

Positive

You move away from the patrol following an odd smell, one you can't quite place. Stepping closer to a bush you recognise it as...soap? You lean forward, trying to work out where it could be coming from - and splash the water from the basin on your face, washing the last traces of suds away.

Drying your face with your towel you walk over to your bed where your dress uniform has been laid out for you. You inspect it carefully with a studied eye, adjusting your captain's insignia and give a couple of buttons a final polish. You get dressed, and as you check yourself over in the mirror you have a strong sense of déjà-vu that triggers old memories, making you smile to yourself. It was the vision from the patrol to Mad Ox all those years ago that really made you consider if you could be an officer for the first time in your life, the vision you've worked so hard at to make it come true - taking every step you could to get yourself moved on to the commissioned officer track. The vision where you saw your daughter for the very first time.

The image of your daughter snaps you out of your reverie. Today of all days you must not be late; you don't remember being late when you first experienced this, but time is fluid and changing, and just because it didn't happen then doesn't mean it can't happen now.

You march out of your office and across the courtyard to the main hall, smiling at the various families from all over come to celebrate their children's promotion. There are still a few details to sort out before it can start, but for now you have a more pressing concern in the carriage just pulled up by the hall. Heading over you help your elderly mother down; her arm resting in yours you lead her carefully through the hall to sit by your darling wife occupying pride of place on the front row.

You join the other Captains opening and checking through the box of Lieutenant pips for the handful of Wardens you will be promoting today. The Pathfinder Captain near by, Brom Heleg, leans over from checking his own box and hands you one extra set, saying, "While normally it's my honour to give out the Pathfinder promotions, given the circumstance I think you should give these to her. She's a remarkable soldier, and a talented healer; you should be proud."

You smile and nod, and turn to look down the aisle as the assorted Defenders march up, your daughter at the very front. You nod to Brom and step forward, your aide shadowing you with the box, as Brom calls your daughter forward. She salutes smartly, her uniform immaculate, your old weapons carefully sheathed with visible metalwork polished to a gleam. You smile as you salute her back, a tear forming on your eye. Carefully you fix the pips to her uniform, resisting - but only just - the urge to kiss her on the cheek. You salute once more as Brom orders the Lieutenant to take her seat; she heads back to sit next to your mother who smiles up at both of you proudly.

The most important task done you order the first of the Wardens to approach. The half-orc's face looks shiny and almost pink where he's scrubbed it clean; as you lean in to affix his pips the strong smell of the soap he used catches in your nostrils making you sneeze. Somewhere between sneezes the hall is gone, replaced by the bush and the patrol.

Neutral

The patrol passes a small stream half-hidden in the vegetation to the point that at least one person accidentally steps in it; you pause to rinse hands and face, and as you bend down the smell of crushed soapwort rises to meet you. Hands finally clean of blood and sweat, the herb-wife whose hut you have temporarily commandeered grudgingly allows you to get back to work - it seemed easier than trying to convince her that as the patient was already dead her worries about 'tiny invisible demons' were completely irrelevant. The only good news is that the time wasted was enough for the Regrow potion to finish its work; the only sign left of the blow that broke Mistral in two is the damage to her armour, a blow that had been aimed for you unseen until the Champion threw herself in the way. Settling yourself in the surprisingly comfortable chair the herb-wife provided you speak the words and reach for the power to let you bridge the gap between this world and the next...

You aren't quite sure what to expect when you open your eyes, but the farmyard with its peculiar architecture really wasn't on your list - especially as there's no one around, only a closed front door. As you walk across the yard to the door, something clicks in the back of your mind; in death, Mistral has gone home. Knocking tentatively on the door your suspicion is compounded by the woman who opens it - not Mistral, but close enough in features and build and that same solid sense of presence that she's surely a relative. She raises an eyebrow enquiringly at you, but then oddly recognition seems to dawn.

"Ah, you would be the young man here for my daughter, yes? The one with the flower-name? She is not ready yet; come inside, have tea, she will be with you soon." You bemusedly let yourself be led by Mistral's mother through to the kitchen, ducking through the low doorways, and find yourself seated at the kitchen table with a steaming bowl of tea in front of you. Through the window you see Mistral out in the yard - armourless, make-up free - sparring with two men in the prime of life who move like professional soldiers.

