

Rip and Tail

Up until around 50 years ago, bath-houses were a rarity in the lands west of the Sword Peaks. Scholars could name any number of reasons, and many of them were likely to be valid. Of course, these same scholars would also claim that the Tar'ri were created as sex slaves rather than soldiers due to their status as hermaphrodites, but motives are not always logical in reason.

Nothing showed this more than the slowly increasing presence of the aforementioned bath-houses. Tales from travellers to Azlanti spoke of pools heated by magic or by natural springs, but it was an invention from the kobold empire of Arital that led to the chain of buildings appearing in the larger cities of the Southlands. Only kobolds staffed these houses, but somehow the fact that the staff consisted of literal small, wingless dragons seemed to put the minds of bath-goers at ease.

For Sharilar, it was a chance to relax and indulge as she seldom was able to. As a kitsune, her race's fox-like appearance was fairly unusual in western lands, so to avoid trouble she typically assumed the human-looking form that was also her kind's birthright. Only in moments of danger or places of safety did she allow her true black-furred appearance to show.

Giving a happy sigh, the purple-eyed vixen sank a few inches deeper into the steaming pool, letting the hot water fully soak into her fur and skin. With no other visitors to share the pool this time, she had taken advantage of the situation to strip completely naked, enjoying the way the water washed over her bare breasts without any cloth to dull the sensations. Sometimes, being overly sensitive in some areas did have its perks.

That thought got a slight giggle from Sharilar as she caught her unintentional pun. Still, these days she seldom had the chance to indulge herself in a nice long soak while in her natural form, and she was going to enjoy every bit of the experience while she could.

"Sharilar." The sudden male voice jarred her out of her reverie. Jolting upright, the well-endowed kitsune covered her chest with one arm while looking around to see who had intruded on her private time, but the room was just as empty as before.

"This is Morgan," the voice spoke again, and this time Sharilar could tell that the voice was not coming from anywhere nearby. Not to mention the name was ringing a few bells...

"This sage says this message should reach you, but I must be brief. There is danger you should know of."

“What danger?” Sharilar asked without thinking, but no response was forthcoming. “A sending,” she mused as she tallied up the words in the message. Such messages were one-way only, and limited in length.

Slowly lowering herself back into the bath, the shapely vixen began to relax her guard - which of course is when the next message came through.

“Prima graced one of our priests with visions of the world breaking apart. I would not involve you, but one of the starting points was Ashtalon.”

Ashtalon! Now she knew who it was that was trying to reach her - a paladin of Prima that she had assisted a few months back. She had gone to that very ruin to aid him against a small stronghold of Dark Realm cultists who had taken up residence, performing insane experiments on themselves and others who fell under their sway.

Reminded of the events there, the black-furred kitsune half-turned to look back at the twin foxtails she now sported in place of the single one she had been born with. To prevent a disaster, she had been forced to channel wild magic through herself, and it had awakened a greater magical power within her, granting her a second tail in the process.

Her new strength of magic had nearly caught her off-guard the first time she had attempted to tap into it, and she had nearly summoned a shoggoth instead of the spell she had been trying to call forth. After that incident, she had taken several weeks to retrain herself in how to control her powers, and now she could channel that extra power with barely any extra effort on her own part.

“I know you are not of our order,” the third message came through with less of a delay, bringing Sharilar’s attention back to the present. “I would not ask this of you normally, but please, look into it if you can.”

Sharilar waited for several long minutes, ears perked, but no more words came through. With a resigned sigh, she slipped back down, submerging herself again up to her short muzzle in the heated pool. If it had been anything else, she would have flipped him the proverbial middle finger and continued on her way, but given what had nearly happened once already at Ashtalon she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was minions of one of the Old Ones involved.

Sharilar knew herself well, and she wasn’t exactly a shining beacon of goodness, let alone a holy warrior like Morgan and his ilk. While she did not usually seek out trouble without a reward involved, if something did threaten her or her kin, blood or adopted, she was as merciless as the predator she resembled.

Servants of the Old Ones however had earned a special place of hate in her heart. First, they had stolen her magic in an attempt to use her as a focus for their mad ritual, which was bad

enough on its own. A few years later, she had discovered that same ritual had made her barren as well, and for that she would never forgive them.

Since then, she had made it a habit to look into any rumors of cultists gathering, to ensure that there would be no more victims like her, but she was only one person in a very large world. Now, a lead was being dropped into her proverbial and literal lap, and despite the ruins being two weeks travel from here, she was going to go there and see just what was so Glimmer-damned important that Prima was involving Her order, and by extension, Sharilar herself.

Closing her eyes, Sharilar took a deep breath, and let it out slowly as she forced herself to relax. With that long a trip, there was no reason she couldn't put it off until tomorrow. If today was going to be her last day of relaxation and pleasure for a while, then by Stylor, she was going to damn well enjoy it!

Two weeks and many dusty trails later, a very human-looking Sharilar found herself once more standing before a broken city wall, her horse snorting and pawing at the ground uneasily next to her. The ruins were far too large for her to have found the same place she had entered before, but one section of crumbled stone looked enough like the other that it made no practical difference.

Petting the mare's nose to calm her, the kitsune let her form shift back from human to vulpine, her clothes accommodating the change easily as usual. While it took no concentration to stay in human guise, it always felt like the magic came easier in her natural-born form, especially as of late.

That gave her pause, and not for the first time. She'd only really begun to notice it in the past month after finishing her re-training, but as a human her magical ability felt hobbled, to put it bluntly. While every spell or enchantment she had tried had still worked, when she returned to fox form it was like blinders she had never noticed had been taken away, and everything seemed so much clearer to her.

Just like now. While her horse had been growing ever more nervous the closer they had rode, Sharilar had only felt a slight twinge of unease, like a vague worry scratching at the back of her mind. With her natural form restored however, she could sense a serious feeling of wrongness about the area. Earperking uncertainly, she glanced around warily, but nothing seemed out of place apart from her own presence.

With a single unpronounceable word, she called up her magesight and took another look at her surroundings, just to reassure herself that she was not walking into any sort of trap. The wall

itself looked fairly normal, the tattered remnants of a long-expired ward all that remained of any magic that had been bound here.

Trying to shrug off the feeling of unease gnawing at her chest, Sharilar secured her mare's reins around a rock, testing them to make sure they were loose enough to let her escape if some danger did appear while she was in the ruins. In a caravan, your horse and wagon were your life, and having to track your mount down was always more preferable to losing it to an unforeseen threat that you may not have foreseen.

Clearing the rubble with a single hop, the black-haired and black-furred eldritch kitsune began to slowly make her way through the ruined streets, eyes and ears alert to any danger. She could sense an Otherness about the area, nothing she could concretely identify. Everything appeared normal, except for the sound of the wind blowing down the alleyways and broken stone.

