

Sun rose over the Merl territory, its rays timidly peeking over the caldera where they had dug their homes. Viv packed up her meager belongings and enough food to last her a few days, courtesy of her hosts. Tweek sent her off alongside members of his family, including a worried old Merl woman who clung to him the whole time. The lone human was led outside by a Merl warrior with quite a few scars. Just like the older ones, he seemed wary of her.

Viv wasn't sure what to do and stayed silent while they walked through crags and ravines on their way through the mountainous region. The path first climbed the nearest slope, but soon they went through a narrow corridor to find more flat forest on the other side. Well, mostly flat forest.

Vegetation extended in the typical endless green she had come to associate with the Deadshield woods, a sea of fluffy canopies pierced here and there by the occasional meadow, except for one striking feature. Kilometers away in the distance, a lone mountain stood, and on its rocky surface, a face had been carved. A face of colossal proportion.

Or perhaps not. Viv wasn't absolutely sure. Three massive cavern openings resembled two eyes and a gaping mouth opened for a sigh or a scream. Overhangs and peaks could have been bushy eyebrows and a messy beard, or perhaps it was all just a coincidence. It was hard to determine at this range whether this was an accident of nature or the result of a conscious effort. What she knew for sure was that the scale was gigantic. Titanic. Even with earth mages working in concert, it would have taken decades to complete.

"Wow this is..."

Viv was at a loss.

"Hollow mountain," her guide confirmed in broken Enorian. "River there. You follow and see many humans."

"Did you scout the place?"

"Scout?"

"Look see find?"

"We looked, but dangerous. Feel dangerous. We go."

"Hmm. Anything I should know?"

"Lizards that can hide. Also, old statues near the front. You can see soon. We go quick."

With this, the guide fell silent and moved on. Just like Tweek had said, night fell before they could approach the peak so they stopped at an abandoned camp nestled between two trunks. They formed a natural arch that protected them from a light rain.

Remnants of past fires revealed that it was not the first time Merl expeditions had used this place. They ate fresh egg rolls and berries the pair had found on the way. The scout also

boiled a large mushroom that tasted and felt like a plastic bag that would have been left in the ground for a hundred years. It was probably healthy, Viv told herself as she forced the thing down. With dinner over and alarm spells set, there was little left to do except twiddling her thumbs or meditating, so she tried to start a conversation. Viv wasn't sure how to break the ice, or even what would be appropriate to talk about so she started with the most obvious.

"So... you fought the beastlings?"

"Yes," the scout replied, frowning with suspicion.

"Beastling shaman's monster?" she asked while pointing at a scar in a last ditch effort to salvage her attempt at socializing.

"Yes! Snake. Very strong."

He stopped and tilted his head.

"Tasty."

"And this one?" she asked while pointing at another.

The scout didn't waste this occasion to show off and Viv learned much through a mix of basic Enorian, very basic northern tongue, and wild gestures. His name was Shawak and he had been a child during the beastling debacle, one of those who were called to defend the walls despite being a bit too young. He had also taken it upon himself to barter monster remains with merchants from Losserec for medicine and scraps of food, hence his basic understanding of the tongue. Viv found the exchange's subtext interesting. The Merl were quite prideful and cared a lot about their image. Although, to be fair, two male individuals did not represent a meaningful portion of the population. Nevertheless, Shawak's distrust towards humans melted like snow under the sun as the night progressed and he narrated the grand battle over the wall. It sounded nightmarish to Viv, if she had to be honest, but the Merl turned it into a tale of endurance and heroic will. Eventually, she asked him how old he was.

"Ten! My eldest child is already two!"

It confirmed Viv's suspicion that the Merl reached maturity faster. It did not say much about life expectancy, however. Stats and paths impacted age, something Solfis had confirmed on multiple occasions. Willpower and endurance played a key role, though there were other factors. Viv wondered if it affected the Merl or the Kark the same way, and how important the biological factors were. Did mana prevent telomeres from shortening? Was it more metaphysical, like mana just regenerating cells? She had no idea, and without access to research, there was no way to know for certain.

She missed the internet.

The conversation petered out after a bit, especially because Shawak had no questions for Viv. She meditated until it was time to fall asleep. Shawak woke her up the next day at dawn, too early for her tastes, and they moved quietly through the untamed forest.

