

MANASTUFFED

A TALE OF MASS & MAGIC



(Content Tags: Stuffing, weight gain, slightly dark themes)

I. - The Death of Princess Foulheart

An ancient king once said that it would not be a blade that brought about the end of times, but a meal.

'Power will no longer be measured in steel and might, but in mass and magic.'

That king could see the future.

Centuries ago, ancient tribes of mortals discovered a power that would change the course of history forever—magic.

The leftover wisps of breath from when the gods walked upon the land, this magic permeated through the physical world through a substance known as 'mana'.

While this mana could be found within almost anything, great traces of it imbued itself into certain items. Since it was the fuel of magic, it found itself greatly intertwined with the fuel of life... food.

It didn't take long for food to become synonymous with magic. Mortals realized they could use it to imbue their own bodies with mana. To fill their bellies with it and wield magic as if it were a manmade tool.

Every spell became associated with a dish. Eat enough of it, and its rune would appear upon your body, and you could cast that spell at will by simply touching the rune and speaking the arcane phrase that invoked it. So long as you had a full belly, of course. After all... food *is* fuel.

But—as with all things—mortals pursued this power to no end. They pursued... strength. Indulgence. Excess.

Gwen sighed as she sat back in her chair. The luxurious, comfortable upholstery did little to soothe the aching she felt, for the pain wasn't in her back or her rump.

The pain she experienced at this moment, was in her stomach.

“Uuuarrp—! Nnngh...”

A long groan was pulled from the vampire, a belch unceremoniously bubbling past her lips and snout, her tongue lolling from her mouth. She tried to find a comfortable position to sit in as she fumbled with the belt on her tight tunic to undo it.

As the confines around her stomach loosened ever slightly, her stomach didn't so much as plop into her lap as it did push outwards like an over-inflated ball. Gwen's stomach was small, and it wasn't used to being gorged like this. It was stretched so painfully tight that it looked like a balloon. One could slap the taut surface of it and expect it to make a sound like overstretched rubber.

It looked out of place amongst the rest of her. Unlike most mages, Gwen was thin and petite. The rest of her body looked like a twig, now sporting a bloated foodbaby stuck to it like a balloon.

Gwen's long, sharp ears were flat on either side of her head, distaste and displeasure written as plain as could be across her face.

This was the *worst*.

She couldn't even bother hiding her upturned nose and clear disgust as the servants brought in another tray of decadent indulgences. Honeyed ham, stuffed duck, and chocolate cake to complete the feast. Oh, joy.

“Oh, come now, Lady Gwenifer.” Gwen's personal handservant insisted. “This is the final course, and your torment shall conclude.” he said with a small snicker. “Don't be such a fuss. I've seen the subjects eat as much as this for a single appetizer. You're hardly keeping up.”

Gwen practically hissed at the gnome. The well-dressed servant had long, twitching whiskers and floppy ears that rivaled even Gwen's in size. On top of that, despite his usually-polite demeanour, when he teased her like this, he wore an insufferable grin that she wished for nothing more than to rend from the rest of his face.

As Gwen looked upon the table with deadly disdain while plates were set atop it, she spared a glare of daggers at the gnomish rabbit.

“I do not—... **huff**... —*INTEND* to ‘keep up’ with the subjects, Norrison. Since when did it become the responsibility of nobility to—... **wheeze**... —compete with their own subjects?” she spat with annoyance. As her fingertips trepidatiously prodded at her stomach, she accidentally sent herself into another fit of uncomfortable burps and groans.

“*OUUURP*—... *mmnfh*... A-And... frankly, this is all ridiculous.” she declared at last, tossing her napkin aside with a huff. “Where are the royal alchemists? This is their duty, not mine. I am not—*BRUUURP!*—*nngh*... b-built for such menial tasks!”

“They are away, Madame. Far abroad, speaking to new kingdoms that seek Queen Foulheart’s protection.” Norrison responded matter-of-factly.

She scoffed, shaking her head. “So that’s what this is about? Expanding her—*URP!*—ugh... Expanding her empire? If so, then why are we preparing the subjects for tribute? Should Madame Morgana not be setting her focus on matters of diplomacy instead?”

“Queen Foulheart’s mana crystals have begun to run low. She has explicitly requested double yield from the subjects this month. That means double the feedings. Which means...”

He tapped the plate to signal her to get eating. Gwen just shook her head in disbelief. Since when did the servants learn to share Madame Morgana’s demanding attitude?

“*Ridiculous...*” Gwen muttered under her breath as she lethargically took her fork and knife to begin agonizingly stuffing down the last of her meal. “*But don’t—mmnfh—blame me if you end up having to roll me out of this bloody room.*”

Despite what her figure would suggest, Gwen was by no means an amateur mage. As evident by the many runes mapped across her body, she’d mastered dozens of spells now. However, unlike most mages, she sported a petite physique by employing carefulness and patience with her training.

Rather than gluttonizing and gorging herself on the regular, Gwen was instructed by the Madame to learn each spell slowly and efficiently. Small meals every day, slowly chipping away at mastering each one as the runes appeared over months of effort.

It was a painstaking process, but it paid off. Most mages became slow and lethargic as they grew in power and size. Their weight, while the source of their power, also often proved their greatest folly. And Gwen was able to circumvent that weakness through this technique.

"After all," Madame Morgana had insisted, "we vampires live for centuries. You have all the time in the world, Gwenifer. Patience is ever a virtue."

So... what exactly changed about that now? What could be so important that I'm to forsake my training just to do grunt work in their absence?

Gwen couldn't help but wish that Madame Morgana were here now to give a piece of her mind to. Although, she had to admit, she'd likely be a bit embarrassed if she saw the... current state of her.

Grrrrggrrrggle....

A shiver passed through Gwen as she pulled the fork from her mouth, a particularly heavy mouthful of chocolate icing and fudgy cake sliding agonizingly slowly down her gullet. Her fur stood on end. Her tail twitched, and her eyes were wide, cheeks puffed. She was going to be sick.

