

## Visiting Nana

Vulfgaar, still wearing his apron, set the plate with fried eggs in front of the empty seat next to Beleard and yelled into the corridor, “Yara, breakfast is ready!”

As no sounds of response, footsteps, or doors opening answered his call, he looked at Beleard, who was busy gobbling down his meal.

“Do you think she’s still mad at me? Or is she mad about something new now?”

“Wouldn’t know,” Beleard replied between bites. “But she probably took off already.”

“Took off? Where?”

“To see her grandmother. Today’s the anniversary.”

“Her grandmother?”

Beleard slowly looked up at him, halting his chewing.

“Oh, right.”

Vulfgaar disappeared through the kitchen door, only to return without his apron and with a plate containing his own breakfast.

“And she does that every year?” Vulf continued.

“Mhm.”

“On the exact same day?”

“Mhm.”

“Visiting the exact same place?”

“Obviously.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Mhm.”

“If somebody found out, they could ambush her.”

“Mhm. They usually do.”

“*Usually?*”

“Mhm.”

“Alright. Clearly one of us here has lost our mind. Either I’m not understanding what you’re saying, or you’re saying that Yara deliberately walks into a trap once a year and you’re way too relaxed about that than you have any right to be.”

“It’s no big deal. Usually, I keep a lookout while she spends a few minutes with her grandmother. She went ahead to pick some flowers on the way there. Says they need to be fresh and hand-picked, otherwise it doesn’t count. And I catch up with her quickly with my portals. No big deal.”

“It’s dangerous. An unnecessary risk.”

Beleard kept chewing. “It’s important to her.”

“It’ll get you caught.”

“Hasn’t so far,” Beleard shrugged again. “Are you going to eat these?” he pointed at what was supposed to be Yara’s plate.

Vulfgaar shook his head and rubbed his temples in frustration. Beleard moved Yara’s plate onto his empty one and dug into the fried eggs.

“Actually,” he said with a full mouth, “I was wondering if you could cover for me today.”

“Cover for you?”

“Yeah. The new tome of *The Villainess Is My Reincarnated Cat* is releasing, and I

was hoping to grab it before it sells out. So if you could be on the lookout while I visit the shops, that'd be great."

"Why would I-"

"You still owe me for saving you from that mushroom last week."

"I could've handled it on my own!"

"Could you also handle what Yara'd do to you once she found out you exploded her favourite sentient mushroom?"

Vulfgaar pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned.

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Not much later, Beleard stepped through one of his portals with Vulfgaar following him closely before the hole in space closed noiselessly behind them. They found themselves in the woods, in a place wholly unfamiliar to Vulfgaar.

"She must've gone ahead," Beleard said, looking around. "It's just that way," he pointed towards a barely visible path snaking uphill through the thickets, "you can't miss it."

"So what do I do?"

"Just keep a lookout. Nothing more, nothing less. I'll come pick the two of you up when I'm done. It shouldn't take too long." With that, he disappeared through another portal of his.

Vulfgaar conjured a concealment spell, just to be on the safe side. He'd never been fully at ease in forests. There were too many blind spots, too many ways of approaching undetected, too many tiny things going on everywhere at the same time for comfort. Although having lived there for several months now, he'd gotten used to it. He'd learned how to move without leaving obvious traces and without making too much noise. But safe was safe, there was no reason to take unnecessary risks.

The woods and thickets of the deciduous forest became less and less dense as he trodded on. Soon enough, he reached what looked like a meadow. But the headstones standing tall in the grass betrayed that the locals had repurposed the clearing for their deceased. Judging by the state of some of the stones, it had been used this way for quite a while. Smoke rising behind treetops in the distance told Vulfgaar that a village was nearby, a mere few minutes of walk on the muddy path leading away from the other side of the graveyard.

Vulfgaar remained hidden in the shade of the woods as he scoured the open cemetery for Yara. The clearing was by no means large and he had a decent oversight over it, but so would any ambushers, he worried. Nevertheless, it took him a moment to spot her. She was sitting on the ground by a stone on the far side of the centre on her own.

Yara was hugging her knees and speaking softly, her back turned towards him. A bouquet of wildflowers lay in front of her next to a lit candle. Vulfgaar thought she looked smaller than her usual self as if the headstone towering before her had somehow shrunk her. He couldn't make out the words she was saying, but it appeared that she kept talking and talking.

And then Vulf heard a twig snap close by.