While Viv tended to go straight and shred every obstacle on her path, her guide preferred to move around them. It made the trip considerably slower and also meant less meat. The witch didn't complain, however. Her approach would work until she met a bigger threat than herself. Then she'd be dead. It was much better to trust a survival expert. Despite the detours, they moved with good speed and reached the base of the mountain in the early afternoon, under a mild cloud cover. She looked up as soon as they cleared the edge of the forest, and had to stop. The face was even more impressive at the base, and due to a trick of the perspective, it felt like its titanic eyes followed her movements. Tiny growths decorated the escarpment, working together to lend the battered rock a semblance of life. It was rather disturbing, moreso because it quickly became obvious that this was, indeed, by design. Stone steps led up the slope from long-overgrown roads, disappearing into the mouth of the giant.

Shawak led the way up. Here, the silence was complete. No birds, no creatures disturbed the otherworldly silence as if the mouth was screaming and that screamed drowned everything else. Viv disturbed a stone. Pebble and sand galloped down to the forest in a tiny avalanche that seemed to echo to infinity. It felt as blasphemous as having one's phone ring at church. Shawak shrugged though, and the ascent resumed.

They moved into the mouth cavern. The air there was cold and wet. She did her best to ignore the needle forest of stalactites hanging overhead like so many teeth. They were geological features, not tools grown to crush her into a broken mess of punctured organs and jutting bones. If she repeated it enough times, maybe she would believe it.

The mood of the place affected her more than her magic-reinforced mind should allow. Something insidious permeated the air. The scout was even more affected. His back was bent, and he kept reaching for a pendant hanging over his thin sternum. He stopped next to the edge of the cave where the light of the sun still shone and pointed forward, to a side tunnel.

"The river is this way. You go. You take wood and swim!"

And with this, he turned away and ran, literally ran, off and into the forest.

Viv stood there for a little while, letting her ears get accustomed to the darkness. The mana here felt pretty normal to her senses, with black being more common due to the darkness. Her unease must have come from something else. She was also curious about the statues.

The cave entrance led to a vast circular room as large as a cathedral, expanding deeper into the heart of the mountain. A circular platform occupied the center, now overgrown with mushrooms and obscured by debris. Five columns stood in a half circle facing her. They were each topped by a different statue.

Viv heard the susurrus of flowing water to the side as she moved down but she could not avert her eyes from the ancient stone works. Even the most ignorant goon would guess at a look that those were ruins of a civilization that must have predated even the Harrakan Empire. Her steps led her to the center of the circle. A feeling made her look up to a vertical shaft above her head. It must have let light through at some point of the distant past but it was now obstructed by dead roots. She grabbed in her backpack for a light stone and let it banish the shadows. She inspected each statue in turn.

The first one, facing her, was barely more than a pile of broken rock. The shape of a hand still held a club while two powerful legs supported half of a muscular torso. There were no signs as to whom they belonged to, however, but she did find inert runes engraved into the pillar. She had never met their like before and she decided to commit them to memory.

The second pillar held a familiar, hooded figure under a ritualistic mask. Those were the symbols of Enttiku, without a doubt. The figure was in a much better shape than the previous one, though the writing system underneath remained cryptic. She committed them to memory as well just in case. They reminded her of cuneiform. It was in moments like those that she enjoyed her stats-enhanced mind, otherwise she would have needed a notebook.

The presence of the goddess of death raised questions, but she decided to finish her inspection first and the next statue was intriguing. Getting close, she saw that it was a scantily clad woman with two pairs of wings coming out of her back. Her form was voluptuous and muscular at the same time as if the sculptors could not decide. It took her a moment and some squinting, but the wings finally gave up their answer.

Those were legs. More specifically, segmented spider legs.

Viv had to take a step back. The presence of Enttiku and the pedestals were a clear indication that this circle had a religious function. Her [polymath] skill screamed at her that possibly the whole mountain did. It only left one reasonable explanation.

“Octas,” Viv whispered despite herself.

The air suddenly felt much colder to Viv. The light made her a target, no, this place was dead and abandoned. It had been so for countless generations. She needed the light.

Maybe she was wrong. Turning around, Viv crossed the circle to check the fourth column but the statue on this one was broken so completely, only the feet remained. The last one displayed a corpulent man holding an axe. What looked like Zebra stripes were probably scars, of which he had many. There was only one god known for a large body and unyielding resistance.