She doubled over, crossing her legs and clutching her bloated belly desperately as she rubbed the sides of her creaking tunic. She was half-convinced the seams along the sides were splitting apart at this point.

It hurt so much to lean forward that she had to throw herself back in her seat, tossing her head back with a gasp and a whimper. The fork clattered to the floor as she dropped it, squirming in her chair from the unbearable tightness.

Her lips practically stuck together from the honey glaze smeared across them, chocolate stains all across her mouth. Somehow, she'd managed to empty the platter of ham and stuffed duck. All that was left was the cake. She was only a slice in. Gwen could feel her stomach turn as she looked at the remaining five slices.

“T-There. That sh-should be plenty enough for th—UUUOOORRRRP!—nnngh...—th—the spell...” Gwen groaned as she gently prodded her angrily-gurgling balloon of a midriff.

The remark was somewhere between a dignified declaration, and a thinly-veiled warning to the handservant to not push her any further.

“I’m afraid not, Lady Gwen. Madame Morgana made it quite clear. You were to finish every last bite.” the twitching-whiskered gnome said, snout held high in proper etiquette.

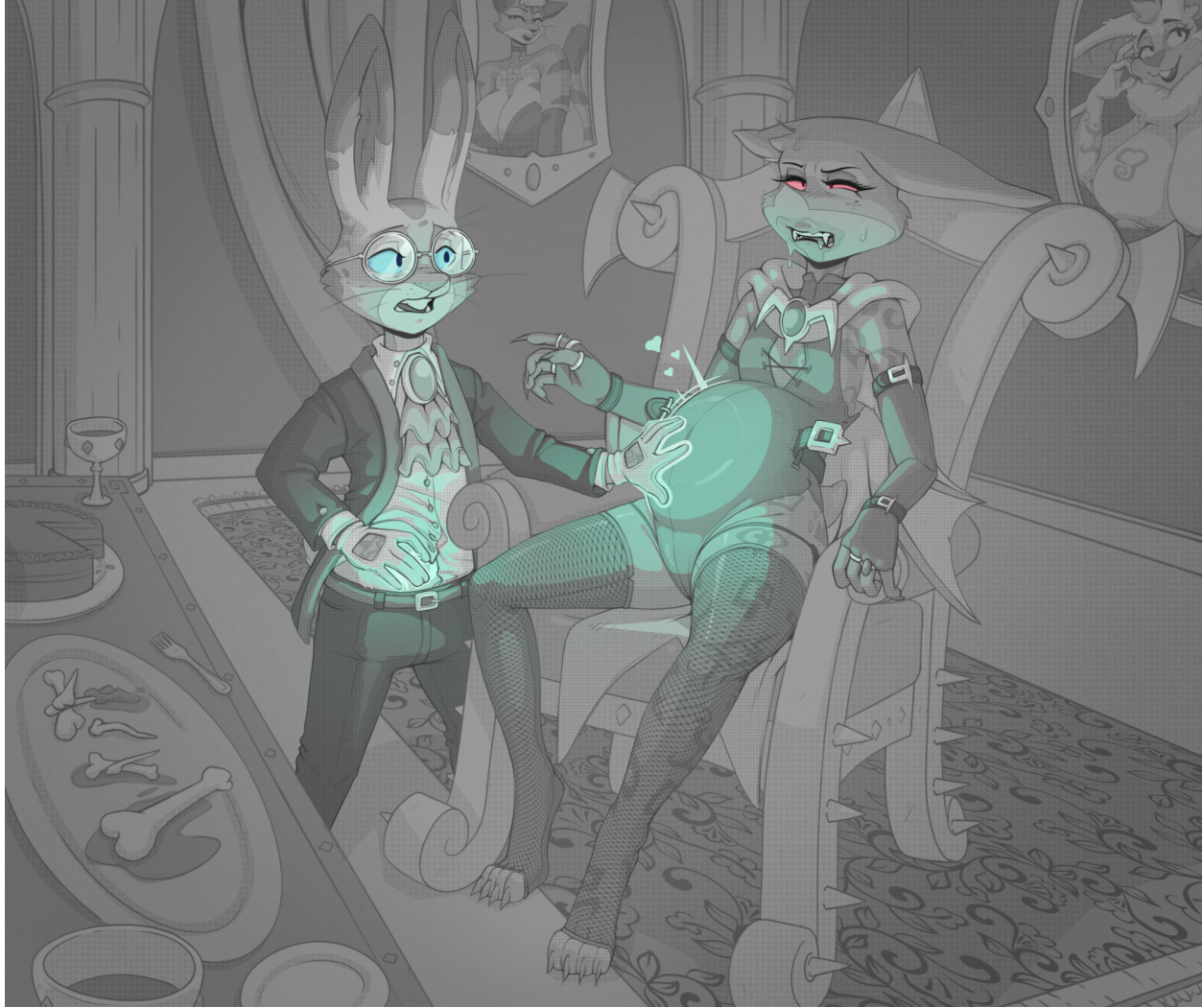
“N-Norrison... n-no more.... P-Please...”

This time, the request was far less dignified. It came out as a squeak. A whimper for mercy, barely audible.

Norrison sighed and approached, gently placing a paw on Gwen’s taut belly. Rubbing the tight surface gently, he moved his free paw to his shirt, lifting it up to place his fingers upon a rune across the fur of his stomach.

“Vysta-alio.”

Shhhrrrring...



Gwen could see a faint glimmer of soft green light, and the sound of chiming, delicate magic. She breathed a shaky sigh of relief as she felt healing magic flow over her. It was only a minor healing spell, but even the slightest bit of relief felt like a miracle in the moment.

She melted into the seat and closed her eyes.

“-OMMNFH-!”

Gwen’s eyes snapped open in a look of rage as she felt the next slice haphazardly crammed between her lips, multiple handservants each approaching the table one after another behind Norrison, each grabbing one and presenting it to Gwen as if a pack of overly-eager mother birds feeding a hatchling.

“MNNFH! HNN-MNNGH–!” she tried to roar her disapproval to the damnable servants.

But alas, her muffled requests fell upon deaf ears.