The sound! Sharilar froze as she finally figured out one of the things making her so uneasy. She had only skirted the edge of the forest during her trip here, but the singing birds had become so familiar she'd started blocking them out without even realizing it. Even during her last visit, there had still been a few winged creatures trying to make their homes among the broken and shattered buildings, despite the corrupted creatures wandering the streets. Today, it was as silent as a tomb.

There was an encouraging thought. Still, she had yet to find any corpses or signs of any undead presence thus far. Maybe it really was a trap? Warily, she re-activated her magesight, and the sudden brilliance cascading from the tower nearly blinded her.

Quickly turning away, she canceled the spell as she tried to blink away the tears, everything around her only visible as vague shapes decorated with floating spots. "Well, damn," Sharilar muttered to herself, as she felt her way to a nearby alley.. Something was happening at that tower, but whatever it was, it was far out of her league.

As she waited for her eyesight to recover, Sharilar ran through her options. First: she could turn around and go back, and forget this ever happened. It was the safest option, and she had to admit after that light show she was sorely tempted to do just that.

Second, she could move on and see if she could at least discover what was going on while hopefully avoiding being smashed like a bug. It's not as if she didn't know just how powerful some of the creatures Out There were, and if one had gotten brought through, leaving it alone would be one of the worst things to do.

Third, she could leave and come back with some major backup. She had a feeling though that the Order was too far for her to get any help from, otherwise Morgan wouldn't have gone to the trouble of contacting her in the first place. As for other ruin-delvers, they'd either want to know what sort of rewards were available, or more likely, wouldn't believe her that something major

was going on out here. Stories of a group of plucky adventurers stopping a worldwide threat were supposedly just tales for children, not something that actually happened in reality, after all!

To Sharilar's surprise, it did not take as long as she had thought it would for her vision to recover. Lifting a hand, she watched her fingers as she ran through a few gestures, but the image stayed sharp, and she gave a small nod to herself. If she left, she had a feeling that this would haunt her if it did turn out to be the work of an Old One, and with help out of reach, that left her one option: to move forward and see what she was facing.

She cautiously peeked around the corner, both tails twitching nervously, but she saw no movement or sign of anything untoward. With a deep breath, the vulpine gypsy began to slowly make her way towards the tower again, sticking to the shadows as much as possible.

Her nerves felt ragged by the time she reached the courtyard. The certainty that something was going to jump her had grown ever higher the closer she got, but there had not been even a physical sign of a single creature's presence the entire time. Even the tower itself looked undisturbed from her previous visit. It all felt perfectly normal, except for the almost overpowering aura of Otherness that seemed to permeate the air around the building like a thick fog.

Steeling herself, Sharilar dashed across the open space, but no firewalls erupted, no creatures appeared to try and tear out her guts, no walls of magic rose to block her way. The only sound was her sandals hitting dirt as she moved across the patchy grass surrounding the tower's base, and in seconds she was safely next to the half-open doorway. Well, relatively safely, considering the magnitude of the presence she was feeling from within.

Suddenly, there was a pop behind her eyes and the presence was gone. Had the being discovered her? Trying not to bite her lower lip, Sharilar peered around the edge of the doorway, but the entry foyer was empty. Or... was it?

Looking around the room, the purple-eyed kitsune could feel her eyes sliding over... well something was there, but it was like her mind refused to acknowledge it. Not only that, but while the pressure she had been feeling on her soul was definitely gone, she could still sense what felt like a flow of Other-ness coming from the doorway.

Squaring her shoulders, Sharilar stepped around the door and strode into the room as if she owned it. "Well, I'm here. Now who was so stupid as to serve an Old One again?" she called out, forcing a note of bravado she didn't feel this time into her voice, but no response was forthcoming.

After an anticlimactic few minutes of silence, she felt herself relax. Whatever was here wasn't intelligent, or at least didn't understand her language and wasn't hostile. What that didn't tell her though is just what the being had left behind.

Walking around the room, Sharilar let her gaze roam over each part of the room, mentally noting where her vision jumped. After several minutes of pacing the floor, she managed to determine the area seemed to cover a few feet of what should have been tile, to the left of the stairs up.

Once she had the area defined, she paused a moment, tails idly twitching as she pondered. Something was preventing her from looking at whatever it was, but after the magesight incident outside she didn't want to risk taking a peek in the magical realm either. Then again, maybe it was only a ward of some sort against direct viewing...

Turning away completely, the kitsune began to slowly angle her head until she could just barely catch the area out of the corner of her eye. Trying to keep her vision focused ahead but still give all her attention to the peripherals felt like trying to juggle knives while reciting the Tale of Branstock backwards. Despite the difficulty though, it seemed like it was working, and that portion of floor slowly came into view.

The sharp intake of breath that followed had to have come from someone else, because Sharilar could not move, think, or even blink. When trying to describe it later, she could only put it as a "crack in reality," but in this moment it was so much more. The space was both nothingness, and everything. Worlds were created, and destroyed in the span of a single breath. She saw things that could not exist, things that should not exist, and things that never existed. The edges of the gap were both rigid, and flowing like molten metal.

Suddenly, Sharilar saw a momentary vision of herself, slightly younger, fighting goblins alongside some sort of cat-person, a human, and an elf in the middle of a festival of some sort. That vanished, to be replaced by another version of her, heavy with child, resting against a male elf that she felt she should recognize. Then came another, with green eyes and white fur, standing before an altar and granting a blessing to a supplicant. Yet another, this one with three tails, was fighting alongside an angel, a giant wolf, a bare-handed orc in robes, and a female warrior wielding blades growing with ice and fire. Even as that image left her consciousness, it was replaced by a 9-tailed version of her, throwing spells alongside a large white dragon using Azlantian hand-to-hand techniques against a shadowy figure, even as other dragons and champions moved forward to help. Multitudes of herself, each and every one fighting their own battle, or enjoying a moment of peace. And somehow, for that moment, each and every one of them looked back at her.

She could feel her mind beginning to fray, but this chaos, this madness, was very like what she had once experienced before. She had come back from it then, and she was not going to surrender now! Taking every ounce, every erg of willpower, she fought against the tantalizing pull and simultaneous rejection of the spacial tear, slowly inching her head at a rate that felt like a snail moving through molasses in the middle of winter, against a headwind. Just... a... bit... more...

With an almost audible snap, time returned to normal for Sharilar, leaving her gasping, despite not having done much other than move her head. Unsteadily, she made her way to the nearest column and leaned against it, ears folded flat as she shook her head to try and clear it.