The implication was baffling. She had never seen representations of dark gods, but she expected something more ominous like a giant spider or a pile of meat with an eye in the middle, not traditional anthropomorphic figures. Octas was even depicted to be attractive. It was eminently disturbing after having seen the real deal. More curious was the presence of Enttiku with the rest. It was also likely that one of the broken statues was Efestar, but it didn't explain the last one. There were only three dark gods she knew of.

Out of curiosity, she went to stand under Enttiku's statue and offered a prayer. Her prayer drained a little mana and she received a pulse of comfort in return, a hint that when she died, and she would die, and that was fine, she wouldn't be alone. It helped with both her mindset and the conclusion to her experiment. This was indeed Enttiku, and the cave was indeed religious in nature. The conclusion was clear. There was a time, long ago, when the dark gods were worshiped in the open. And Enttiku used to be one of them. Or was it more complex than that? She could not help but notice that none of the current pantheon was present.

The scale of the mountain was also a decisive factor. It implied that a lot of people used to live around, or at least gather here. And it stood forgotten, and had been forgotten for... a very long time. She wished she had a map. She also wished maps had a use in the Deadshield Woods. And she meant that for future reference because there was no way she was going to explore that place right now or any time soon, and especially not alone. A general air of unease still floated around. Whispers came and went at the edge of her hearing. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear the shuffling feet of worshippers, smell the cooking fires of the tribes as they gathered, but that was long ago. Something had broken this place, just as it had broken the statues of the... old gods?

The idea settled, reinforced by the polymath skill. The rational part of her decided that she didn't have enough information to go on. This was mere speculation based on the interpretation of five columns and three statues, an extremely small source of data, yet another part of her could not deny that one does not set up bad gods at the entrance of a major place of worship. It would be suicidal. Shaking her head, she was about to leave when her mana perception picked up something.

A black spot was slowly moving towards her. The shift in mana was barely perceptible. Someone without her skills and tendency to look for ambushes would have missed it. It used black mana as well in a way that reminded her of what Irao did, only this time it was not as good and she could perceive how it was done.

The thing moving towards her warped light around itself in a strange, cloak-like fashion. A quick glance only revealed the far wall and a slight distortion. Viv discreetly used mana to burn a circle on the ground, but otherwise watched, confident in her reflexes. She was learning a lot by merely observing the curious attacker. The stealth effect went beyond light to play tricks with her mind as well, which she found fascinating. Her gaze kept going up and down despite the firm knowledge that something was there. She felt the black mana try to convince the world this spot was empty.

When Irao had demonstrated his abilities, she had found it impossible to adopt the concept of being hidden because she was, she had to admit, noticeable. That had been a mistake on her part. Black mana didn't allow its wielder to blend in, just like Irao could never be taken for a normal laborer in the streets. Instead, it denied the world the ability to find them. It was actively affecting the target rather than subtly hiding the caster. And that made it much more manageable for Viv, for whom getting people to do stuff came naturally.

"Holy shit I'm having an epiphany. Oh, yes. Net!"

Thin, razor filaments emerged from around her to lash at the hole in space and the veil dropped as the monster behind shrieked. Viv noticed black scales and a lizard-like body while ichor dripped on the dusty stone floor. The witch made a snap call that it may not be enough. Her filaments gathered in a blast spell that cut through the beast from skull to rectum. It fell dead. The scent of blood and offal wafted towards Viv.

“And that’s that.”

She approached the body, which looked like a Komodo dragon dipped in oil.

[Dark-Scaled Stalker]

Nasty teeth on that thing. A pulse of mana attracted her attention and she used her focus knife to remove a small core from the creature’s sternum. It was barely the size of her thumb but that was fine. They sold for gold talents. This one was aligned with black, life, and a smattering of minor affinities. She pocketed it.

And turned in a rush, pushing her round shield in front of her. A reflexive blast hit something in the shoulder. It yowled, but its weight smacked into Viv and she was pushed down. A quick excalibur ripped through her attacker’s muscular body before it could recover. She fell with a massive weight on her torso. Innards spilled on her dress. It stank like hell.

“FUCK.”

Idiot, idiot. Idiot! If there was one, there could have been others. She had let herself be distracted. Her trip through the forest had gone too well and made her cocky. Understanding a concept was useless if she died for it.

Viv pushed the lizard corpse aside and stood up, covered in disgusting fluids. She swore when she realized some of it was her own just as pain let her know she hadn’t survived the ordeal unscathed. She had a gash near her right shoulder and a small cut on her scalp that bled freely. Not alarming per se until she realized her complete lack of medical supplies. The constable’s men had taken her mending potions.

