how productive you can be. After all, if we’re going to make a run at that Chimera’s spot, we’ll have to know what you’re capable of.”

There’s no commands for you in her speech, and so you barely hear it. Your whole being is

honed to just this task, to being and doing exactly what she wants, so that anything else is just white noise, almost entirely drowned out by the pounding need deep in your reshaped crotch. Your hooves skid against the stones beneath you, your snout wrinkling as you fight to keep yourself contained.

“So then”, she says simply, still not even facing you. “Cum.”

You weren't even aware of your hand on your balls before it starts to squeeze, just hard enough to direct the desperate, throbbing tension pent up inside you. Your other hand falls back to your chest, not even needed on your shaft as it twitches and strains, your back arching as you feel the release finally coming.

“Hawww!” you cry out, the inhuman bray just adding to how utterly your mind is sunk into this animal lust. “Hee-haww! Haww!”

Finally you cum, your stiffening fingers trembling against the base of your cock as it shudders with a kind of orgasm you've never had before. The rush hits you so hard that your mouth freezes in an open gasp, replacing your frantic donkey brays with the simple clack of hooves on the ground as your legs flail wildly. There's just so *much*, you have to fight to keep your eyes from unfocusing, but all you can see is the endless spray of slickness pouring out of you. Every second breath brings another surge through your cock, and the moment each trembling thrust dies down you feel the tension in your balls signalling another readying in its wake. A heartbeat later and your hips are once again thrusting dreamily forward, another spurt of slick cum coating your fingers and the floor beneath you.



By the time it's all done, you're utterly spent. It feels like you can truly relax for the first time today, and suddenly the bill is coming due for the nervous energy that carried you through all those puzzle rooms. You flop heavily onto your side, uncaring for the moment about how your still-slick cock sticks to the fur on your inner thigh. You can barely do more than breathe heavily, the flaring of your nostrils at the bottom of your vision the only movement you can focus on to keep you from simply falling asleep.

Grace's voice drifts down, cutting effortlessly through your tiredness and making you feel like she's cradling your head in her hands while she simply stands above you. "Good girl", she whispers, the affection in her tone making your tail thump absently in the sticky mess beneath you. "What a good, productive girl you are. Rest now, and then I'll figure out what we can do with all this. I've already got... quite a few ideas..."

Sleep is pulling at you softly even before she finishes her sentence. You settle happily down into it, a grin on your long face as you idly think about tomorrow. Maybe you'll get the Crown, and maybe you'll just leave it where it is so that whatever this is can keep happening. Whatever the case, Grace will know just what to do. You make a good team after all, and she always has such good ideas...

**THE END**

## Uh, I don't know, taxes? Let's just do the job...

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You shrug distractedly, still looking around the temple for any traps you should actually worry about. "Uh, I don't know, taxes?"

Grace sounds a little disappointed at your dismissive answer. "Really? Just that? C'mon, you don't want to really get into it?"

Turning to face her, you give her a quizzical look. "Uh, we're in the middle of an ancient, magical deathtrap temple. Here is the *last* place I want to open up about my deepest darkest fears. I mean, surely the point of all this is to just use it against you, right?"

She waves away your concern. "Oh, that *can't* be..." she pauses, turning back to the inscriptions for a moment, then stops. "Huh. Yeah, that's it exactly. 'Ironic punishments and/or growth opportunities, meticulously tailored to incapacitate the intention of intruders indefinitely.'"

"Uh-huh", you answer. "And how does it normally go for folks?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's not too bad. It's probably just..." Once again she stops herself as she looks back over the wall. "Oh, wow, that is... one way to incapacitate folks indefinitely, huh. Hey, let me just... take a rubbing of this section, will you? For, uh, research purposes."

You roll your eyes, but don't stop her from making her copy. "See? There's always some catch in a place like this. That's why you've got to be smart and, I can't believe I'm saying this, *not* announce your greatest weakness the moment you walk in the door. Now, if you're quite finished, I believe we've got an ancient artefact to track down."

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The sun isn't even setting yet when you re-emerge from the temple, the Crown of Vol'Surtoth safely secured in your backpack. The forest around you already looks a little bit healthier, but Grace is a little unsettled. Eventually, she pipes up.

"Hey, did that seem a little anticlimactic to you? All that build-up and then just... absolutely nothing interesting inside. I barely saw any traps!"

You shrug. “Fine by me. If it’s anticlimactic that just means everything went smoothly and we did our jobs well.”

“I *guess*”, Grace pouts, kicking at a nearby rock. “I suppose that is the sensible approach.”

“Damn right. And when you’re dealing with weird, ancient magic, who would want to be anything other than perfectly sensible?”

A few moments pass as the two of you walk back towards the raft. Once again though, Grace breaks the silence.

“So, what’ll you do now?”

“Head back to the village to hand over this Crown. I don’t know how they’re planning to destroy it, but I *do* know they promised an impressive payout for it, which I intend to collect.”

Grace nods along, but then stops, giving you a look that you can’t properly interpret. “Uh, hey, actually — you’re not from around here, right?”

“No”, you answer. “And I’ll probably be heading on after this. I’ve already got a few nice places lined up where I can spend a payday this good.”

The look of growing discomfort on her face is enough to make you stop walking entirely. “What?” you ask.

“Well, it’s just... I’m not sure you know about this, but the local Kingdom has gotten really big into administration lately. Their rules are that if anyone makes a significant amount of money within their borders, they not only have to declare it, but *also* go through their last three years of earnings, just to prove they, y’know...”

She trails off, but your furious stare eventually brings out the last part of her sentence.

“...paid their taxes.”

Your eyes bulge, and you could almost swear you can feel your backpack shaking slightly, as though something inside was laughing out loud.

“Oh you *absolute* fuck”, you mutter to the Crown. “Before we get back, I am going to drop you right in an outhouse.”

**THE END**

**BONUS**

harpy - alternate image



**BONUS**

full cover image



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