“By Solus,” the rattled kitsune whispered. She’d been too late after all, though the thought of trying to oppose that massive presence that had been here just before her arrival was almost laughable with her current power. For that matter, how does one go about fixing a rip in reality itself? This was big. Bigger than some schmuck cultists preying on innocent girls. This was-

Sharilar felt herself on the edge of panic, the ever-present whispers from the Far Realms only adding to it as they admonished her and told her how weak she really was. Her tails wrapped around each other, hands going to her head as each negative thought built upon the next. A soft black glow began to form around her as she whimpered, dark-furred fingers digging into black hair. The whispers seemed to grow almost joyful, and for a moment, the black-furred vixen could see the abyss of insanity yawning before her, waiting for her to throw herself into its tender mercies. It would all be so easy.

Then, one of the voices whispered, “You would have been a terrible mother, too.”

Instantly, her head snapped up. Anger replaced doubt, and she could sense the Deep Realm spirits recoiling in fear as a purple fire began to burn in her eyes. The black glow that had been surrounding her took on a purple tinge, reshaping itself into flames.

“What. The. Fuck. Did. You. Just. Say,” Sharilar whispered through gritted teeth as she rose back up, her willpower re-ignited. Ignoring the pain, she switched to magesight, baring her teeth as she reached out with her aura and directly ripped apart each of the half-formed creatures that had been trying to use her despair as a gate. She didn’t even bother to form so much as a framework of a spell, but channeled the vast depths of the Far Realms directly into the powerful clawed strikes tearing each shadowy being into quivering bits, that then faded back to the hells they had come from.

Within moments, she was alone once more, hunched and panting, her tails bristling as she stared at the empty space where the Things had tried to come through. With the targets of her rage gone, her tenuous hold on her magic slipped away. The purple-black aura faded as she fell to her knees, then to the floor a moment later as unconsciousness finally claimed her.

“Urgh...” With a small groan, Sharilar awoke, opening purple eyes to see a bare stone ceiling above her. Slowly sitting up, she found herself wincing, ears folding flat as a dull throbbing pounding began behind her temples. Lifting a hand to rub at them, she muttered, “Why is it whenever I come here I end up on my back and passed out? Why not at a bar, or someplace where the hangover meant I actually had fun?”

Slowly, she took stock of herself, but luckily it seemed she'd avoided any injury. Still, something was beginning to nag at the back of her mind. Beyond the headache, something didn't feel quite right, but she couldn't quite put a claw on what it was.

Maybe something to do with the crack? Turning to look that direction, her eyes slid over the spot where it had been again, completely skipping over the couple feet where she knew she'd seen some sort of rip in reality. Concentrating, she tried to recall what she'd seen, but all she could recall was a vague sense of something incomprehensible. That and... herself, reflected into infinity.

Try as she might though, Sharilar could not remember any of the specifics of her alternate selves. For maybe half a second, she considered trying to view the Crack directly again, but despite the jumbled memories of it, she could clearly recall the breakdown she'd nearly had. Now, some might say that no one had earned the right more than her, but when you become a gateway straight to the deepest reaches of the far realms by doing so, you can't allow yourself the luxury of giving in, even for a moment.

Shrugging off the slight uneasiness that still persisted, she climbed to her feat. Well, if it could be opened, maybe there was some way to seal it. Bracing herself, she viewed the room with magesight once more, but the area around where the tear should be was, quite frankly, a mess on the magical level. Blinking away the tears as she turned it back off again, the vulpine spellcaster shook her head. Even with the magical knowledge she had picked up and the information that had leaked into her head over the years from the Far Realms, she still had no idea where to even try starting.

Sharilar started to pace as her tails lashed behind her, deep in thought. Trying to meddle with things of this power level was usually a bad idea, even if you knew what you were doing. On the other hand, she had a feeling that Morgan's order wouldn't be much help either, as they focused more on the Dark Deities than Old Ones. Frankly, she couldn't really think of anyone else she knew or knew of that had the breadth of experience she did with the Other - at least ones that were sane and not worshippers of it.

Suddenly, she halted, snapping her fingers. The Tabor Academy was known for its arcane library, reputed to be the third best in human lands, after the Freeport Arcanum and the Chantry of Vector in Rhenimere's capital city. The wizards that had run it were strong believers in neutrality and when the Human-Elven war had first broken out they'd sealed themselves off until it had ended, using teleportation spells to come and go as needed. Maybe they might have some information about something like this.

With her course of action decided upon, Sharilar quickly made her way back to the section of wall she'd entered at, paying little heed to stealth or wariness. With the presumed creator of the

Crack(as she'd started to think of it) gone, there was nothing else for her to fear in these slowly crumbling ruins.

Still, by the time the black-furred kitsune had reached the exit, the sun was near the horizon. Hesitant to start her journey at night, she instead made sure she set out food for her mount, then set up her tent with the ease of long familiarity. The sky was fairly clear, which promised no sudden surprises of weather, but it never hurt to be careful!

Oddly, by the time she was done with the setup, Sharilar still wasn't feeling hungry. Knowing better than to not eat at all anyways, she pulled a stick of jerky out of her pack and slowly ate on it as she began to undress for bed.

First came the blouse. After a quick check for any holes, she used her usual cleaning cantrip to clean any dirt or sweat off it and set it aside on the blanket next to her bedroll. After that she went to remove her pants, which involved threading her tails out of the hidden opening in the back. It was a slight modifications he had made to all her lower garments, so that in human shape they looked normal, but on taking her natural form her tails would push free without being caught in a pants leg or tearing the fabric. This time however, as she concentrated on moving them free, she finally noticed what her subconscious had been trying to tell her ever since her magical hangover.

Where two fluffy foxtails had been, three now met her hands, eyes, and mind!

But how- why- what- For a few moments, confusion reigned, the newly three-tailed kitsune unable to parse what she was seeing. Finally, putting the questions aside, she focused on moving each one individually. Quickly she found that yes, each one moved individually, and fully under her control. Since nothing had happened here in camp that could have caused such a thing, it must have happened earlier.

But when? And why hadn't she realized until now? After a few quick tests, all she could come up with was that she had grown so used to handling multiple tails as one that she hadn't consciously noticed the change until now, because she'd been moving them as a unit. On some level though she definitely had noticed earlier, because with her discovery, the nagging feeling that had been bothering her since she woke up had left.

Half-undressed still, the three-tailed vixen sat back down on the ground, hugging her knees up against her bare chest and curling her tails around her feet. Her second tail had been practically a cause for celebration, and the increased magical potential she had felt had been obvious. The cause had been obvious as well - there had been only one way to channel that much magical energy without-

Sharilar's head shot up as that thought set off a chain reaction in her mind, her tails momentarily forgotten as she worked through the consequences of the connection she had just made. What

- what if the horribly miscalculated runs and formulae that that cultist sorcerer had written around the room hadn't been due to incompetence, but to cunning? Had that sorcerer actually been a pawn for the being that she had just barely missed, and the Crack the end-goal all along? Why there, of all places? And just what had that being been trying to accomplish?