“Dammit.”

A quick inspection revealed two more wall creatures slowly making their way over from the back of the cavern. Fucking things. She moved to the side where the passage to the river ought to be, eyes opened for more surprises. The tunnel continued only for a little while before ending in another room. Viv blinked when she realized this was an underground pier.

A wide stretch of dark water moved lazily towards her left, deeper into the mountain. The light in her hand could not pierce its surface. A stretch of stone expanded into the river around the middle while stone pillars stood at regular intervals, possibly to moor small rafts. A long plank of wood was the only sign that the Merl had ever been here.

Viv suspected that whatever furniture had been here was long lost, but the stone remained. There were tables set against the wall on her side while stairs led up to her left, signs that the Hollow Mountain truly deserved its name. Viv almost slapped herself when she realized she would indeed have to swim. At least the plank would keep her belongings dry.

She almost jumped in before a groove on the ground grabbed her attention. A few step backs gave her a better look at a construct around the entrance. It was enchanted with a shield construct like nothing she had ever seen before.

“What..”

The construct was three-dimensional. Not even on Prince Lancer’s carriage had been shown this level of protection. The enchantment used the natural curve of the tunnel to form a double circle of different radius. More interestingly, there were no runes she could see.

She checked the way back. The lizards moved slowly, apparently unwilling to let go of their camouflage. They probably weren’t all that smart. A hiss of anger and the sound of cracked bone let her know what was really happening. The lizards were eating their fallen.

Whelp.

With some time for herself, Viv raced through the stairs and placed some alarm spells. She cast another long one around the entrance, just in case something attacked from the river while she was busy. Fuck, this really wasn’t a good place to hold, but she didn’t want to get into the water without bandaging herself first. On a hunch, she moved mana into the tunnel construct, then more, then more. Almost half of her reserves were gone when suddenly, the construct flickered to life. Runes appeared mid air, ones she was thoroughly unused to seeing: the number six, unity, projection, protection.

A shield set in place then, expanding to form a half-sphere bulging outward. It consisted of hexagons fused together. Each shield fragment was semi-independent from the rest. Viv’s contemplation was cut short by the feel of something warm dripping down her shoulder.

“Right. The bleeding.”

The witch had to salvage most of her small cloth and both of her sleeves to tie her arm to her satisfaction. She had used water to clean it, but knew it wouldn’t do much in this dirty environment. And it would require stitches. And it would probably scar. She looked at her left arm, where the dragon-shaped burn scar remained from Arthur’s first flame breath. Nyil was leaving its mark on her.

With her last breast band firmly held against her scalp wound, the witch focused again on the shield. Truly, it was a thing of wonder. The key runes had been dug inside the stone in three dimensions by an insanely talented earth mage, then projected outside by a projection rune. Could it be that modern Paramese had forgotten past techniques? Or maybe she hadn’t seen its like because she had never left boonies.

As for the shield itself, the hexagon structure was a fascinating design decision. She could see from the way the tiles were arrayed that some could fail and the structure would survive. If a tile was attacked, it would offload pressure to the surrounding ones as well. It was an extremely efficient, extremely resilient design that sacrificed size for survivability. It was perfect for small passages or personal protection. She had to make her own, had to. It was just too good to pass.

The witch focused like never before, trying to extract the heart of the spell so she could use it herself. Redundancies were removed. Range got further reduced. Parts of the spell were designed to absorb great blows by moving with them, something that wasn't needed right now. Slowly, the vital elements filtered into her mind where they remained, waiting for completion. Viv stopped twice to check that she wasn't bleeding out and once to see if any lizard was approaching. One was, but it was on the other side of the shield.

It took her half an hour of constant effort, but eventually she managed to reduce the complex shape into its simplest components. It was there, her mind, ripe for casting. She ordered the symbols in her mind and they appeared, dark and familiar around her. The structure reminded her of something she had seen long ago at a honey sale. The idea settled into her mind.

"Hive."

A black-colored ball manifested around her.

It was... magnificent. She could control each and every facet, directing power to them as needed. Her experience with the coating spell easily let her handle the many elements, even if it was significantly more taxing than a more simple shield. She exulted.

Acuity +1 (39)

Lost Heiress (4/10)

All her regrets of not getting to fucking Helock without distraction disappeared before this amazing discovery. There was only one small, tiny problem though.