GlooOOooooorrrp... BwooooOOOOooooOOORrb...

Gwen swore she could hear the sound of a bag of gelatin being tossed about with every waddling step she took. Gwen had never felt this full in her life. Nor had she ever before had to request that the handservants aid her with a task as trivial as... walking.

And yet, here she was, undignified and seething with each heavy step as she felt their eyes burning into her. Never in her life had she hated how large this castle was as much as she did in this very moment.

“It’s not much further of a walk now, Miss Gwen. The subjects are held in this room up ahead.” Norrison assured her.

“How–UUUUUOOOORRRRP! –nnnnngh... oh, gods above... H-How wonderful...” she huffed unenthusiastically.

Every inch of Gwen’s skin felt tight and uncomfortable. Her entire body felt like it’d been pushed to its limit. And yet, despite the prickling pain, she could hardly pull her eyes off of her belly.

She looked as if she were pregnant and ready to go into labour right here in the castle. There was a taut, roundness to her that would be easier to mistake for an expecting mother than an over-glutted bat any day of the week. And yet, she had a certain awe at how she could... *feel* the tingling of mana coursing inside her.

It was a sensation she only ever felt in the midst of a spell. During those vital moments, all of your concentration had to go into controlling your magic, so you never got to savour the feeling.

But... like this, she could just... experience it.

Gently, she let her fingertips glide across the taut surface, her tunic creaking as she touched it. The fabric already looked under enough pressure to rupture even without her rubbing it.

She felt a red warmth come to her cheeks at the touch. She felt the heat from her bubbling stomach just below her stretched clothes. She could feel every bubble of mana that swelled and popped. The churning of that power. The way it swirled and danced inside of her, pushing against the overstretched walls of her stomach and waiting to be released.

She couldn't completely stifle the moan that left her, biting her lip to try and conceal it as best she could, covering her mouth.

"Miss Gwen?" one of the servants behind her asked.

"What? D-Did it sound like I asked for yoOOOOUUURP! –ugh... J-Just keep going!" she snapped impatiently, trying to hide her fluster with annoyance.

After what felt like a worldwide odyssey, Gwen quite literally threw her weight against the door. Leaned against the wall, she tried to catch her breath while the guards opened the grand entrance before her—not without her catching their glowing eyes within their helmets sneaking a few glances down at her midsection. Their stares made her cheeks burn.

Gods, can this bloating please go down...

Staggering back upright, Gwen gazed upon the room before her, her eyes scanning the Mage Orchard that lay ahead.

There was a symphony of sounds that immediately spilled from the grand chamber. A cacophony of utter gluttony. Groaning, chewing, belching, and gasping for air. Madame Morgana had achieved... quite the collection over the years.

The guards stepped aside, and let Gwen pass.

She looked along the halls with a mix of wonder and slight disturbance. Every time she saw it, it seemed to grow larger. More... densely packed.

Wall to wall, the enormous, chapel-like chamber was lined with hundreds of mages. Almost every race across the entire Mainland. Bat-like vampires licking their fangs as they gorged themselves on wine and gourmet meals as if they were worthless. Dog-like gnolls, scarfing greasy meat with reckless abandon. Rabbit-like gnomes, chewing away on bundles and bundles of sweet fruits until their fur was stained with the juices.

Slowly, Gwen set out towards a small, stage-like altar. The fatter the Orchard's inhabitants became, the harder it was to locate the centerstage. Most of their bodies verged on eclipsing the platform soon enough.

Though, spotting it was the easy part. Actually *reaching* it was a whole other story.

Gwen's nose wrinkled as she had to squeeze her body through gurgling lard like a dwarf spelunking into a cavern. Her fur stood on end as sweat trickled onto the back of her neck. She crawled under fat legs and clawed her way past guts and neck rolls.

*"When can we—... *pant*... s-speak to... our families?"* a faceless voice wheezed.

"Sorry, sir. Visitation has not been scheduled yet."

"It... hurts..... T-Too... much..."

"We'll get you a healing elixir right away, Ma'am—OOUUURRP—!"

Gwen huffed as she felt a particularly fat arm bump into her strained stomach, squeezing another burp from her as she tried to push by.

As she achingly ascended the few steps to climb atop the altar, gnomish servants followed along with carts full of crates, trays, and towel-covered platters.

Gwen cracked her neck, and took a deep, shaky breath.

Hopefully I can actually focus on these spells when I'm this full...

She cleared her throat, and spoke up.

"Alright, all of you! I hope you all have your appetites. You know what is expected of you all. For those of you who are... new around here, allow me to explain."

Gwen glanced around from side to side. She wasn't sure if there WAS any new additions. Everyone in here looked utterly enormous. Perhaps, though, if there were some new members, they were simply... *buried* at the moment...

"Your towns and villages have sent you forth as their protectors. Their guardians. Your people are under siege by monsters and dark magic, and Madame Morgana has ever-so-graciously offered her protection from such dangers. She offers this service to your people free of charge... on one condition."

One by one, the gnomes began unveiling the cargo they'd brought. Crates of ingredients. Barrels of spices. Trays and trays of all the foodstuffs any merchants from here to the western shores could ever hope to get their paws on.

A wagon would have overflowed trying to transport this many goods.

"Madame Morgana expects your help in protecting your people. As is fair. The magic she uses will be empowered by your gluttony. You eat, not for yourselves, but for the good of your people. Do well to remember that. Especially if you feel like... tapping out. Each of you will be dining on a very specific dish... and a LOT of it. Every day, you will be expected to earn at least three runes each. You will continue to eat until you gain all three. And if they don't appear... well, then we keep feeding you until they DO. Or, until..."

She glanced over at Norrison, who produced a balloon and a needle.

POP!

A gasp passed through the orchard of obese mages. Gwen's words were cruel, but necessary. Madame Morgana found that fear was the perfect motivator for a large appetite.

"I think I've made my point clear. Don't worry, we have powerful priests and shrines to resurrect you should anything like that happen. But I can't promise it will feel pleasant... and frankly, we'd rather not clean up the mess. So... let's try to avoid that, shall we?"

