

She then held Pirogoeth out at arm's length, and said, "The Dominus has had you studying morning, noon, and night for over two months! What time would you have had to think of *anything* else?" She then looked across the cobblestone street, and said, "I know what will make you feel better. Semi makes some wonderful almond bread at the bakery across the way. Not as good as *mine*, of course, but if I know you, you'll like it. Come on!"

They were halfway across the street when a loud commotion interrupted them from the north. A single cart, drawn by two horses had rushed past the guards, who were now giving chase. A familiarity struck Pirogoeth, like she should know who the horses belonged to... until she saw the humongous man leading them. She couldn't place the name, but she definitely remembered the large merchant that she had run into the first day she arrived in Kartage.

She broke free of Taima's hold, and sprinted to the cart as it was forced to stop just short of the town square by the masses of people. She arrived just as the Phalanx did, the soldiers angrily demanding the merchant surrender.

"I need help!" the large man shouted frantically. "My brother is hurt! Please!"

Captain Daneid intercepted Pirogoeth, but she would have none of it.

"My lady, stand back..."

"Get out of my way!" she shrieked. "He's frightened, and I'm going to find out why!"

"He could be dangerous, and Dominus Socrato would flay the skin off my bones if you were harmed."

"He's a *merchant*," Pirogoeth growled, tapping into the training tome looped into her belt for a surge of visible energy that she ignited into a harmless flame, though Daneid didn't need to know that. "Now, if you do not step aside this instant, I am going to try and confirm my master's claim that skin melts at one hundred and sixty degrees."

The Phalanx captain reluctantly complied, deciding that the danger of melted skin *now* was greater than the danger of flayed skin *later*. He stood down, allowing Pirogoeth to pass, and ordered the soldiers trying to force the merchant off of the cart to stand down.

The large merchant saw her, and also recognized her. "You... are the Dominus's apprentice."

"Yes. I'm Pirogoeth. I'm sorry I don't remember your name."

"Pierre," he said, his eyes repeatedly dashing towards the back of the cart, that had been covered by a white sheet. "Is the Dominus available? We need his help immediately. We were attacked by bandits on the road, and Julian was wounded."

Pirogoeth rushed to the rear of the cart, ordering two of the soldiers to pull back the sheet. Indeed, Pierre's brother was laying on a bed of sheets on his side, his skin a deathly pallor, the side facing up sporting a vicious puncture wound, with a shard of steel still sticking through, blood soaked dressing wrapped tightly around it.

It was remarkably good first aid, Pirogoeth noted, and no doubt the only reason Julian was still alive. But he needed more complete attention, and quickly. "Captain! Escort these men to the loading gate for the inner keep. I need to get the proper tome, and I'll meet them there."

Pierre was wary of those orders. "Why can't the Dominus aid us?"

"Dominus Socrato is away," Pirogoeth replied, fighting back insult. "I'm going to be the best you can get." Then she snapped to Daneid, "Now, Captain!" She took off again into a sprint towards the tower, Taima catching up in the process.

"What is going on?" The servant girl asked.

"We're about to find out just how well I've learned healing magic." Pirogoeth intentionally left out the "in five days" part as she took to the steps in a full sprint, and only barely slowed down through the interior halls of the tower.

"I'm going to need to get myself a shoulder bag," she grumbled once she reached her chambers, flinging the door open and crossing the distance to her desk in three strides. "I need to start carrying all my tomes on me, that's all there is to it."

Pirogoeth grabbed the necessary tome of her desk, and turned to Taima who had been waiting in the doorway. “Damn it... Taima, do you know of a liquid called Norine Lavender? It would be in a red clay pot with a brown stripe on the third row of shelves of the hall arcana, smells like... well... like lavender. Can you get it for me?”

Taima snapped her fingers with a smile. “Can do you better my lady. Chef Vargat has some that he uses when the keep gets food from foreign lands. How much will you need?”

Pirogoeth shrugged. “Enough to test a piece of steel. Not sure how long the piece is though.”

“I’ll grab a washbasin then. That should be enough.”

“Then go. Meet me outside the loading gate as quickly as you can,” Pirogoeth ordered as she grabbed a roll of linen gauze from a lower drawer of her desk.

The girls quickly parted ways, and Pirogoeth took as direct of a path as she could to the gate used for large deliveries on the east side of the inner keep. Unlike what you would expect, the loading gate was just a single-door entry into the dry stock chamber, so small that Pirogoeth was more than able to push it open herself even if the Phalanx hadn’t already been there and opened it for her.

Pirogoeth was rifling through the pages of her tome, trying to commit to memory all the spells she might need. Mending for deep tissue, assuredly, but also toxin and disease purging spells as well. She just sincerely hoped she didn’t need to use all of them, as she suspected just the mending spell would tax her horribly.

Daneid had done as requested as well, and Pierre had nimbly backed the rear of the cart to face the gate not even ten feet away, allowing her to hop right in to tend to the wounded without having to break stride.

