

Pressures of Leadership

By Angelus

The embers of a dying campfire winked out as the orange glow of the dawn streamed across grassy hillsides and rocky outcrops. The warrior tasked with the last watch prodded at the charcoal, making it collapse and breathe a last shower of sparks into the breeze. She sighed and took a deep breath to rouse herself to her feet. The leather straps of the lizard warrior's armor creaked as she pushed herself up from her sitting position, and the metal plates rattled as she stretched her body from talons to claw tips. A yawn into the rising sun showed off sharp teeth and a long forked tongue that snaked out of her mouth to taste the fresh morning air. It was time to wake her comrades.

She decided to start with the foxy thief who was the closest thing they had to a leader. She approached the tent with heavy footsteps that made her armor clatter and jangle, and knocked on the wooden beam across the top, making it clatter against the supports. "Time to get moving Vesper. You always take the longest, so get up and get to it. If you're still in bed by the time I wake the other two, I'm bringing the tent down on you." She gave another knock on the top, receiving a groan from the tent's sole occupant.

Moving on, she went to make sure their mephitic alchemist was already awake. She raised a hand to knock on the top of the tent, but was halted just inches before hitting the top by a call from inside. "Good morning Ayla." The skunk poked his head out from the tent and looked up at the taller, pale-scaled lizard, assessing her from bottom to top before giving a quick smile. "Looks like it was a quiet night." He disappeared back into the tent, accompanied by a rattling of glass. "I'll have your usual ready shortly. I trust you already woke Vesper?"

Ayla stepped back from the tent to give the skunk some space. "Morning to you too Riley. Yeah, I started with her. The wizard is next, then I'm gonna double check on Vesper," she said, flicking out her tongue and getting a taste of what Riley was working on in his tent. "Ah. Smells good."

"You always say that." Riley replied from within as liquid was sloshed around.

"I always mean it!" Ayla gave the tent a rattle, just enough to make the supports shake and get a yelp out of Riley.

"Gyah! Ugh. Yes yes, and I appreciate hearing it. Save your menacing strength for Vesper and go check on the client," Riley huffed.

"On it." Ayla approached the last dwelling, but instead of a tent, it was a glowing dome just a bit larger than the tents were. She frowned and scratched at the cream-colored scales on her arm, peeling a piece of dried skin off that flaked to the ground. "Hey uh. You there, wizard guy?" She spoke up, uncertain if he could hear anything through the dome. "I feel like I shouldn't knock on this..." she muttered quietly to herself.

She was almost startled as the dome vanished in an instant, revealing a short figure wrapped in many layers of drab robes, and wearing a hat with such a wide brim that almost none of his features were discernible.

"Ah, good morning!" he croaked with a surprising amount of enthusiasm. "I take it that since you're standing here, it means we all survived the night. Excellent!" He tapped his foot on the floor, and the standard single bed he had been sleeping on vanished in a gust of wind.

"This isn't exactly a dangerous place," Ayla said flatly. "The worst monsters that come out this way could be easily dispatched by a lone merchant with a dull blade."

"Oh yes oh yes, that's why I picked this location of course, ah but you can never be too careful! It's why I came along, insurance you know."

"So you've said a few times. Don't worry, we have no plans to run off with... whatever it was you wanted," she said dismissively as she meandered over to Vesper's tent again.

"It's my artifact!" the wizard insisted, shouting after Ayla. "I put it there for safekeeping, and I ah, well, I don't remember how to get to it. That's why I hired YOU all to help me get it back," he said indignantly, crossing his arms over his chest, the robes all flowing together into a mass that made it difficult to tell where his arms even were.

Riley slipped out of his tent, his large, twin-striped tail taking several seconds to fully exit after his body did. He was dressed in a gray button-up shirt that was undone at the top and lightly stained, though the gray color helped conceal that. Black pants met black low-cut boots with metal plates over the toes. His hands were wrapped in heat-resistant gloves, and tinted goggles adorned his head, sitting just below his ears.

He had a tray of hot drinks in one hand that he walked over to a tree stump where he sat down for a moment to drink. "Coffee is ready. And sir, did you really not take notes on how to retrieve your artifact?" the skunk asked as he picked up one of the mugs and took a sip. Half coffee and half cream was the choice for the alchemist.