As Gwen finished her speech, a murmuring spread through the room. It wasn't exactly the most... heartening reassurance. Even so, the handservant at her side gave a polite applause.

“A rousing speech, my lady.” Norrison said with a bow of his head, his ears flopping.

Gwen just snorted and rolled her eyes. “*Something* like that. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

She followed him towards the center of the stage, and together, a pair of servants lifted up a massive wooden board with sheets of papyrus and scrolls over it. One by one, they flipped the pages up and let Gwen read.

As her eyes skimmed the words quickly, she nodded along, and moved her fingers instinctively to a rune on her shoulder.

“First up... Devil’s Tongue goes to Mister Traiton until he has learned the spell *Flame Breath*.” she said, as if reading it off a script.

“Aeria hyros.”

Fwoooooosshh...

With a wave of her hand, a gust of wind followed her fingers, and blowing towels and tablecloths about. In a single movement, bowls of peppers and roots were uncovered from the cart, and mixed carefully with the bowl of buffalo wings in front of her.

“A cup of dragonroar chili powder, three devilroot, a pinch of sugar, a dollop of honey...”

Gwen whispered each step under her breath as the ingredients fluttered about, laying the dish out in a fanciful display atop the serving pedestal as it was prepared...

...and another. And another. And... another...

Within a matter of minutes, the enormous den of gluttony was bustling with the sounds of eating, various different comments and reviews of the dishes they received, or just outright overfed groaning.

Gwen didn’t care much about who liked or didn’t like the food. This wasn’t a catering service. For all intents and purposes, this was their training.

Gwen wasn’t trying to ‘make it the way they liked it’. She was making it the way it **WORKED**. These were the same recipes that the servants had prepared for her to gain her

own runes, so she knew they were effective. Whether they liked it or not, they'd gain their magic. Three runes a day, just like Madame Morgana demanded.

"From prodigy apprentice to head chef... lucky me..." Gwen groaned under her breath between chanting spells and reaching for various runes across her body.

It wasn't easy staying focused on reading recipes, assembling dishes, *AND* maintaining spells, but somehow, Gwen managed to balance the juggling act. Though... as minutes ticked on, she was beginning to feel the wear.

This was a job meant for multiple mages. This could take an hour, or even more! And already, she was beginning to work up a sweat. With every spell she casted, the mana inside her churned and grew hotter.

"Aeria hyros."

Fwwhhiiiiip...

"Aeria halara."

Fwiiiiisssh...

"Aeria hyros."

Fwoooooosssh...

GuuuuUUuuurrrrggle...

Gwen tried to cover a small burp that bubbled up, and groaned. She reached down to hold her belly, eyes going wide as she felt how much less taut it was. As she looked down, she could practically see it visibly deflate as if it were filled with mere air.

Her body churned and bubbled noisily, her stomach working overtime to offer her the surplus of mana she needed as she cast spell after spell after spell.

Gwen made dozens of each dish. And *HUNDREDS* of different dishes. Sweat was starting to trickle from her in large rivulets now as she assembled each recipe. She tried to make sure not to sweat on the food as it dripped from her body. She gasped for air, feeling as though she'd suddenly stepped into a furnace.

The more magic a body burns... the hotter it grows. Much like an engine, burning too much fuel can cause the whole thing to overheat.

As Gwen burned through the food packed away in her stomach, she felt herself shaking and ready to collapse. She gasped, trying to fill her throat with cool, refreshing air. Anything to stay focused. Even as her tunic technically grew looser around her stomach, it felt as though it were clinging all the more with the buckets of sweat that were pouring from the vampire.

And if that weren't bad enough...

Creeeaaaak—...

Well, to say Gwen's tunic was fitting *looser* wouldn't have been *entirely* accurate. As the food was digested at an intense rate, her flat chest steadily ballooned with the fat her body stored.

With a gasp, Gwen's face went cherry red, and she brought a shaky hand to her breasts. She whimpered as she felt her hand squish against... well, *something*.

The fact that there was something there was a bit stunning to her. Gwen had been remarkably flat-chested all her life. Extremely so. She'd practically been confused for a boy every day growing up.

It was so strange to feel fat filling her hand as she squeezed. Another whimper was ripped from her, another trickle of sweat falling from her cheek as she felt just how... *sensitive* they were.

By no means were they anything to write home about. Probably barely a B-cup, if she had to guess it by looks. But... the fact that there was something there at all felt unreal.

She wasn't sure how to feel about it. There were certainly worse places to pack on weight. But at the same time, the fact that this lapse in her careful training now had a permanent consequence that she could *FEEL*...

It didn't quite sit right with her. It felt like a bad omen.

"Miss Gwen?" A servant's voice cut through her thoughts like a knife once again

Gwen yelped, dropping whatever half-finished dish she had suspended in the air, and whipping around to face the gnome who'd called upon her.

"R-Right, yes! S-Sorry! I—... let me get the next batch going. I j-just... I just needed to catch my breath." Gwen apologized, gasping for air.

In truth, she wasn't sure she could keep this up any longer. She was worried that the next levitation spell she tried to cast might make her faint. If her body got any hotter, she'd combust. Not to mention the fact that her stomach was feeling completely empty now.

"No, no, it's not that! The Madame has relieved you of this duty. The Emmisary of Straywater has arrived. He has requested an audience." the servant explained.

"With... me? Matters of emissaries and diplomats are Madame Morgana's expertise, not mine. She should be the one to meet with this guest." Gwen remarked, shaking her head.

"It is the Madame's wish for you to take her place, I'm afraid. She is quite busy today."

Gwen felt her eye twitch at that. Busy.

Right. Of course. Busy. Her mages are busy, SHE'S busy, apparently EVERYONE'S busy today except GWEN.

She took a long, slow breath.

"Norrison..."

"Yes, Miss Gwen?"

"PLEASE get me an audience with Madame Morgana as soon as possible. I need to have a serious discussion with her about the... unforeseen changes in responsibilities that I'm finding myself in the midst of today." Gwen hissed through gritted fangs.