She could not see through the shield.

it was completely black and blocked her line of sight.

Oh well, she could find a solution later. It was nothing compared to the excitement of studying something obviously exotic. If she could learn from this... how many more constructs waited here or in forgotten corners of the world for her to find them? Maybe

Harrak hid a treasure trove of secrets even Solfis had not been taught. Proprietary constructs and spells... The possibilities were... intriguing.

Viv turned her eye to the entrance when a flash of tongue momentarily disrupted the black mana cover of a lizard. It was smack in front of the entrance, but the presence of the shield obviously confused it. Viv took the opportunity to examine the creature more closely. Paradoxically, the shield blocked her mana perception, which meant that she had to rely on her willpower alone to track down its movements. The struggle against the monster's instinctive use of the 'stealth' concept sharpened her own, forcing an understanding through confrontation. It took an hour, perhaps, but eventually she felt her soul vibrate in harmony.

It was not stealth, but denial. Denial of light and attention, denial of the world. Black mana could remove things temporarily just as it removed others permanently. It could remove her if needed. She gasped with the epiphany.

Lost heiress (5/10)

Her soul pulsed and the lizard turned and fled, its own coating bleeding from its body like melting paint. She could do it. She could hide.

"Sneaky Cloaky."

For once the stupid name reflected reality. The world dimmed around Viv. Swirls of darkness wafted from her dark-clad form and she felt ever-so slightly that the world was paying less attention, which made it a real surprise when something screeched very, very loudly. The ear-shattering scream paralyzed the escaping lizard and Viv. An intense pressure crashed on her, backed by the most evil will Viv had ever felt. Even the Herald of Octas had not felt so vile, so destructive. She made to move and realized she could not. Her heart beat a crazy staccato while her lungs labored to find more air. She tasted bile down her throat. She was aching to flee, but her body wouldn't do that one last step of contracting muscles. Whatever creature had screeched went far beyond anything either her will or the cloak could possibly negate. She was going to die here in this dark, hopeless place.

No.

It was all over.

No.

She did not stand a —

No!

Viv pushed back against the foreign thought. This wasn't her. She had to move. She had to move now! One step back, and she collapsed on herself. Her elbow hit a rock. It went numb.

The familiar pain woke her up. She crawled to the nearest plank. It was all she could see and all she could do because the world was under the dominion of something terrible and only hiding or crawling would save her. The wood was grainy and wet under her fingers. She dipped in the river. The water was shockingly cold. Its icy grasp freed a bit more of her mind, barely enough to hear the lizard's whimper when it saw something it shouldn't have. A ghastly crack silenced the beast.

Viv let the current carry her away but could not stop herself from watching the entrance. A blood-splattered, white arm the size of a small tree pierced the static shield as if it were wet paper. Its clawed digit swept across the room languorously like a child looking for chocolate. The stone groaned. The creature was too large for the opening. Viv knew exactly what it was before she inspected it.

[Necrarch: :LETHAL, caster, cunning, Men Nightmare...]

Viv cut the skill before the information could flood her mind. She needed all the concentration she could get. A shiver shook her body and terror filled her heart when the creature sampled the air. It chuckled, the sound vicious and pitiless. It whispered one guttural word. Black mana flooded the room; it searched for Viv; it found her. It tried to invade her conduits.

It did. The thing was simply too powerful.

Viv fought it off with everything she had, claiming the sweet poison for herself. She was getting away, deeper into the lightless flow. The roof was getting lower above her head. Already, the creature was out of sight and still the spell persisted.

Her chest suddenly hurt.

You are suffering from mana poisoning.

You are suffering from cardiac arrest.

"Ah."

The spell was fading. She had to hold on, fight it off. She wheezed pathetically in the dim light, one hand holding the shining stone and the other the plank she had grabbed. Her core converted the foreign mana coursing through her conduits as fast as it could even as cold sweat covered her brow. Finally, the last of it disappeared. She checked her pulse.

Nothing.

"Ok, bad bad bad."

No defib to be found and she could not use electricity because it was an advanced application of gray mana. Compressions? Compressions. Viv placed a hand under her breast and pushed. The angle was wrong. The water reached to her chest. Changing tactics, she punched her side instead. Still nothing. The water slowed her fist down even with her improved strength.

“Come on, come on, come on.”