"Notes can be stolen! Even a ciphered one can be cracked, I couldn't risk that! The only safe place to keep it was my head, and I was right! Not even I could steal the notes back from my wrinkled old brain, hah!"

Riley's tail drooped at the wizard's backward logic, and he stifled a frown. He said nothing and took a sip of coffee.

Ayla approached Vesper's tent and raised a scaled fist over her head. "Are you up?"

"I'm up!" Vesper huffed. There was a frantic shuffling from inside the tent.

"Show yourself in three, two..." She pulled her hand back, ready to smash Vesper's tent in a single blow.

"I'm UP!" A lithe vixen burst from the tent flaps, disheveled but dressed and awake. She turned on her heel to glare at Ayla, who simply shrugged and lowered her fist.

"Good. You're getting better."

"Bah." Vesper snorted and then looked herself over, straightening her outfit. Her shirt and pants were both the same dark shade of blue with no patterns or adornments to speak of, and they came together seamlessly at the waist, making them appear as though they were a single garment. She fastened the remaining buttons and tucked them under small flaps of fabric to hide them from view. The entire thing was form-fitting, preventing it from making any sound, not even the sound of fabric rubbing against fur.

"I could probably slip past anything in this old wizard lab without the sneak suit, but better safe than sorry!" Vesper bragged.

"You couldn't get your other clothes on fast enough, could you?" Ayla ribbed her and smirked as she looked down at the smaller vixen.

Vesper puffed out her cheeks and stomped her foot, orange tail puffing out. "That only has a little bit to do with it!" she admitted indignantly. "Anyway..." she turned to the wizard, and

her expression turned into a bright morning smile without missing a beat. "Good morning sir! Sleep well?"

"Quite so! My shelter domain is *quite* cozy, though it can only support one." He nodded, making the brim of his hat bounce.

"Which is fine, we all have our own stuff for camping out. Speaking of, Ayla, can you pack up?" Vesper asked.

"Suuuure, on it." The large lizard went about taking down her and Vesper's tent, leaving Riley to tend to his own.

Riley wordlessly slid beside the wizard and held out a mug of coffee filled with a brew that was especially thick. The wizard grabbed it without a second thought and loudly slurped up some of the caffeinated sludge. "Oh my, this is perfect! And on the second try! My striped fellow, are you perhaps interested in a magical apprenticeship? You have quite the talent, and I've got an eye for talent!" the wizard offered as he took another loud slurp.

"No thank you, but I appreciate the offer," Riley politely declined and made his way over to Vesper.

She snatched a mug of straight black coffee from him and took a sip from it, wrinkling her nose at the bitterness. "Urk. That's disgusting, Riley. It's perfect." She took another drink and shook her whole body at the shock of the flavor.

"I raised the bitterness just for you." Riley gave a polite nod and handed off the last and largest mug to Ayla, who downed the sweet cream and sugar laden coffee in a single gulp before resuming packing.

"Ahh... Perfect as always! Thanks small stuff." She handed the mug back to him.

"My pleasure, large lady."

"So!" Vesper turned back to the wizard and spoke to him between sips of bitter coffee that made her face scrunch up. "Where are we headed this morning? You said this was pretty close to the location," she asked as she looked around the rocky slopes and grassy flats, squinting against the dawn light.

"This IS it!" he said excitedly. "We camped out right in front of the entrance. Let me show you!" He hurried toward a slope of granite, seeming to glide across the ground as he moved.

"Huh? Hey, wait, we gotta pack! Crap." She ran after him and was relieved that he stopped after only going a few yards. "Sheesh, I know it wasn't far, but don't run off like that. You're paying that big muscle lizard for protection, so you should think about sticking close," she said, throwing her thumb back to point at Ayla, who was throwing a pair of tent wraps over her shoulder.

"Oh yes, right, the people I hired. Well I won't move from here until they catch up, but let me get the door showing at least!" A gust of wind billowed out from him, bending blades of grass away from him and making Vesper's tail whip. She raised an arm to shield her eyes and watched him as his robes billowed dramatically. He raised his arms overhead, then thrust them down, shouting something into the wind that was drowned out by the howl of it.