After a moment, the black-furred kitsune rested her muzzle back between her knees with a sigh. More questions, though no more answers until she could reach that library. On top of that, this third tail - just what did it mean for her and her own magic?

Mentally, she reached out, feeling around the edges of her links to the Other, but it didn't *feel* any different - or at least not any stronger than before. Still... she knew she wasn't just imagining things either. She ran her fingers through the fur of each tail, reassuring herself again that all three were real, and were actually hers.

"Well," she finally said, the sudden speech drawing a surprised whinny from her chestnut mare, "I can't help what I can't help." After reaching back in a momentary stretch, the shapely vulpine woman climbed back to her feet. The actual town of Tabor was at least several days ride, and maybe she could find someone there who could help her figure things out.

With her decision made, Sharilar resumed her preparations for bed. Before climbing into her bedroll however, she found herself contemplating her fortune deck, the cards feeling like feathers as she deftly shuffled them with one hand. The idea of consulting them strongly tempted her, but the more generic or further ahead in time the question was, the less reliable any answers were. Without more information, she'd probably just end up causing herself to worry even more.

Returning the deck to her belt pouch, she slid back into the bedroll, laying her head on her arm as a pillow. Best to get some sleep now, as the journey tomorrow awaits.

The first part of the night passed dreamlessly. As the nearly-full moon passed its zenith however, Sharilar snapped awake, sitting up quickly as she began to cough and wheeze. It felt like her throat was clogged with bile, and she could barely get any air as she tried to clear it. Suddenly, her stomach lurched, and she barely had time to stick her head out of the tent before her makeshift supper came rushing back out, ears folding back as her stomach rejected the night's meal.

Once the retching had stopped, she sat back down on the bedroll, taking a few deep breaths now that she could breathe again. The jerky hadn't smelled bad... was she getting sick? A quick check of wrist against forehead didn't feel any hotter than normal.

Grabbing her water bottle, Sharilar took a small drink and swished it around in her mouth to clear the foul taste from her tongue, then spat it out outside the tent. If she was sick, she was just going to have to deal with it until she reached Tabor. Given how large they had to be to support the magical academy, there was a high chance there was a church of Celestia there. If anyone could help her in that regard, who better than the priests of the goddess of healing?

After a few more minutes to make sure her stomach had settled, she tucked herself back into the bedroll. With the moon still high in the sky, the thought of more sleep seemed enticing, and there still was no pressing reason as to why she couldn't wait for sun-up to start the trip. Besides which, the sleep could help her stomach...

The teardown in the morning went smoothly for the gypsy vixen, though she skipped breakfast as she was still not feeling hungry. Once everything was packed, with a quick thought she resumed her human shape before taking the saddle. While she did not expect to run into any travellers until she rejoined the main trails, it never hurt to take precautions.

Morning stretched into afternoon as she trotted her horse along hard-packed dirt roads, stopping occasionally to water her horse and stretch her legs. As the sun dipped lower in the sky, the stops became less frequent, as hunger or bladder had yet to trouble her, and one of the main trading routes was near.

Not long after rejoining the main trail, Sharilar found herself coming up on a Dwarven merchant's caravan. While most dwarves are known for being notoriously tightfisted, the few who handled the aboveground trade routes always had a mug of ale and a spot at their campfire for anyone with a story to tell. It was one of the ways that their nominally isolationist confederation of underground cities could keep up with the developments in the world above. Well, isolationist in every fashion not involving gold. As the old saying goes, if there's anything you want to buy, ask a dwarf.

"Ho there!"

Well, the guards were on point, she thought as one of the rearward riders fell back, readying a crossbow. "What business brings ye down this road?"

Putting on her best 'festival voice,' the kitsune gypsy replied, "Greetings and well met, master guard! I am but a travelling fortune-teller, making my way from town to town, earning my fortunes telling others their own!"

The mounted dwarf gave a humph, stroking the braids in his long red beard with his free hand as he examined what he could see of the traveller. "Vishanti too, by the cut of yer clothes. Ye a solo act, lass?"

Sharilar gave a small shrug. "I go where the winds take me. I see that you happen to be going the same way I am. Would you mind a hanger-on for a few days? I'm sure your crew wouldn't find a few readings as payment..." As she spoke the final sentence, she tapped very lightly into her magical reserves, slipping a small bit of suggestion magic into the words. Nothing overt, just enough to tip the scales if he was already wavering.

"Ah, hrm." He seemed to stare intently at her, and for a moment the kitsune was afraid he'd noticed the slight mental nudge. She started to tense, ready to turn her horse aside and make a run for it, but the grumpy expression on the dwarf's face turned into what could charitably be called a smile. "Aye, there be some fools that have not yet learned t' keep their money close. Ye be welcome, as long as ye be willing t' help with the camp chores when needed."

Trying not to let out a sigh of relief, Sharilar gave the dwarven crossbowman a short nod. "Aye, that I can do easily. My thanks!"

He just gave a short harumph, before turning his small horse around to loudly call out, "All gold, new caravanner joining until-" he paused, blinking, then turned back to the shapeshifted gypsy. "Did ye happen t' have a destination in mind?"

Sharilar shrugged again, trying to answer as nonchalantly as possible. "Maybe Tabor?"

The trip to the crossroads that led to Tabor was fairly uneventful. True to her word, she did several readings on mundane questions for a few of the merchantfolk, but the majority of her 'service time' ended up being spent assisting with camp setup and break-down.

Thankfully dwarves tend to be private folk unless invited to do otherwise, so she was able to avoid revealing her issues with food and drink. Several times during the trip, Sharilar did try to sneak a bite, but each time she ended up throwing it back up later that night. Despite that, she never felt any actual hunger, even with the delicious smells of the stew the dwarven cooks could put together.

As she turned her horse down the cobblestone pathway, a small part of her wanted to turn back around and rejoin the dwarves. While they were not her kind, real or adopted, it had been a long time since she had travelled in caravan, and it had brought back fond memories.

Shaking off the nostalgia, she trotted her mare towards the gate, nodding in passing to the few travellers headed the other direction. The walls before her stood twice the height of a man, with a gate two wagons wide, either side under the watchful eye of what she presumed was an apprentice magus. Each one wore a silver helm, etched with a glowing eye, and despite the proclamations of neutrality, the eldritch kitsune felt a dash of nervousness. The helms were

undoubtedly enchanted with Truesight, so how would they react to one of her kind, travelling in human form?