"Good boys but not my boys," Mistral's mother says, seeing where you're looking, "But they look after my daughter in the living world so they may visit while she is here."

"We unworthy ones appreciate your patience, honourable lady," comes a voice from the doorway; the man who enters is of a piece with the ones in the yard, perhaps smaller and slighter with an edge to his movements that speaks volumes, but his eyes are kind and his smile genuine. "Might this unworthy one join the honourable sir and lady for tea?"

The conversation is relaxed and amicable despite the circumstances, and ranges from tea-making to comparative philosophy of day to day life to 'war' stories. Over it you warm to both Mistral's mother and Liu Pei, as the man names himself; Mistress Wu's straightforward practicality plays well off Liu Pei's subtle humour and iron-clad sense of honour. You even feel a slight sense of regret when Mistral finally enters the kitchen, what you think of as her 'normal' outfit melting onto her as she crosses the threshold, and the conversation comes to an abrupt end. Goodbyes are said rather formally, then you and Mistral walk back to the front yard; at the point where everything starts to fade, the last thing you see clearly is Liu Pei giving you a nod that says without words, "We will meet again."

Back in the herb-wife's cottage, Mistral gives you a slightly odd look as she wakes up. You ask her why, and she responds, "Of all people, the honourable sir is the one this unworthy one least expected to make a comrade of the Sword of the Lords of War - the Death aspect, as the honourable sir wills." Before you can respond to this statement the herb-wife bustles through with a bowl of warm soapy water to give Mistral a chance to clean up, the slightly harsh smell making your eyes water, and when the cloud of sudsy steam has dissipated you are looking at the Mad Ox patrol.

Traumatic

There's a cold wind blowing, one that causes you to keep apace with the rest of the patrol just to get some shelter. As you drop back into the group the wind catches a scent - one of the others must have washed well this morning for the lingering trace of soap to still be there. A gust throws up dust that forces you to close your eyes for a moment.

The shock of cold, soapy water wakes you; it's the most efficient way for the guards to get the prisoners clean and ready to receive the scraps they call breakfast. There's just enough floor for a grown man to lie down but not much else - no window save for the opening of the barred pit they call a cell, just low enough for you to get your hands through, and a stinking bucket that you can only hope they empty before it overflows. They might not - everyone's heard of Orchid, the Warden responsible for the massacre at the orphanage at Treiton, and the guards are notably lax towards you. You won't be their problem for much longer. It was difficult to make the rope without them finding out, but once they've brought around the scraps for the prisoners - your portion less, but it doesn't matter - it's not that difficult to tie one end around your neck, climb up the walls enough to get the other end tied good and tight to the bars above...and drop.

The shock of cold, soapy water wakes you; it's the most efficient way for the guards to get the prisoners clean and ready to receive the scraps they call breakfast. It's raining heavily today - you can't see it, but the stone flags are slowly submerged as the groundwater rises. In the distance you hear shouting from the guards but only one word stands out: flash-flood. You weren't the only one to hear, and with the water now around your ankles you do like every other prisoner here; the air is full of screams, shouting and pleading to be let out before the flood hits, faces pressed to the bars above. Somehow you get 'forgotten' as others are led to safety; the water rises until there's nowhere left for you to go...

The shock of cold, soapy water wakes you; it's the most efficient way for the guards to get the prisoners clean and ready to receive the scraps they call breakfast. Today someone has deemed that you should get some time outside; you get hauled roughly out of the pit, one of the guards almost wrenching your arm out of its socket, and marched to the yard. The other prisoners mutter when they see you, and the guards somehow fail to notice when you get surrounded, somehow fail to hear when you call for help as the beating starts. They don't even react to your scream when the crude shank goes in just under your ribs - in pain and terror and deep-down guilt you find yourself praying in your mind, *please let it all just end*.