Norrison bowed in response. "Of course, Miss Gwen. I will ensure she is ready for you after your meeting."

Gwen plastered a smile across her face. "*Great. Perfect. Thanks... Alright, fine. Lead the way.*"

Making a supreme effort to not further grope her newfound bust on the journey, Gwen made her way across the castle to the entrance gate, where chambers awaited for meetings with visitors and diplomats. Gwen pushed open the wooden door, leaving the cold, snowy outside air of the night and stepping into the warmth of a hearth-lit living space.

It was one of the few cozy, tavern-like rooms in the whole palace. While Madame Morgana preferred her personal quarters cold and foreboding, this place was intended to put visitors at ease, and was furnished as such. Soft pelts strewn across a sofa, fresh pastries left upon lavish wood tables, candles lit about the room. And of course, the unmissable addition to the room... an enormous stray sat in the upholstered seat in front of the fireplace.

Like all strayfolk, the diplomat was feline in appearance. He had a coat of brown with black stripes—all of which were stretched around a remarkably corpulent body.

What looked like they were once fancy merchant's attire was now pushed hopelessly to its limit, threads ready to give out as he barely paid any heed to his clothes' cry for mercy. Instead, he simply picked up another jelly-filled pastry with an aristocratically-raised pinky as he huffed impatiently.

"You must forgive me for my tardiness, Lord Catsmane," she announced her presence, startling the stray with a gasp as he nearly choked on his donut of choice. "Matters here at the castle have been rather hectic. But I am here now."

Gwen set herself down in the seat across from the stray. Immediately, he raised a brow, and dropped his half-eaten snack with a scoff.

"Where is Queen Morgana? I was informed that she would see to this meeting personally."

"I'm afraid plans have changed. She has her hands full at the moment."

He scoffed again, shaking his head and slamming his paws to the armrests of the chair. The seat creaked in agony as he tried to lift himself from its confines. "*Ridiculous!* If Morgana believes this matter is not important enough to prioritize over housekeeping, then my people want no part in this alliance—"

"Sit your fat ass down, Catsmane." Gwen snapped.

The stray's mouth went agape, and he stopped his struggles to escape the chair, his eyes narrowed into a glare and his ears flat to his head, the fur along his fat neck bristling. "How *DARE* you speak to me like that?"

"I will not tolerate disrespect simply because you do not see me as a formal emissary. You will accept me in Madame Morgana's stead and you will like it." she declared matter-of-factly, and gestured to the corpulent gentleman.

"Look at yourself. You are a stark example of the wealth and prosperity that my Madame has brought to your people. Before we found you, your people were nomadic tribes on the brink of collapse. Now you have towns. Cities. Castle walls. You are no longer hunted through the night by monsters and ghouls, and instead feast and lavish yourselves with jewelry and fine silks. Your people now hold the gift of magic, and you think to spit on our generosity?"

The words caught in Catsmane's throat. "I—..."

After a moment of fumbling to start a sentence, he instead just cracked a smile and let out a laugh, shaking his head enough to make his fat chins jostle. "You really are your mother's daughter, Gwenifer. Forgive me, I meant no disrespect. But it is... frustrating to come all this way just to have no audience with your mother."

Gwen didn't share his same amused crack of a smile. Frankly, she wasn't much in the mood for it today. Though, at the very least, she lightened her tone from a scolding snarl to one much more reserved.

"I can only imagine. I will ensure that your complaints are voiced to her personally."

"Actually... you might be the next best person to talk to. My people are growing... restless, Miss Gwen. They are questioning my leadership, and wondering if it was wise to... align ourselves with the likes of vampires."

"Then it is not *you* that your people seek to defy... it is *us*." Gwen stated bluntly.

“I believe this could be a problem for both of us. They don’t like what is being asked of us. Sending our finest mages to this castle, just to never see them again. My people are wondering what happens to them when they are in your mother’s service.”

“What happens to them is exactly what we said that would. They are now in service to the Queen’s personal army. They have joined the ranks of her elites, and now serve her dutifully. *AND*—might I add—are what keep your towns safe every night. Are we to parade them through your streets just so that you believe they are in good health?”

Lord Catsmane wore an annoyed look on his face, his eyes narrowed once more. “Your mother—”

“Queen Foulheart.” Gwen finally corrected, snapping the words out.

“...Queen Foulheart... owes us at least the opportunity to see them. Those people have families, Gwenifer. They wish to see their loved ones.”

“My Madame owes you no such thing. If anyone is in debt in this arrangement, it is you, Lord Catsmane. You give nothing, and take so frivolously. I don’t think you’d know the meaning of the word ‘sacrifice’ if it bit you in the—”

“Gwenifer, I do not come asking you as an emissary. I come asking you as a friend. Please, find it in yourself to speak to your mother on our behalf?”

Gwen sat there a moment, her lips parted as she searched for a response. Finally, she set her face into a stern expression.

“Do you believe that just because I am her daughter, I have final verdict on what *she* decides is best for your country, Catsmane? No. This castle bears *her* crest. It is *her* magic that permeates these walls. I am just as powerless as you are, Catsmane. We are both helpless, and we can do nothing but watch as she decides what is best for the world, moving her chess pieces about the board. You might think me a greater piece than you, Catsmane, but in truth, we are both pawns. Do you understand that?”

A long moment of silence passed. Nothing but the crackling of the fireplace and the muffled howling of the wind outside.

Finally, after a long minute, Lord Catsmane spoke.

“Gwen, I—... I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“No, it’s... it’s fine, really. I apologize. It has been quite the week, I’m afraid. I was not lying when I said how chaotic matters have been for us—”

GRRRGRRRGLE—...

Gwen’s eyes went wide and her cheeks dusted pink as the ravenous growl pierced the conversation. She looked down to her stomach, as if in disbelief that it had come from her.

Her stomach must have been completely emptied of everything she ate when she burned through all that mana. After just an hour, her body had completely forgotten it had been gorged to its limit, and now it already craved a new meal.

No wonder mages got so fat. This mana gluttony was a slippery slope.