Desperate, she started to push with her leg to bob out of the water with every punch, just to give them some more impact. Her ribs screamed in protest. Her head started to swim from the increased oxygen consumption but her determination kept her focused. She would not die now and certainly not so stupidly, not after learning so much. Not before Arthur reached her majority. Viv roared and used a burst of strength to slap her side. The pain stole her breath, but the reward was immediate.

You are no longer suffering from cardiac arrest.

Okay, okay that was better. Slowly, the pain in her chest faded away, replaced by wariness. Not dying right now. Or at least, not quickly. She swore when she realized that her bag had been in the water from the start and still hung from her back. She placed it on the plank to dry, hoping that the insulated outer fabric had kept the contents dry.

It was cold here, and silent. The waters moved placidly along. Viv's breath slowly calmed down until she was mostly back to normal except the small, tiny problem that she had almost died. Again.

A flash of white, corded muscle reminded her of Harrak, of the first necrarch she had seen. This one had been dumb and feral, unlike the abomination that almost killed her. Fuck, for all her abilities, she was still small change before those freaking monsters. Still the same scuttling thing looking for an exit. And Solfis had killed two of those with his true frame? Insane.

Viv took shuddering breath after shuddering breath, pushing the panic down for now. She would be fine. She was fine now. The necrarch had been too large for the opening and the river ended so far away she would be safe. There was nothing in the water or it would have eaten the Merl scouts. unless it could taste her blood in the water. Fuck. Ok, calm down. Calm down.

Viv changed her grip and winced. her shoulder and head hurt. She felt feverish, but that was probably the mana poisoning. A quick glance at her naked hand showed black veins and pruney skin. How long had she been in the water already? That long? It felt like just a couple of minutes.

Slowly, adrenaline faded. It was replaced by exhaustion. The witch placed her head on the plank and fell asleep.

Viv woke up with a jolt and panicked. Her blood-crusted fingers closed on the light crystal, causing feeble yellow light to dawn in the darkness. She was trapped. She was in water. Raw dark stone covered the sky.

Oh yes, the underground river.

Okay.

Food.

Her backpack yielded a slightly soggy egg roll. It was cold but good, and it settled her. The Merl had mentioned that it would take a day to exit the cavern but they had probably been swimming and she had merely floated, so she beat her legs and moved on. She didn't dare change the bandage on her shoulder or clean her crusted scalp, so that would have to wait until she found a more salubrious environment. A tiny voice reminded her that the stalker lizard looked like Komodo dragons and those killed their prey via septic shock but she silenced it. Besides, the bacteria were in the komodo dragon's mouth and she had been hurt by the lizard's claws, so there. She inspected her shield. It was, once again, pristine. No hint of damage. The Merl had added skin and feathers at the back. It felt a bit more comfortable in her hand and would also soften the blow the next time an attack sent the heavy implement into her jaw, which would definitely happen, the way things had been going so far. Viv took the time to wash off most of the congealed blood in the stream with the rationale that predators would taste the lizard blood anyway so a little Viv seasoning on top wouldn't make much of a difference. Then, since she had nothing better to do, she paddled.

She kept paddling for a long time.

At some point, only the passing low roof over her head confirmed that she wasn't stationary. Thank the light gods for her strong grip because her sanity might not have survived hours of darkness without the light sone. The trip was still a grating experience that eroded her spirit as the hours went by. She thought her ordeal was soon over when the cavern opened, but it was too soon and she knew it. Instead, she found a cavern. It was not very big and apparently devoid of life. The river cut straight through the middle, with the shore entirely blocked by stalagmites. She still smiled because she was seeing light. It was a nice fuschia and radiated out from a peppering of crystals nestled inside the stones, so that the entire cave shone like a disco ball. The effect calmed her down further, even as she left it behind. She paddled with renewed vigor and told herself it helped practice her core. The thought was silly and made her smirk.

After what felt like an eternity, she saw a pink light in the distance. The sound of rushing water woke her up from the semi torpor she had been in. The roof gave way to a dawn sky with high clouds. She swam to shore, only realizing her feet reached the bottom and she could walk instead. There were trees and bushes around. The air smelled of sap and growing things again.

In front of her, the river joined a body of water so large the opposite side was still covered in fog. She approached it and tasted the liquid under her finger. No salt. There was only one lake that size adjoining the Deadshield Woods: Lake Hydon. Losserec would be a few hours away on the south side.

The sun rose above a distant mountain and bathed the world in warm light. A bird tweeted.