The face of the rock peeled away, eroding under the pressure of the wind. A massive stone door was revealed underneath, sealed shut against intruders and the elements. Vesper was shocked by the rock-shredding wind pressure at first, but quickly realized the wind was more for show; the rock face had just been an illusion. There was no biting sediment in the winds, meaning no rock was actually being eroded.

The wind abated once the door was fully revealed, and the wizard stood before them, triumphant. "Hah! I DID remember!"

"Are you saying we might've come all the way out here for nothing?" Ayla had caught up and was carrying camping supplies over one shoulder. Her opposite hand gripped the hilt of the cloth-wrapped greatsword that hung at her side. "I might've just cleaved you in half for pulling something like that. I hate being led to the middle of nowhere by wizards."

"She had a bad experience with a wizard once," Vesper clarified. "She's joking. Probably."

Ayla snorted and adjusted the grip on her sword and set their packed gear down by the stone door. "Yeah. Joking."

Vesper neatly stepped between her armored friend and their mutual client. "Alright, well we can proceed once Riley--"

"Present." Riley declared himself as he stepped in to join the group. His outfit now included a wooden case that was attached to his stomach with leather straps that went around his waist and over his shoulders. "I'm ready to go, camp is packed, and we've had coffee. Shall we begin?"

"Begin we shall!" The wizard wheezed with excitement. "And the first order of business... The door!" he gestured at it with both arms. "It's locked."

"That's on you Ves." Ayla took a seat on a large chunk of granite, armor clattering as she did so.

"I got it I got it." She approached the door and gave it a quick look over. "A traditional lock? You didn't opt for a magical one?"

"Other mages would be prepared to pick a magical lock! And those who could pick a traditional one would be unlikely to get past my other defenses!" The wizard explained.

Vesper retrieved her lockpicking kit from a concealed pocket on her outfit. "Why not use both?"

"Well you see, that's because uh..." he paused. "I don't remember!"

Vesper shrugged. "Fair enough. Now let's see..." The padlock holding the stone doors shut was slightly oversized and made of steel that had stayed in good condition despite the elements. Vesper grabbed it in one hand and lifted it, giving it a shake and listening to the rattling. "Pfftt, easy."

"Be careful all the same." Riley had taken a seat beside Ayla and his tail was fluffed up in his lap like a blanket.

"I'm always careful~" Vesper dismissed the warning as she pulled the largest lockpick and tension wrench that she had from her kit.

Ayla snorted and rolled her eyes at Vesper's comment.

The wizard piped in. "About how long do you think this will take?"

"Huh? How long?" Vesper jammed her tools into the lock without looking and wrenched them. The lock clicked, rattled, pinged, and then fell open with a final pop as Vesper gave it a whack on the side with her knee. "About that long." She beamed and imagined that the wizard was wide-eyed in amazement under his hat.

"My goodness! Such speed, such effortlessness!" He was indeed impressed, and wheezed his praise.

"Well I *am* a professional, but it's nice to be appreciated for my skills~" She drank in the praise while she lifted the heavy padlock off the door and set it aside. "Alright, let's keep up the momentum! Ayla, door!"

"Mmhmm, stand aside." The lizard got to her feet and approached the stone doors. She grasped the huge handles in each hand and pulled, grunting and digging her talons into the earth to get proper leverage. The doors groaned as stone ground against stone. Her muscles bulged under her armor, making the leather straps creak, and she let out a hiss of strain that made her tongue flick out.

Air began to rush in through the doors as they were cracked open, threatening to pull them closed again. Ayla steeled herself and bent her knees while digging her heels and talons into the earth. The wider she opened them, the stronger the suction grew. Vesper and Riley's tails whipped in the wind, and they both flattened themselves to the ground as the pull increased.

"Hey!" Ayla barked at the wizard over the howling of the wind. "If this is one of those safety measures of yours, do you think you can stop it? Rrgghh..."