The rightmost guard stepped forward as Sharilar approached, motioning for her to halt. "Hail and welcome, tailed one. What business brings you to Tabor this day?"

"Greetings to you as well. I seek access to to the Academy grounds, and healing at the temple to Celestia "

The guard strode up to the mounted gypsy woman, and she could almost hear the frown in his face. "Healing? I do not see any injury."

"It's... a personal issue," Sharilar said, averting her eyes unconsciously for a moment.

"Well, you may proceed, but please remember that unlicensed use of the arts outside the Academy are strictly prohibited. As for access to the Academy itself, that is up to the headmaster, though I doubt there will be much of an issue. It has been many a season since a multi-tail has honored us with her presence." He leaned in a moment, adding in a softer voice, "Especially one so fair."

Sharilar found a slight blush growing on her cheeks as the guard stepped back. "You may pass," he said, a teasing tone in his voice as he waved her on. Trying not to smile too obviously, Sharilar made a mental note to see if she could find out the guard's name, and maybe find him again when she had a bit more time on her hands.

The first building past the gate was the designated stable for visitors to the city. Sliding off the chestnut mare's back, Sharilar landed lightly on her feet and busied herself with moving her pack from the horse's back to her own.

Within moments, a pimply-faced young human male had shown up to help, keeping her horse steady as she unstrapped the packs and lowered them to the ground. Once the unloading was complete, the stablehand supplied her with a wooden chit to mark which stall her mount would be in. Sharilar watched for a few moments more as he took the horse deeper into the large wooden building, then turned to start making her way down the cobblestone street.

The following couple blocks seemed residential in nature. The buildings themselves were almost universally two stories tall, with walls of weathered stone, and stairs on the side to the upper floor on most of them.. Off to the right, a couple squealing children chased each other around a rather portly-looking woman, while another man checked the locks on his door as the shapeshifted gypsy strode by.

Even with the well-maintained look these houses had however, Sharilar could sense more than see eyes watching her from the alleyway. Turning her head just slightly, she managed to catch

sight of a man in ragged clothes before he slipped back into the shadows. It seemed to be a constant in her travels - the more affluent a town, the more likely it was to develop a darker, less-well-off side among the shadows. Sometimes it was warranted, but occasionally there were those who just could not fit in society and chose to make their lives around its crumbling edges.

Past the houses, the entry road intersected with another large thoroughfare. Here, the cobblestones gave way to actual bricks, smoothing out the path ahead. The cross-road itself was as wide as some of the buildings she had passed, but the difference was made up by the small wagons parked here and there along the sides, their owners hawking their wares from the improvised stalls. While the people walking down the brick-lined road were mostly human, the sharp-eyed human-looking vixen could spot several dwarves, a small party of kobolds, and even one or two elves, their tall pointed ears distinct in the crown. Most surprising of all though was a Tar'ri, the feminine-looking feline 'taur pausing at a stall here or there as shi made hir way through the scattered crowd.

Thankfully, there was a signpost on the corner, pointing the way to the various landmarks in the city. A quick read on the Temple district pointed her eastward, while the arcane academy seemed to be located towards the center of town. After making her way around a parked wagon hawking some sort of bird on a stick, Sharilar started down the right hand path towards the eastern part of the city. If the tear could wait this long, it could wait a few more hours for her to pay a visit to Celestia's clerics and priests.

It was not long before Sharilar found herself exiting into a large marble plaza, with statues of the major gods surrounding a fountain in the center, the water glinting with sunlight. Despite the statues, she only counted four temples.

Closest to her on her left was a temple dedicated to Vector, lord of time, travel, and the arcane, marked with his crossed-hourglass symbol. Considered neutral in the conflict between the courts of Dark and Light, his temples tended to be concentrated in cities known for their magical arts.

Directly to her right, as if to counterbalance him, was the temple to Solus, mistress of knowledge, artifice, and craftsmanship. The arch above the doorway was emblazoned with the hammer-and-anvil of the forge goddess, but foot traffic seemed to be light. Undoubtedly, most of her worshippers would be busy with their craft at this time of day.

Across the plaza from Solus's temple was the building dedicated to Xaaron, the deity of light who rules over home and hearth. Most cities of any size usually had at least a small building for the god of communities, though Sharilar had not expected to see one as old as the worn marble corners seemed to indicate.

Finally, across from Vector's temple was her destination. Dedicated to the goddess of the sun, the golden alicorn-in-sunburst emblazoned in the bricks before the white marble building seemed to radiate welcome. Like Prima, Celestia's temples were a fairly common sight, as she held domain over not just the day, but over the weather, and health as well. This made her a natural goddess to pray to for farmers and even nobles appreciated her dedication to healing the ills of the world. Sharilar's old caravan itself had placed a small shrine in the lead wagon, alongside the one for her sister goddess Luna, who rules over the night sky and the dreams beneath it.

Crossing the plaza, Sharilar climbed the short set of stairs before the temple, nodding a greeting to the pair of priests who stood waiting near the open entrance. "Well met, sunpriests."

The man on the left, the taller of the two, returned the nod. "And peace be unto you. What brings you to our humble place of worship?"

Sharilar couldn't help but give a slight mental snicker at the mention of humility, though she kept any sign of it from reaching her expression. While it may be true enough of the majority of Celestia's clergy, her temples tended towards the austentatious. "I've come to present myself for healing, as I have a... ah... personal issue I need checked."

The priest nodded once. "Then we shall do our best to help. Brother Anton here will take you to a waiting room, then we shall send for one of our Sisters to assist you."

"This way, please." The priest on the right was much shorter, with a shock of bright yellow hair poking out from under the hood of his robe. Nodding her thanks, Sharilar followed him back through several short corridors, into a small room with Celestia's sun etched into the floor. On one side of the room was a bench that was long enough to lay down on if needed, and opposite it was a wooden chair.

"One of our Sisters will be with you shortly," the presumably younger priest said as he left, closing the door behind him. Sitting on the bench, Sharilar crossed her legs, clearing her mind as she prepared to wait.

Thankfully, it was only a few minutes before a young woman in robes entered, folding her hood back as the door closed behind her to show long brown hair and soft grey eyes. "Well met. I am called Sister Silvia. What may the church of Celestia do for you today, miss...?"

"Sharilar," the shapeshifted kitsune responded. "And before we continue, if I may make myself more comfortable?"

"Of course," the Sister replied, inclining her head. "That is one of the reasons we Sisters attend to the needs of females who seek our aid."

Sharilar shook her head slightly. "Not in that fashion. You'll see in a moment." Closing her eyes, the human-seeming gypsy woman returned to her natural vixen form. As she changed, her fox-like ears picked up the momentary gasp of surprise from her attendant, though it was so soft that she could still only barely heard it.