You wake up not so much shackled to the wall as the wall of the temple has grown up around you; by turning your head you are just able to see some of the others from your patrol and others you don't recognise bound in a similar fashion, all of them twitching and whimpering in their own enforced nightmares. From the state of them you think some of your fellow captives have been here a very, very long time... But the real focal point is the young woman - the god of Death whose temple you had been on patrol to investigate and make 'safe' for the Kingdom - in front of you, looking at you quizzically. "I heard your plea, priest," she says in a voice that echoes oddly, the harmonics putting you in mind of the grave, "and I thought I would check to see if you're feeling reasonable yet. All I ask is for an apology for your attempt to destroy *my* temple and *my* worshippers, and your solemn promise to help protect it from further... incursions."

Your revulsion at the thought is strong and automatic; she sighs sadly, clearly aware of your thoughts before you have a chance to bargain. "Not so reasonable, then - in which case, back to sleep with you." Despite your best efforts you find your eyes starting to close...

The shock of cold soapy water wakes you; it's the most efficient way for the guards to get the prisoners clean and ready to receive the scraps they call breakfast. In the bottom of the barred pit you lay curled up on the sopping flagstones, and in the depths of your heart you know you will never, ever be allowed to escape, not

even through death; the tears that spring unbidden mix with the suds, obscuring your vision - until you realise that the ground is dry soil, the birds are singing, and the rest of the patrol are looking worried...

Ridiculous

The party stop for a brief rest; you pull out your water bottle and go to take a drink, but as you open it you notice an odd smell. Bringing it closer to your nose you realise it smells of soap. With a sigh you pour the contents away down the sink, making a note to tell your dishwasher to do better next time. Then again...he's only a boy of 16 and you weren't much better at following instructions at his age - although the consequences of your actions were far worse than just some soapy drinking water.

The day is warm. As you have a few hours until your restaurant opens you decide to get yourself a fresh cool drink and do a final check of the stock - and, coincidentally, spend some time in the ice cellar. As you walk down the stairs at each step it gets cooler; you find yourself once again thanking the water mage who created the spell. The permanent items had been expensive, one for the cellar and another for your cart, but without them you couldn't hope to run your business - especially given how difficult it can be to acquire the required ingredients...

At the bottom of the stairs you open the door and admire the carcasses hanging from hooks on the ceiling, each painstakingly sourced to ensure the quality of the meat; expensive, but people are still queueing up for a chance to experience your menu. You had a Balance priest offer to sell his services in the form of Regrow miracles cast on your stock for guaranteed reservations on request - but the resulting flesh was bland and rubbery. No. Flesh that once knew life, carefully caught and slaughtered, and then stored in ice cold temperatures to keep it fresh was the only option. These days you pay your hunters extra to bring their catch in still alive, preferring to kill and butcher each animal yourself; the business is doing more than well enough to afford the extra costs, and your clientele won't accept anything less than the best.

You walk about the room, your breath misting in front of you as you check each carcass in turn. Long sinewy hydra necks, each forking two or three times until you can see the cauterised line of meat that ended the growth. Huge drokken thighs, each one as large as a full grown pig. Small shocker lizards - all the remaining lightning carefully discharged - squeezed in where's there's space. Near the back hang a couple of basilisks carefully kept away from the other carcasses, the flesh still capable of petrification until it's properly cooked.

Nodding in satisfaction to yourself you head over to check on the meat for your signature dish. It's kept in a locked inner compartment of the meat cellar to ensure none of the other staff can access it without your guidance - and, more importantly, to keep it as far from the daylight as possible. Unlocking it with the key hanging from a chain on your belt you open the door and step inside, admiring three huge night troll carcasses hanging from the ceiling. Approaching the nearest one you draw out a short knife and carefully cut away a sliver of belly. You watch the slice of meat on the blade and compare it against the section you cut; satisfied there's no sign of regrowth from either the sliver of meat or the carcass, you mark the carcass as ready for consumption. You haven't forgotten what happens if you eat improperly aged troll meat. Yes...16 year old boys do make mistakes. Maybe you should give the lad some more slack.

As you leave the cellar you pause to wash your hands before closing the door. You pick up the strong caustic soap, important after what you've been handling. The cold air surges a little, a side-effect of so much magic in one space; you shudder with cold and the mist of your breath briefly obscures your view. Still feeling the chill as it clears you find yourself back amongst the patrol once more.