She was now able to give the patient a closer look as Pierre hopped into the back of the cart, clearly sick with worry. The metal stuck roughly three inches out of Julian’s side, was polished very well, and had etching that she couldn’t quite decipher from what little was visible. That didn’t set well with her. It could be runes that carried any number of malicious intentions.

“He’s fortunate, as I don’t think the blade hit anything vital. I’m going to need to pull the metal out in order to heal it, but I don’t want to do that until I get the lavender I need,” she declared.

“What for?” Pierre asked.

“Because if this blade is poisoned or cursed, just healing the wound won’t do any good,” Pirogoeth replied grumpily.

“I think it’s a bit of stretch that it would be.”

“You can *think* all you want. I’d rather *know*.”

Pierre bit his tongue, and she sensed he knew more than he was letting on. But she had little time to press as Taima’s voice drifted to her ears from the dry stock room. She emerged seconds later in a brisk walk holding a basin that hopefully held the Norine Lavender Pirogoeth needed.

“My lady! I have the lavender!” The servant girl shouted.

“I need pliers!” Pirogoeth barked, holding out her hand behind her. “Now!”

She wasn’t sure who pressed the tool into her hand, and really didn’t care. She was too busy moving on with her instructions. She shoved the roll of gauze into Pierre’s hands, and said, “I’ll need you to hold him down while I pull out the shard. Because it’s going to hurt, I’m sure. After that, you’re going to need to unroll that, and apply as much pressure on the wound as you can until I’m ready.”

Pierre nodded silently, unwrapping a long length of gauze around his right hand and forearm, then put both hands on Julian’s shoulder and ribs.

Pirogoeth took that as her cue. She clamped onto the exposed steel with the pliers as tight as she could, then pulled. As she expected, Julian jerked and howled in pain as Pirogoeth pulled out a five-inch long narrow piece of very well maintained steel that tapered more to a point than an edge. It wasn’t like any weapon she had seen before, but she was reasonably sure it wasn’t any bandit blade.

She couldn’t give it much more thought, as time was of the essence, and without that imposing piece, the bleeding would increase significantly until healed.

“Taima! Come here quickly!” She ordered. The servant girl complied, bringing the basin over to where Pirogoeth could drop the shard of steel into the liquid it held. “Tell me if it changes color. It should only take a few seconds.”

Pirogoeth then took a deep breath, and prepared herself for something she was not going to find pleasant. She focused on her tome, opening the path through her body, readying herself until she knew exactly what she would need to channel.

“No change, my lady.” Taima informed her.

Now she knew what to do. “Okay, step aside, Pierre,” Pirogoeth ordered. She took position, placing her hands over the wound, and added, “Captain, Pierre, I may need you to catch me.”

“My lady?” Daneid asked in concern.

“What I’m about to do might drain me badly. It’s possible I will black out once I’m done. Just... try and make sure I don’t crack my head open falling out of this cart.”

She didn’t wait for them to argue further, focusing on herself and channeling the spell she needed. As she expected, it did not flow easily, merely a trickle that wouldn’t have been able to mend a paper cut. She demanded obedience, and the flow of energy increased reluctantly... still not enough to heal the wound, but enough that it was showing a tangible effect. Crackles of energy sparked off her hand, and it did seem like the bleeding was starting to slow.

Pirogoeth’s vision blurred abruptly, and she shook her head to clear it. She set her jaw, closed her eyes, and again imposed her will on the resisting tome. She wasn’t going to fail this man’s life just because of some uncooperative *book*.

Her sense of hearing started to fail next, whatever Pierre was trying to say to her reaching her ears a garbled, slurred mess of sound. Pirogoeth was reduced more to working on instinct than what she could see in front of her... which was fortunate because she couldn’t see much.

The last thing that she really remembered was being forcibly pulled away from her patient, despite her slurred protests, before her vision completely collapsed upon itself. Within that internal blackness, time held no meaning. So it was hard for her to tell just how long between that moment and when she started to hear voices from the outside again.

*I do believe she is who we are looking for.*

*Do you now? From what I have gathered, what you have is a meager talent unable to maintain consciousness for a simple mending spell.*

*That she learned to channel less than a week ago. Tell me, Morgana, how well you fared the first time you tried such a skill on a real person?*

*Your pupil may be a swift learner, Socrato, but how can you be so certain she has the type of talent we’ve been searching for?*

*I’ve seen signs of her power to dominate, Augustus. I plan on making a better observation in a more controlled environment, obviously, but I do believe she will meet my expectations.*

*Or we can continue our search and not hopelessly put all our hopes in this waif of a girl. I could have another prospect easily enough...*

*Your last apprentice tried to kill you and take control of your tower. I think we’ve seen enough of your ability to judge character.*

*Augustus, Morgana, enough. We do not have time for more searching. We do not have time to keep scouring the continent. The Void approaches the South Gibraltar Isles as we speak. Time is no longer our friend. The both of you need to focus solely on your experiments and observations. I will test my apprentice, and prepare her to my fullest for the trials ahead.*

*I hope you are right about this, Socrato.*

*As am I, my friends. As am I.*