Opening her eyes again, Sharilar discovered that the young priestess had already re-composed herself, sitting calmly in the wooden chair. "If you are not familiar with my kind, we are called kitsune. This is our true form, though we also have a human shape that comes naturally to us as well."

To her credit, Sister Silvia did not try to deflect the unspoken question. "I have heard of your kind, but I have to admit, you are the first one I've met!" Claspng her hands, the priest gave a short bow. "I apologize for my inadequacy, and if you wish, I shall seek another with more experience with your kind."

Sharilar waved her back down. "I don't know that it matters. The issue I've been having is that I haven't been able to keep any food down for over a week. If I try eating anything, I puke it back up before the day is out."

Silvia nodded, resuming her seat. "Have you laid with a male in the past month?"

Sharilar shook her head slightly, averting her eyes. "Children is one thing I no longer need to worry about."

It took a moment for the priest to grasp the meaning, but this time the gasp was louder as she made the connection. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she whispered, hands clasped. "If you wish, we can try to restore your ability to bear."

Sharilar shook her head. "The damage was done too long ago, and even back then I don't think anything could have been done." Taking a deep breath, the purple-eyed vixen turned her gaze back to the young priest. "But to get back to why I'm here..."

"Oh, of course," the Sister responded, her cheeks tinting pink. "Has there been any other effects? Any hunger or tiredness?"

Again, Sharilar shook her head. "I haven't felt any more tiredness than normal, and I haven't felt hungry at all, actually."

Silvia nodded once, a thoughtful look on her face. "May I cast a few detection spells?"

The three-tailed kitsune just shrugged and waved a hand towards her. "Feel free to divine as much as you need to."

Crossing her legs, Sharilar rested her hands on her knee as the brown-haired priestess chanted several soft prayers of supplication, sketching out several shapes in the air. After each one, Silvia took another long look at the shapely vixen, the Sister's expression seeming to grow more puzzled each time.

After the seventh one, the priestess gave a small shake of her head herself. "I am not seeing anything wrong, miss Sharilar. There are no curses I can detect, nor any poisons or diseases. I also did not detect the aura of any items enchanted with sustaining magic. Did anything else happen around the time this started?"

In response, Sharilar curled her tails around onto her lap. "I gained my third tail around the same time. None of the stories I've heard ever said anything about this sort of thing happening, though."

Silvia gave a slow nod, her expression changing from confused to thoughtful. "As I recall, your tails are linked to your magic, if that is correct?" She paused long enough for Sharilar to give a short nod, then continued. "There are enchanted items that remove the need for food and sleep, though they are difficult to craft. While these items don't cause the rejection of food typically, and I saw no sign of one on you, they work by tapping into the magic of the world around us to feed and refresh the wearer. Perhaps you are unconsciously feeding yourself with your magic?"

Sharilar opened her mouth, about to reject the idea, but something gave her pause. Briefly, she recalled her own curiosity earlier, that despite the new tail she couldn't sense any change like last time. "That... may be it," she finally finished. "Is there any way for you to see if that's what's happening?"

"I'm afraid not," the young priestess replied, rising to her feet. "The mage's academy here may be of more help, if you petition them for an audience. As best as we can tell, you are in perfect health."

Sharilar rose as well, offering her hand and her form wavered and shifted back to human once more. "Then my thanks for what you were able to tell me. It at least gives me a place to start."

Silvia took the proffered hand, clasping it in both of hers. "I only wish we could do more. May the sun light your way."

As Sharilar left the god-hallowed halls, she found herself feeling a bit despondent. If her tails had been visible at the moment, they would definitely have been dragging as she made her way down towards the fountain in the middle of the plaza. She'd been hoping to find an answer at the temple, but it had just left her with more questions.

What was supposed to have been a quick peek-and-run had turned into an investigation that had her chasing her own tails, literally, if the Sunsister's suggestion was correct. It was looking like all the answers she sought awaited in the mage's school, but she wasn't sure if she even wanted to know now.

Thinking of that reminded her of the gravity of her main mission here. A part of her wanted to just send a missive to Morgan about the rift and let the paladin deal with the consequences. Tirek damn it, she was no hero, no shining champion fighting for everyone's smiles. She was just a fox that likes to have some fun now and then, and maybe make some gold on the side. So what if she had three tails now? What did that even mean to her? And reality tearing itself open, caused by a being whose power she wasn't even close to matching - it was all too much for one little kitsune.

Suddenly, a familiar tune broke into her consciousness, bringing the shapeshifted kitsune out of her growing fugue. A Vishanti tune, one she hadn't heard in years - but where was it coming from?

It didn't take long to spot the small knot of people gathered around the northern side of the water fountain. Still unable to see, the curious gypsy squeezed past several folk as she worked her way through the wall of bodies to see what was going on.

Under the statue of Logos, patron god of bards and footloose womanizers the world over, stood a sprightly young man, with dark eyes and light blonde hair. Much like Sharilar, he also wore the comfortable clothes of a gypsy wanderer, sporting a sheer white tunic and dark brown breeches, almost black. His foot tapped out a beat as he strummed his sitar and belted out lyrics she had last heard 'round the campfire, when she was but a young girl.

In the empty space before him, and just as likely to be the cause of the audience, was a Vishanti woman, in blouse, corset, and dress. Red hair spread out with each spin, soft blue eyes glinting with laughter as she danced to the beat of the song. For a long moment, Sharilar considered joining them; all the stress she had felt sloughing away as fond memories of times long gone came to the fore - times of freedom, music, and pleasure.

Alongside those pleasant memories however, another image came to mind, unbidden. In it, the woman before her was tied spread-eagled in the middle of a runed circle, clothes torn and skin cut, as a group of hooded cultists surrounded her, chanting supplications to the things Beyond. An all-too-familiar whispering voice murmured in the back of her mind, "She is just like you, and will suffer just as greatly."

Shaking her head to clear it, Sharilar gave the eldritch spirit a mental middle finger and somewhat reluctantly turned to go. Much as she wanted to join the couple and forget everything for a time, the one thing she was not willing to let happen was allowing more folk to be twisted in

service to uncaring “gods” that were anything but benevolent, even towards their so-called worshippers.

A second, smaller stone wall surrounded the grounds of the Tabor Academy, visually separating it from the city surrounding it. It wouldn't take much thought either on the nature of such an academy to guess that there was more than just the physical wall between the two as well.

The gate before Sharilar appeared to be a normal stone arch, with various vines winding their way around it, and two wooden doors that didn't appear as if they'd hold up to a stiff breeze. To the side of the arch was a small stone shelf, containing a bronze sculpture of a hand grasping a clear crystal sphere, much like the one some Vishanti used when they were being more showy. Unlike those mundane baubles, undoubtedly this one was enchanted. A sign above it read “To request entry, place hand on sphere,” which confirmed her suspicions.