"Oh! Yes right, of course! Please stand your ground for another moment Miss." The little bundle of robes and rags stepped between Ayla and the door, standing under her arms and looking quite unaffected by the vacuum. His robes weren't even reacting to the forceful wind. He lifted both arms and drew them back, creating a wind current to match the first one, but in reverse. There was a rumble in the air like distant thunder as the two wind streams collided, and the next moment the air was still and calm. "Heh! Clever one, younger me." The wizard gave himself a pat on the back and hurried out of the way.

Ayla opened the door wide enough for them to all file inside one by one, and she stepped through last. The doors groaned and shut behind them, leaving them in total darkness.

"Didn't think to splurge for interior lights huh?" Vesper asked the wizard. Her voice echoed off the walls. "Oh, big chamber. Riley, can you-"

Before she could finish her sentence, there was a slosh of liquid and a sudden luminescence from the skunk's hand. He was holding a glass ball filled with a shining liquid that illuminated an area of several feet around him. The ball was wrapped in rope that he used to attach the glowing glass globe to his belt. "Would anyone else like a Gloworb?"

He opened the wooden box attached to his front and it unfolded into a portable alchemy station. His ingredients were neatly sorted into various sealed vials, and the station included a built-in mortar with included pestle, a small burner with a magical stone for the fuel source, and a number of empty vials in various sizes. It only took him a moment to pick out what he needed.

"I definitely do. I've got decent night vision, but that's useless when there's no light at all. And I don't want to try finding my way by taste," she said, flicking out her tongue.

"I'd love one! Such a novelty," the wizard chimed in.

"I'll pass, kinda hard to sneak around with a light source attached to me." Vesper declined.

"Are you certain? You wouldn't want to step into something avoidable because you couldn't see it. Do you remember the last time?" Riley asked as he uncorked some vials and mixed their contents into a pair of hollow glass globes.

"I was fiiiine, and I'll *be* fine," Vesper insisted. "I'm gonna scout ahead while you work on those okay?"

"Don't run ahead," Ayla spoke in a halfhearted tone, knowing her warning would be brushed off.

"I said I'll be fine!" Vesper slipped away and disappeared into the dark, her outfit blending with the shadows as soon as she stepped outside of the Gloworb's radius. "I'm just gonna check for-"

Splash!

Vesper was cut off, and the end of her sentence was replaced with the sound of a vixen falling into water.

"Well, she's dead," Ayla sighed and walked toward where Vesper had vanished, moving slowly.

"She's not dead," Riley corrected as he plugged a cork into one of the globes and gave it a shake, causing it to light up. "Catch."

Ayla raised a hand and caught the glowing orb without looking. It was small in her palm, so she handled it with care as she hung it from her breastplate, using it to light the way. Stray beams of light shined off of her armor and dimly lit the distant walls and floor. The room was quite large, like a castle banquet hall, but devoid of any furniture or decoration.

She crept forward, sword at the ready while she watched the floor. The stone floor gave way to a bubbling pool of blue and purple liquid that stretched to the walls, and far enough ahead that the opposite side wasn't visible in the Gloworb's light. "Vesper? You alive in there?" She poked the tip of her sword into the liquid to test it. It was wet as she drew it back, but it dried in seconds, producing a breeze in the process. "Huh."

"AYLA!" Vesper gasped as she broke the surface, gasping and sputtering as she clung to the shore.

"You're alive!" The bulky lizard grabbed Vesper with one arm and hoisted her out of the liquid, dragging her a few feet away before laying her down. "You seriously need to be more careful. What if that was something dangerous?"

"Blegh... I told you I'd be fiiiine, it was just water anyway. Uhhk." Vesper coughed and rolled onto her side.

"Sheesh. You fell in mid-sentence, how much of that stuff did you inhale?" Ayla beckoned the rest of their crew over.

"Don't ask." Vesper rolled onto her stomach and panted, catching her breath. Her sneak suit and fur quickly dried, generating more wind in the process. Ayla shielded her eyes as the wind kicked up dust.

"Hey, wizard, what's in that pool?" Ayla asked as he and Riley approached. Riley kneeled down and looked Vesper over for any injuries as the wizard stepped up to the edge of the expansive pool.

"Ahhh of course, I remember this now! My lake of liquid wind! Impossible to swim across safely, the only way across would be to float, trivial for me naturally," he explained.