He cursed internally and began casting the strongest concealment spell he knew.

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"Vulfgaar?"

Yara stood behind him, her clenched fists ready to strike and engulfed in her flames, now dwindling as she recognized him.

"Oh, hi," he turned around. Releasing his spell, three floating lifeless bodies shrouded in camouflaged hoods dropped onto the ground with a silent thud. "Sorry, I tried to keep this quiet to not perturb you. Guess I messed up a bit."

"Yeah, the lightning strikes were a dead giveaway."

"That wasn't me. That was this one, I think," he pointed at one of the bodies on the ground. "Wait, did you hear those lightning strikes?"

"Was I supposed not to?"

"My concealment spell should've covered them. Maybe they went out of range? I'll have to investigate and tweak it when we get back."

"Is that all of them?" Yara looked around.

"I think so."

"Where's Beleard?"

"Away. He said he'll be here soon."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"He asked me to be the lookout today in his stead."

"That's... oddly nice of you," Yara's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I owed him."

"Ah, figures. Come on, then."

"Come on, what?"

"You're here already. You're meeting Nana."

"But-"

"Oh, hush," she grabbed him by his arm and pulled him along as she stepped briskly back towards the graveyard. "No objections. You're meeting Nana."

Holding on to his arm, Yara beelined to the centre of the graveyard and then towards the stone where she had been sitting before. Nobody else was in sight. Out in the open, the bright sunshine warmed their faces. The sounds of insects buzzing and crickets chirping mixed with the smell of moss and the wax coming off the candles placed before most graves.

They were humble gravestones, cut simply and straightforwardly. There were no massive monuments, sarcophagi, or statues anywhere, nor anything else Vulfgaar would've been familiar with, suggesting any nobility or wealth had never taken any interest in it as their final resting place. Some markers were even wooden, brittle and decaying for having withstood the elements out in the open for years.

"Hi, Nana, I'm back," Yara said once they reached the grave. "And I brought a friend. This is Vulfgaar. He lives with us. He's a bit of a jerk, but tolerable sometimes. And he thinks he's really good with magic."

Yara sat down in the grass and moss underneath them. "Vulf, this is my grandmother. She raised me and looked after Beleard for a while back when we were still kids. Be nice and say hi."

Vulfgaar gave her a questioning look but saw nothing but stern sincerity on her. "Hi," he finally stammered and waved awkwardly.

"Now sit down, you're sticking out like a sore thumb."

Vulf obeyed wordlessly and sat down next to her. The big headstone in front of him stared him down coldly. He felt himself shrink. Traces of swiped fingertips in the dirt, leaves, and gravel betrayed that Yara had cleaned the stone while she was there. Vulf awkwardly hugged his knees, letting the silence become dense and heavy. The engraving on the stone also looked cleaner than on the surrounding stones. It read "Sylphie Darren." No dates, no years.

"So... how long..." Vulfgaar began hesitantly, having become uncomfortable enough with the lack of conversation.

"It's been five years."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

Vulfgaar sought more words, unsure what would be suitable or appropriate, or even whether to say anything at all. Perhaps the moment called for silence, even an uneasy one.

"I can wait elsewhere if you prefer," he suggested.

"Don't be silly. You can't meet Nana if you're elsewhere."

"Sorry. I'm just not sure what to say or do. I know funeral etiquette. I'm not aware of visitation etiquette. Maybe there's something about it Urefort's Treatise on Social Etiquette that I've foolishly missed."

"It's all books with you, isn't it," Yara smirked.

"Not all. But they're very useful for nearly everything."

"I didn't learn from books at all. Didn't need to. Nana taught me everything I know. From potions and magic to gardening and housekeeping. She taught me the way she was taught," Yara tucked a waft of her hair behind her ear. "Wizardry schools were not a thing in her time. Basically unheard of, especially out here, so far out of the cities. Her mom taught her, and she taught me."

"She must've been a formidable wizard."

"She was incredible. I once watched her brew a healing potion with only hops, malt, and yeast."

"Isn't that... isn't that just beer?"

"You'd think, wouldn't you. But she was amazing. Well-respected, too. She never moved to the cities, even though she could've made a fortune with her potions. She maintained that she preferred the woods. That she preferred being close to the plants she used in her brews. But I think she stayed because skilled wizards are rare out in the countryside. People desperately needed a knowledgeable healer. They came riding for days to seek her help. So she stayed. Her entire life."

"No wonder people liked her."