Warily, the shapeshifted kitsune placed her hand on the sphere, and felt a slight tingling on her fingers. A few seconds later, she heard another voice in her mind, the timber soft, but also no-nonsense, and nothing like the ever-present dark whispers she mostly ignored.

~Well met. How may the Academy help you today?~

“I'd like to visit your library, for research purposes,” Sharilar spoke aloud, before wondering if she actually needed to speak the words for them to hear.

~It is sufficient to think your responses,~ the voice replied. ~We exclusively use pure thought communication at this stage as it is nearly impossible to lie with your mind. Any attempt will invariably have a shred of the actual truth associated with it, unless the thinker has been deluded into believing the lie. We have separate safeguards for the latter, but I do not think they will be needed in your case.~

~Thanks, I think?~ Sharilar replied, unsure on whether she should be amused at the response or not.

~Now as to your request for access, what is the nature of your research? Advanced materials are restricted to students only, barring special circumstances, and we do not wish for a visitor to be granted entry only to be denied access to what they actually seek. Such mistakes only lead to frustration for both parties.~

~Well,~ Sharilar began, as she quickly thought on how to word her reply, ~I- ~

~Oh! Oh my,~ the other voice cut her off before she could even begin thinking her reply to the receptionist. ~That is quite a conundrum, and beyond my ability to delegate. The doors shall be

opening momentarily. While I get this sorted out, please proceed down the path, then enter the third building on your right, The receptionist there will take you to a waiting room, and someone will be with you shortly.~

~But I haven't even told you what it was yet,~ Sharilar thought back, confused.

~But you did,~ the thought replied, fainter than before. ~When you recalled it all, you also showed it to me as well. But all shall be explained. Please enter, and I hope you do find the answers you seek.~

As the foreign thought faded from her mind, the doors slowly swung open, revealing what looked like a well-kept garden pathway. Gingerly removing her hand from the orb, Sharilar shook it a couple times to get the tingling to fade, then started to walk down the path.

It quickly gave way to a solid marble walkway, similar to what she had seen in the temple district. Here however, there were no seams, the rock seemingly created as a single piece. The stone walls of the buildings on either side were quite similar as well, though rather than pure white they had somehow been imbued with some amount of color, shading them with dark reds, browns, and blacks.

As she counted the buildings, a few other folk, presumably students passed her by, and Sharilar found herself surprised to see an elf chatting amicably with a human, while a kobold ran to catch up, his(or her?) legs pumping. Further ahead, another Tar'ri with tiger-striped fur crossed the path, carrying another male human student on his taur-back, who seemed to be whispering something in his ear as he looked Sharilar's way. The Tar'ri stopped for a moment, looking towards the polymorphed kitsune as well, then shrugged, the words she spoke back to the rider inaudible at this distance.

The two continued on a moment later, but the point was not lost on Sharilar. With a moment's concentration, her form shimmered and returned to its natural fox-like shape. The others passing by barely even seemed to take notice as they walked past, talking about "altering the harmonics of the beta ley line" and a few other terms she was not familiar with. While she obviously wouldn't have gained entry if she hadn't been allowed it, she didn't feel it a good idea to even pretend to try and fool the mages here as to her true nature. And didn't that thought have interesting repercussions all on its own?

By the time that thought crossed her mind though, she was already in front of what should be the third building. It appeared to be maybe three stories tall, with a short stairway leading up to doors that looked like they were made of glass, and even stranger, seemed to be missing handles. A sign was hung above the doorway, but the letters were unfamiliar to her, made of combinations of straight lines, almost like what one would make with claws. Draconic?

Mentally shrugging, Sharilar strode up the stairs and reached out to try and open the door- only for the two doors to slide to either side, leaving her pawing at open air for a brief moment. Feeling a slight blush in her cheeks and thankful that her dark-colored fur was usually good at hiding that sort of thing, she continued into the building.

Once she stepped through the opening, she involuntarily halted again in surprise as the temperature dipped from the fairly warm air of late summer outside, to a slightly cool temperature that resembled the most pleasant days of spring. Voices that she had not heard outside were clearly audible now as well, as a pair of dwarves loudly argued over something involving wagons. After listening for a few moments, her ears cocked curiously, Sharilar finally figured out it was something about springs versus air for cushioning wagons. But how would one cushion a wagon's rocking with air, anyways?

"May I help you?" A soprano voice asked from her right, and Sharilar turned to see a dark-haired woman in flowing green robes behind a tall wooden desk, golden eyes aimed straight at the three-tailed kitsune. "You look lost."

"Ah, um, I was told to come here," Sharilar replied, feeling her ears and cheeks heat further with embarrassment as she walked over to the desk. She felt out of her environment among all this arcane magic, and it was majorly throwing her off her game. The magic she knew came instinctively, and could be just as powerful, but none of it was this... refined, for lack of a better word. She knew how to do all this, but the one time she'd tried to describe it to someone else (specifically to her elven ex-lover, on a drunken bet), it had been like trying to describe colors to a blind man. Here, just the snatches of dialogue she heard made her feel like the blind one.

"You must be Director Bereke's two o'clock, then. One moment please." The woman's eyes seemed to go unfocused for a few minutes, leaving Sharilar even more confused and uncertain as to what she was supposed to do next.

With no further guidance, Sharilar found herself pulling out her fortune deck, starting to shuffle it to calm her nerves as she waited for the golden-eyed mage to come out of whatever trance she had put herself into. And what had she meant by being a two o'clock? That was a time of day, not a person.

Almost as if summoned by her thoughts, two distant bongs rang out, marking the time. A moment later the woman behind the counter seemed to refocus on the here and now, turning her golden-eyed gaze back towards the black-furred kitsune. "Please take the hallway on the left,, then turn right at the first intersection. The second room on the left should be empty, and you may wait there. The Director's previous appointment ran long, but he should be with you shortly."

“Appointment? But I requested use of the library,” Sharilar asked, starting to feel a bit put-out by the constant shuffling around. “Are you sure you don’t have me confused with someone else?”

The dark-haired receptionist lifted the book before her, turning it around to show the somewhat frustrated vixen where her name was written in glittering runes, with a small picture of her placed underneath. “Quite sure, We don’t have many kitsune visitors these days, let alone any who have earned multiple tails.” Returning the book to her desk, she turned her attention to something else on her desk, not looking up as she added, “The Director should be able to answer any further questions you may have.”