Lord Catsmane cracked a smile and reached a chubby paw towards one of the pastries on the platter nearest to him, and leaned forward to offer it to Gwen.

“Back to skipping meals, aye?” he remarked with a snicker.

“Busy days bring back poor habits, I’m afraid.” Gwen awkwardly joked as she accepted the pastry, delicately sinking her fangs into it and feeling a surge of relief at the taste. She hadn’t even realized how bad she’d been shaking with hunger. Her body felt ready to digest itself if she didn’t eat something. She finished the donut in just a few bites, and sat back with a sigh. As Lord Catsmane offered another, she gave a nod of gratitude, and wrapped it in a napkin for later.

“I will speak to Madame Morgana on behalf of your people, Lord Catsmane. I shall see if she can arrange something. Perhaps written letters from them. Something to ensure they have communication with their kin and loved ones.”

“Anything is better than no contact at all. I would appreciate it greatly.” Catsmane gave a bow of gratitude.

Gwen lifted herself up from her seat, and as she watched the diplomat try to do the same, the creaking chair and the look on his face told her everything she needed to know. He was stuck.

With Gwen's help and a few handservants, the stray was unwedged from the tight squeeze, the chair pulled off his rotund rear with a *POP!*

Filling his paws with a plate of to-go pastries, he gave the tenders of the castle a few formal, wheezing bows and made his way back to his carriage. Gwen looked out the gate to offer him a farewell wave, and grimaced as she looked to the steeds pulling the wagon.

Centaurs were bipedal equines that were meant to have lean and muscular bodies, capable of hauling enormous payloads with little issue. One would never have guessed that if they looked at Catsmane's pullers.

Reins squished against fat cheeks, with corpulent bodies that dripped sweat into the snow with the effort of holding themselves up, let alone actually *pulling* a wagon.

The coachdriver trudged out to bring them a few handfuls of sugarcubes and buttered croissants for the journey ahead. She was bundled up in robes to brave the cold, but the centaurs needed no such covering. Both of them seemed piled in enough lard to be just fine in the icy winds, practically naked. Or at least, so it seemed. If they were wearing any underwear, Gwen certainly couldn't see it underneath the rolls of blubber.

Good gods... even their horses are blowing up...

The sight made Gwen's stomach turn a bit. Mages and aristocrats turning into overly-decadent balloons was one thing, but what would happen when all the able-bodied workers in every single town were helpless? Already there were fewer and fewer soldiers that could fight all across the Mainland. More and more towns were relying on Morgana's magic to protect them.

What would happen when the Mainland ran out of capable artisans and craftsmen? Would the world have to rely on Morgana for all its needs?

That worry settled like a stone in Gwen's mind. She didn't like this. It all just felt a bit... off. This didn't feel like the symbiotic alliance between mages and cities that it used to be. It felt like preying on the weak and gullible. Madame Morgana—*her mother*—was building an empire... and she was using the fear of monsters and the temptation of magic to do it.

A part of Gwen had always been aware of her mother's ambitions, but she was able to excuse a lot in the name of the greater good. But this... this felt like it would go beyond any good it could bring. A change of strategy needed to be discussed. Thankfully, she'd have just the opportunity.

"Miss Gwen? Madame Morgana is ready for you." Norrison called.

If there was ever a greater leap in decor than going from the cozy meeting chambers to Morgana's own personal chambers, Gwen couldn't think of it.

At the highest tower of Castle Foulheart, gone were the warm candles and walnut wood floors. Now, every room was bathed in a cold blue. The walls were a suffocating grey of iron and stone. A long, crimson carpet led Gwen's path to the looming doors at the end of the corridor. Chilling blue light bathed over her from the orbs of pure mana that lined the halls.

It looked less like a palace here, and more like a prison of the afterlife for damned souls. A part of Gwen couldn't help but wonder if that was its true identity, and the luxurious comforts down below were merely a facade to put guests and servants at ease—and her as well, she supposed.

As she reached the colossal doors, she had to stand on her toes just to reach the enormous iron knocker above. She lifted it up, and let it fall against the metal door with a crashing thrum.

KRUNNNNGGG...

Her ears laid flat at the noise, wincing and covering them as the rumble echoed back and forth through the corridor behind her.

"Enter." the voice called from beyond.

With a deep breath, Gwen mustered all the strength she had to push her way through. The doors cracked open, and with shaking arms, Gwen managed to budge them just far enough to squeeze inside. As the doors slammed shut behind her, she gasped for air at the effort.