"I don't know about 'liked'. But they definitely feared and respected her. She could make anyone hold their tongue with just a look. Once she stopped a twenty-person brawl in the tavern without saying a single word or lifting a single finger. They all took their hats off when they talked to her. Or when she entered a room. And they'd

leave small presents at her door. Foodstuff, mostly. Little signs of appreciation. And she was always Miss Darren. Never Sylphie, never The Wizard, never The Witch. Always Miss Darren. Miss Darren this, Miss Darren that. Call Miss Darren, the horse is ill. Call Miss Darren, Frudka broke her leg. Call Miss Darren, Kahla is giving birth.”

“Sounds very respectable, indeed, if the people put that much trust and gratitude at her feet.”

Vulfgaar flicked his wrist through the air and drew symbols with his fingers. A moment later, he had conjured a sparkling, shiny, small white flower in his hand and placed it next to Yara’s big bouquet of wildflowers. “I’m sure I would’ve loved to meet her.”

“She probably would’ve given you a hard time,” Yara flashed a malicious smile. “A big fancy city mage with his big fancy degrees and schools who can’t even make his own conditioner.”

“I can, you know that. Yours are just much much better. Why do you insist on making me admit that?”

“Because it’s fun!” Yara grinned at him. “Is that the same spell you used for the tiara you made me?” she pointed at Vulfgaar’s flower.

“No,” he shook his head. “Those were enchanted. It’s much harder to create new objects from scratch instead of duplicating existing ones. I couldn’t figure out how to combine a creation spell with a perpetual motion and floating spell for the petals. But a duplication spell on existing ones worked. Add a decay freeze spell to keep them looking fresh, and there you have it.”

“You’re... You’re so... Ugh.” Yara’s fingers curled into tense claws.

“What? What did I do now?”

“You kinda ruined it now!”

“How?”



“By explaining exactly how it works, you dork. You could’ve just said ‘no.’”

“But you asked!”

“I know! Argh!” She threw her hands into the air.

Yara looked at her Nana’s name on the gravestone and clenched her jaw and fists.

“Close your eyes,” she finally growled.

“What? Why?”

“Just do it,” she hissed.

“Are you going to hit me?”

“I am if you don’t close your eyes right now.”

“Fine,” Vulfgaar gave in. “There. Happy?”

“Yes! Now shut up for a second.”

She could see him roll his eyes even though they were closed. Yara looked pleadingly at the headstone in front of her, but soon gave up, lowering her head and crossing her arms.

“Nana always wanted me to become a respectable wizard like her. And a respectable person. Shut up,” she halted him in his tracks as soon as she noticed his mouth twisting into the irritating smirk that only meant he was about to say something he thought very clever. “Let me finish.”

She ran her hands through her hair. “So I guess this is me trying. I know that I never really thanked you for the tiara you made me. I want you to know that It was a lovely present. I like it very much,” she mumbled sheepishly. “And thanks for keeping a lookout today. Coming here means very much to me. So there, thank you.”

“Can I talk now?”

“Not yet.”

Yara wavered and shook her arms, struggling with herself. Then she briefly ran her hands through her hair again, exhaled, and leaned over to plant a quick kiss on his cheek.

Surprised, Vulfgaar opened his eyes to find himself looking at Yara's glistening brown ones just beside him, closer than he ever remembered seeing her, a faint blush gracing her freckled cheeks.

"I mean it. Thank you," she whispered.

"You're... welcome..." he stammered softly with burning cheeks, running his fingertips over the spot where her lips had just left. He didn't dare move a muscle, he didn't dare let go of the warm gaze directed at him. Yara didn't back away either. He didn't understand why she wouldn't, but he didn't mind, nor did he question it. On the contrary, he didn't want her to go, at least not just yet. She was close enough for him to sense the pleasant warmth of her breath on his skin. He wondered whether her cheeks would feel as soft and beautiful under his touch as they looked.

"Am I interrupting?" Beleard said, standing behind them. "Do you want me to come back later?"

Yara's face flushed radiantly red even before she turned around.

"How long have you been here?" she roared, jumping onto her feet.

"Just a few moments."

"Let's go, then!" Yara stomped off towards the forest.

Vulfgaar looked at Beleard with perplexity written all over his face as plain as day.

Beleard shrugged. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah..." Vulf got up and followed them into the woods, the poor gears in his head still rattling and grinding away, doing their best to rationalize what had just happened.