Sharilar opened her mouth to reply, then thought better of it, and turned to go. As much as she wanted to push for more on why they weren’t granting her access, despite letting her onto the campus, she was in the middle of the greatest concentration of unaligned mages in the western lands. If she caused any trouble, not only could she lose access to the information she came for, but for all she knew she could be turned to stone or teleported into the middle of Longleaf’s forests, to be forever lost in the illusionary pathways that guards the surviving elven cities.

The halls were fairly empty as the black-furred kitsune made her way to the room that the green-robed woman at the front had described. It seemed curious at first, but the occasional voices from behind the closed doors that she passed told her it was simply because they were all otherwise occupied at the moment. The same sense of self-preservation that kept her from trying to get more information also kept her from peeking into the various rooms that she walked by, and in moments she had reached her destination.

Unlike the front entrance, this door let her actually open it, like an ordinary door in an ordinary building. Closing it behind her, she found herself in a small wooden room, with the floor seemingly covered entirely by a rug that looked as soft as grass. In the middle was a long rectangular table, with chairs scattered along the length of it. Beyond the table was a long window, which did not show much other than some plants and a path paved with bricks.

Taking one of the chairs, Sharilar regarded the deck of cards she still held in her right hand. Whenever she had felt uncertain on her future, the guidance it had provided had been a comfort, though the times she had needed such a reading had been few and far between. Perhaps this was one of those times...

Before she could start placing cards though, the door opened again, admitting a man with short, black hair, and brown eyes that gave the feeling of an eagle watching its prey. Rather than the robes of some of the mages, he wore a doublet over a loose white tunic, matching the dark grey pants tied with a leather belt, the few pouches hanging off it undoubtedly full of spell components.

Stepping forward, he offered his hand to Sharilar, who took it and shook it warily. “Aurelius Bereke, Director of Planar Physics.” His voice was deeper than she had expected, with a

scratchiness about it that sounded as if he had spent his life shouting. Taking a chair at the end of the table, he continued, "I apologize for the delay. One of my assistants had some urgent business that needed my attention. Now, miss Sharilar, I have been informed you also have some urgent business that brought you here today?"

"You... could say that," she replied as she slipped her deck away, taking a moment to compose her thoughts. "I was on my way to Freeport when I received a message from an acquaintance of mine..."

Briefly, she ran over her discovery, Aurelius nodding as she made each point about what she had found. As she finished her tale, leaving off the details of what had almost happened from her near-breakdown, the mage had already begun to stroke his chin in thought. As mundane as the gesture was, Sharilar found a slight bit of amusement at the fact that despite the movements being a very "classic" wizard quirk, without the beard it did not quite give the same air of wisdom.

"I see," he finally spoke after a minute of silence. "A planar breach can be quite dangerous, if left unchecked. You did well in bringing this to our attention."

"So, you do know how to close it then?" Sharilar asked, leaning forward slightly in excitement. Maybe all this had been worthwhile then!

"Close it?" The incredulity and excitement in the wizard's voice sent a chill down the kitsune's spine, her tails involuntarily curling under the chair she sat on. "This a great opportunity for learning! Imagine what we can discover by examining this dimensional breach in closer detail! Why, the theories we'll be able to prove or disprove can set us centuries ahead in our understanding of the multiversal framework we live in! The papers this will produce will make for fascinating reading."

"Of course, we will monitor it carefully," Aurelius amended a moment later, finally noticing the shocked expression on the purple-eyed vixen's face. "If it does truly pose a threat to the continued existence of our reality, we will prepare countermeasures, of course. Just because this provides the opportunity for great knowledge does not mean we will underestimate the risks."

Forcing her ears to perk back up and the rest of her expression back to normal, Sharilar gave a small nod, though the lump in the pit of her stomach remained. "I.. see. I.. guess that works, thought it's not quite what I expected." *But I can't stop you either*, she mentally finished.

"My dear, some of our greatest discoveries are not preceded by a cheer, but a 'That's odd,'" he replied, clasping his hands in front of him. "And from your description, this anomaly is very odd. With that decided though, there is another piece of business I would like to discuss."

“And that is?” Sharilar asked, tilting her head slightly in an invitation for him to continue, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feelings still swirling within her.

“We would like you to enroll in our Academy. Your, ah, ‘extra appendages’ indicate your already extant great magical abilities, and one of the stated purposes of our school here is to allow all magic-users to explore their potential to their utmost.”

“Ah...” Sharilar replied, dumbfounded. She had come here to see about fixing a major magical problem, and not only was that taken out of her hands by overly curious wizards, now that same group wanted to help her ‘reach her potential’? Imagine if they knew the actual source of her power!

Thankfully, Aurelius seemed to be content to wait politely as she worked through the implications of his offer. While a large part of her wanted to just throw the offer in his face and march out, there was still the question of why she couldn’t eat anymore, and what it had to do with her gaining her third tail. For that matter, was it the last one, or was this all going to happen again? Did she really have the strength of soul for five, seven, or even nine tails?

Ultimately, it came down to if she could trust these people. Earlier today, she would have said yes without hesitation, but now? While this Aurelius seemed earnest in his offer from what she could see, the way he had reacted to the news of the Crack left her feeling cold. No, she’d have to decline, but maybe she could leave the door open for later, in case things changed.

Perking up, Sharilar gave her head a small shake. “While I would be honored, I don’t know if I am really ready for such a commitment yet. This, all of this,” she said, waving her hand about at nothing in particular, “is all beyond me right now. Unlike all of you, I’m fully self-taught, just with a natural talent for magic, and I feel I’m just not prepared for something like this yet.”

For a moment, Aurelius seemed genuinely disappointed, but the mask of the professional quickly slipped back into place. “I understand. If you wish, we can grant you an associate membership, and then when you feel ready, we can start you on a proper training regimen.” Sharilar tilted her head, looking off to the side as she considered this. While she didn’t really want any ties to this place, this would at least let her continue her own research on herself, and maybe provide a way to keep an eye on them as well, to see if they really would keep their word on the Crack. Slowly, she nodded once. “I think I can live with that, as long as I can continue to come and go as I please. We gypsies aren’t really much for settling down.”

“That... would be acceptable,” Aurelius said as he stood, walking over to offer a hand to help Sharilar up. “Just please, keep in mind that these kinds of offers are not something we give lightly. I won’t be able to keep the spot open forever.”

Taking the hand, Sharilar rose to her feet as well, taking a closer look into the mage’s eyes as she tried to judge his sincerity. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she said finally, turning to go.

Giving her a small smile, the mage-professor inclined his head towards her. "Then I shall look forward to seeing you again."

Pausing in the doorway, the eldritch kitsune looked back over her shoulder to give the man a foxy smile, letting a tiny bit of power loose, just enough for her purple eyes to start glowing. "I'm sure you will."