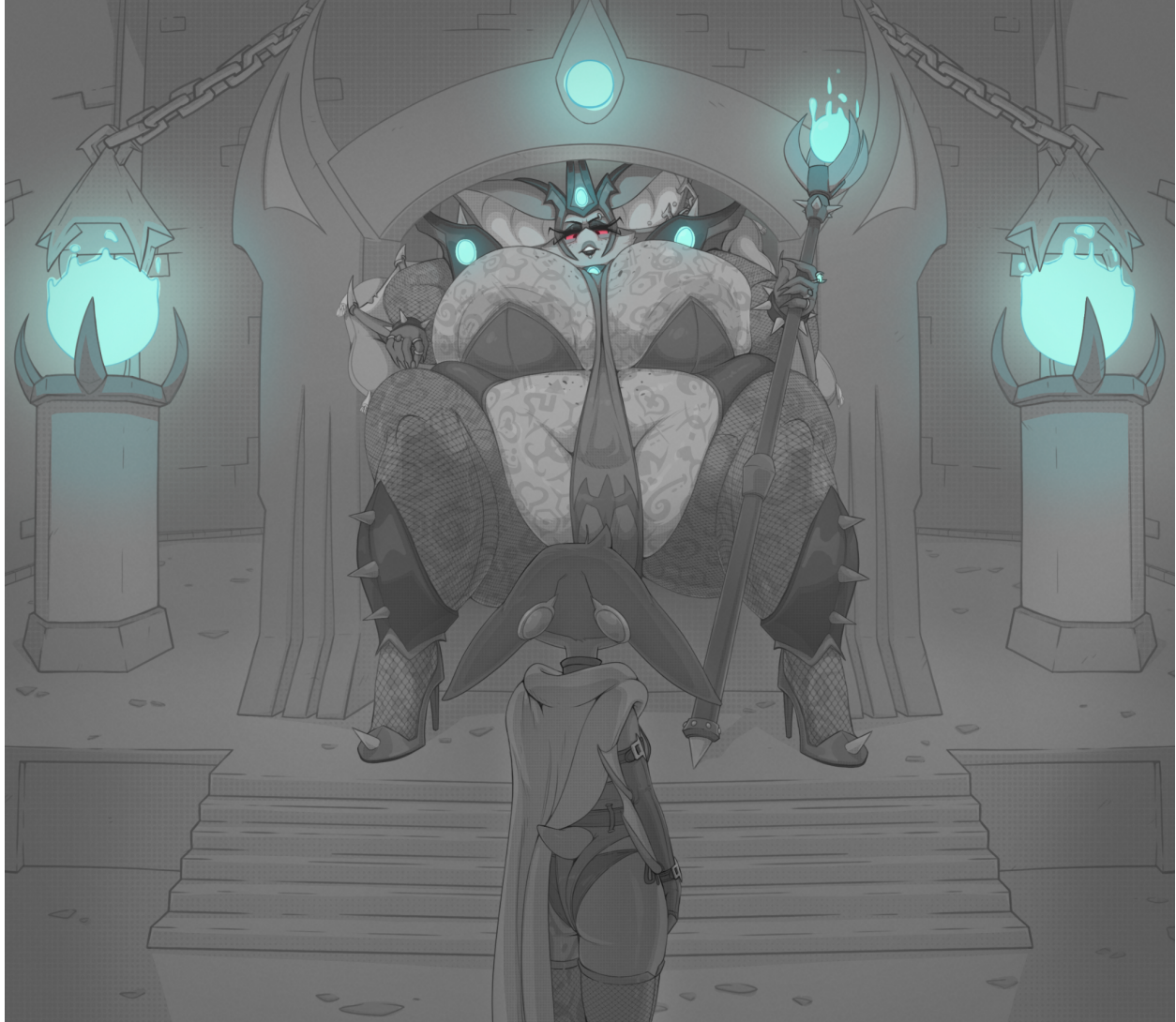
"Hello, Gwenifer. Speak, girl." the booming voice greeted.

Gwen's breath caught in her throat, and she looked up. From her enormous throne, the colossal vampire gazed down with tedious, half-lidded eyes at her. She had a bored demeanour, clearly waiting for what Gwen had to say so that she could be back to more important matters.

Gwen was getting cold feet. She always forgot just how... intimidating of a presence her mother could be. Even still, she was in awe of her all the same. Morgana's enormous body was covered from head to toe in runes that she'd spent centuries acquiring. Gwen couldn't think of any spells off of the top of her head that her mother *hadn't* mastered.

Easily twenty feet tall, she loomed like a giant over most mortals. The sheer gravitas of her impossible height was rivaled only by the immensity of her figure. She was a remarkably heavyset woman, although she had not ballooned into shameless obesity and utter helplessness like Lord Catsmane. Somehow, she wore the weight in a way that felt... elegant.

It was evenly-spread across her body. Rather than making her appear slow and encumbered, it only added to her presence of strength and impossible power. Gwen didn't doubt for a second that, even at that size, she'd have no trouble reaching any of the runes anywhere across her body.



Morgana's bored face twisted into one of annoyance, and she slammed the bottom of her staff against the floor with an abrupt crack to stir Gwen from her thoughts with a gasp.

"I said SPEAK, girl." she barked, the glow of her crimson eyes growing stronger for a brief moment, before her gaze settled just below Gwen's chin, a brow raising. ***"Since when did you have those?"***

The blunt question caught Gwen entirely off guard. Almost moreso than the slam of her staff. Gwen looked down at the small bumps on her chest with red cheeks, before shooting a glare up at her mother.

"Since today!" she snapped. ***"Because apparently your alchemists have been too busy to prepare dishes for YOUR subjects, and YOU'VE been too busy setting your sights***

on greener pastures to worry about what you already have! We're stretched too thin, mother!"

"Morgana." she blatantly interjected, her face now set in an emotionless, intense gaze.

Gwen scoffed. *"Are you kidding me?!"* Do formalities really trouble you more than the concerns of your own people? Your mages in the orchard are growing unrecognizable by the day. You are pushing them too far. The towns that you have brought under your banner are growing restless, and... frankly, just **growing** in general! You honey them with promises of protection, strip them of their best mages, and then indulge them with decadence to distract them!"

"Yes. And that is a problem, how, exactly? I fail to see the point of this."

"The point?!" The point is that this can't last, mother! Monsters have nearly been wiped out from the Mainland! There are few dangers left to make your 'protection' worth the sacrifice! These cities are growing wiser and questioning your rule! At this rate, an uprising is all but assured! And yet, you're convinced that you can expand the empire **further?** How?! How in your right mind do you think you'd be able to convince even more kings and queens to bow to your—"

"ENOUGH."

Morgana's voice rumbled through the chamber like an erupting volcano. As she sat upright in her throne, Gwen shrunk back in turn. Even if there was an entire massive chamber's worth of space between them, it still didn't feel like enough to give her the illusion of safety.

"Listen to me, Gwenifer. You will not question my decisions. You will not forsake my judgements. You will not defy my orders. I tolerate your advice as a courtesy, but I will not let my kindness grant you the illusion of power over this empire. What I do, I do for US. Even if you are too naive to see it now, you will one day realize the wisdom in my decisions. And you will feel shame for every time you pushed back against them. Do you understand that?"

Silence hung in the air for a long while. Gwen could feel her mouth go dry.

“Do well to remember who wears this crown.” Morgana declared at last, a long claw pointed at her head. Slowly, she leaned back into her throne. ***“Now... was that it? As you might have guessed, I am not exactly blessed with an abundance of time on my hands.”***

Gwen couldn't even find a response. She stood there, stunned. Her mother had always been harsh, but... she'd never spoken to her like *that* before.

“Y—... Yes, Madame Morgana. That was all.” she meekly stammered at last, turning to leave with her head hung, a dark look on her face.

Morgana sighed as she saw the state of her daughter. ***“My dear, you know I love you. I do this for your own good. What I build, I ensure will last for eternity. What seems rash today will all make sense in the future. I promise.”***

Gwen gave a shaky nod. *“I'm sure.”*

Defeated, the young vampire trudged towards the grand doors—

VwwwsSHHHHH—...

Gwen's ear perked. Before she could reach the exit, the distinct sound of a portal violently tearing open could be heard. It was muffled... it came from the doors of Morgana's side chamber. Her personal study.

With narrowed eyes, Gwen glanced over.

What was that? Does mother have mages in her personal quarters? Why?

She stepped away from the exit, and moved just an inch towards the study.

“Gwenifer. Leave at once. You are forbidden from my study room. You know that.” she snapped, leaning forward in her throne.

“What... was that noise? What do you have in there?”

Both of them shot their eyes to the doors as a muffled roar echoed through the sound of violent spells and magic.

Morgana finally began to lose her look of indifference... something between panic and frustration spreading across her countenance.

“GWEN, I WILL NOT WARN YOU AGAIN. LEAVE MY CHAMBER AT ONCE.”

The warning rattled the walls, louder than the roar of whatever beast lay beyond those doors.

Gwen snarled. No more secrets. No more excuses. She wanted to know what her mother was keeping from her. And she wanted to know **now**.

As quickly as she could, Gwen produced the wrapped pastry from her tunic and crammed it between her lips. She tried to swallow with as little chewing as possible just to get it down as fast as she could.

Morgana hissed as she watched Gwen try to load herself with mana, and raised a fat arm to stop her.

“NULLA-RAS—”

But she was too late.

***“Terra-triagda!”
KER-CLANGH—!***

With a gasp, Morgana felt herself pulled back into her throne as two enormous shackles of stone clasped around her wrists and bound her to her seat. She couldn't get up, nor reach her runes.

“H-HOW—”

“You think I never realized what you were trying to do? Keeping my training slow all these years, to keep me from ever being able to stand against you? For every spell I gain, you have a hundred.” Gwen hissed as she stepped towards the door, eyes narrowed on her mother as she focused with all her might to hold those chains against such great strength.

*“So I had to make the most of what I had. I trained with every single spell until it was completely mastered. So that I knew my few spells even better than **you** knew them. And here*

you thought I was still the same scared little girl I always was. Perhaps you should have trusted me with more than alchemy duty after all, hm, mother?"

"G-Gwen... you are... making a mistake..." Morgana grunted through gritted fangs as she pulled and pulled on the chains, the smallest cracks beginning to form across the stone.

We'll see about that...

Gwen stood before the doors, and thrust them open. As the sight that lay beyond filled her gaze, she felt a chilling cold rush through her body.

This was no study room at all. At the center of the chamber, an altar of black stone and steel was covered in blood red runes. At its center, a massive purple vortex spun and swirled violently. An open portal to... only the gods knew where.

In a six-sided star around it, Morgana's most trusted mages chanted under their breath, each with their own place within the markings of the ritual circle across the room.

And slowly... Gwen watched a pair of eyes open from within the portal. Haunting, glowing white eyes. A monstrous claw stepped forth. The beast's breath came in raspy huffs. As it ducked to pull its hulking body through, Gwen knew what it was immediately.

A demon. Towering over the mages that brought it forth, it slowly lumbered into the chamber, its sharp eyes studying every facet of the room it had been pulled to.

Then, the portal stirred. Another came... and another.

Demons. Ogres. Undead. All manner of monstrous animals pulled themselves through one by one, shouldering and shoving each other out of the way with bestial snarls.

And all at once, as the chamber was filled with them, the mages touched their runes and raised a hand to the ceiling.

"NULLA-KRIOSKA!"

KLING! KLING! KLING!

The beasts roared. One by one, metal collars of runes clasped around their necks. Their bodies crashed against one another as they clawed at them and tried to pry them free.

“Nulla-rasalka...”

The beasts’ glowing eyes flared, their heads thrown back as howls of pain came from them, before finally, they settled in place, obedient and unmoving like statues... awaiting their orders.

Gwen wore her horror clear across her face as she looked at the display. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“Th—... This was your plan? Conjuring monsters of the night to plague the Mainland just to keep your subjects loyal to you? You—... You’re a tyrant. Y-You’ve gone mad!” Gwen whispered the words under her breath. It felt as if her whole world was turning upside down. She couldn’t even move her feet. They felt frozen to the floor. She feared that if she tried to rip them free from their place that she’d fall over and never stop tumbling down into the abyss.

Shaking, she turned to see what her mother had to say for herself—

SHHCK—

Gwen gasped, her shoulders going rigid. She felt a white-hot pain shoot through her back... then, that burning settled to an eerie warmth. She felt her warm blood trickling down her back. It was a short blade. A dagger? Whatever it was that had gained purchase in her, she couldn’t reach it. Turning to try to grab for it made her entire body seize in blistering pain.

Then, that warmth began to grow... cold. Her whole body began to chill. A frost settled over her. The disturbing sensation of life leaving her body with each trickle of blood that ran down her back.

With a weak whimper, she fell to her knees, breathlessly trying to form words to her mother. She tried to say something... *anything*. But no words would come. She didn’t have the strength.

The world twisted and turned. She felt her head hit the floor, her body slumped onto its side. She shivered at the cold, her hand twitching with one last fruitless effort to find that blade.

"M... Mother..." she whispered, the words coming out in a weak, shivering gasp.

Morgana said nothing. The Madame of the castle looked down upon the little bat with any emotion steeled away behind a veil. Gwen couldn't tell what she was feeling. Remorse? Guilt?

Or relief?

Was it always going to end like this? Is this what you had always planned?

Morgana took a long, deep breath, and turned towards the servant at the door.

"Norrison. Bring her to the catacombs below."

"Y... Y-Yes, Queen M-Morgana..."