"What makes it impossible to swim across?" Riley asked as he finished his inspection of his vulpine companion.

"Well it turns into air when disturbed. One could only swim across it for a few seconds before they found the 'water' around them turning into empty air. But the real security measure kicked in after they started to 'drown' in it, so to speak!" He was quite enthusiastic, delighting in being able to explain his creations to others.

"What happens then?" Alya asked.

"I think I'm *hic* finding out..." Vesper groaned, drawing all eyes to her.

She was pressing both hands to her stomach as she sat up, and it was visibly expanding as her party watched. It pushed out against her fingertips which dimpled the dark surface of her sneak suit. She groaned and tried to suppress it by pressing it down with both hands, but that only shifted the pressure to her sides as her middle continued to increase in diameter.

Riley looked at the wizard with a frown. "I don't suppose you have a way to stop or reverse this do you?" he asked, prepared to make anything he could that might help.

"Oh goodness no, I forgot this was here! And besides, it wouldn't be a very good trap if there was a way around it. Although, there must have been some other part to this..." he grumbled to himself in thought.

"W-wait, you can't stop *hic* this?" Vesper's voice shook as panic started to set in. Her stomach already looked like a beachball, and it was pulling the buttons of her sneaksuit taut. She used her hands to keep it pulled down over her stomach, but she was losing ground, and her fluffy white stomach started to peek out from under the lifting fabric.

"You might just have to tough this out for the time being, Vesper. I'll figure something out, but it won't be soon." Riley stood up and hurried to the edge of the liquid wind pool where he carefully leaned over and bottled up two vials of the stuff. He made sure to fasten the corks down with a metal clamp to keep the liquid from depressurizing into a gas.

"That's not reassuring!" Vesper barked.

"Can we vent the air?" Alya lifted her sword.

"Well-" The wizard began, but was cut off by Vesper.

"No thanks!! I appreciate that you have an actionable suggestion Alya, but for now I'll deal with the uncomfortable bloating over *hic* being run through with your greatsword."

Alya put her sword back down. "That's fair, it's definitely a last resort sort of solution."

"Such a crude solution would never work anyway, I ensured that the effects could not be bypassed so easily by adding a healing element! You'd need to puncture yourself over and over again to get THAT to work," the wizard elaborated.

"Morbid, but nothing I haven't heard from other mages..." Riley muttered under his breath with a scowl.

Alya grunted and took a step toward the bundle of wizard-shaped robes. "Maybe I should puncture you over and over and see if you remember a cure huh?"

Vesper got to her feet while her companions talked, and had to hold her stomach to maintain her balance. It wasn't heavy, quite the opposite; it was light and airy and felt like a fluffy balloon under her fingers. As much as the swelling caused an uncomfortable pressure in her stomach, there was something delightfully novel about running her claws through the fur as her skin stretched beneath.

"Relax Alya, I'm fine for now. No need for threats." The fox leaned into the bigger lizard with a veiled grin. "Besides, we can charge him a bit more for me having to go through this when we're said and done~"

Alya's frustration waned. "Heh, at least you can think ahead where gold is involved, blimp."

"Hey! I'm not-oof!" Vesper grunted as she lost her grip on the bottom of her black top. Her rounding stomach pushed it up to her chest, and her orange and white furred middle and

sides swelled free. Under the light of the Gloworbs, her fur seemed particularly bright against the light-swallowing darkness of her outfit. The expansion accelerated and stretched her waistband, making it dig into her widening hips. Her stumbling steps grew lighter and quieter as they touched the ground with less weight every time. She was finding it hard to keep her balance as her feet tried to leave the floor. "Could uh, someone hold me down?"

"I got you." Ayla got behind Vesper and grabbed the formerly slim vixen's shoulders in her clawed hands and pushed her down, keeping her firmly on the ground. "You know how I usually say you weigh about as much as an empty coin purse? This time I really mean it," she said with a hissing chuckle.

"You're so funny. The next time you stumble into a trap I'll make jokes at you too," an unamused Vesper replied as she fussed with the buttons on her top, trying to undo them as the fabric tightened around her embiggening bust. "Damnit..."

"That's not any different from normal!" Ayla shifted her grip on Vesper. The fox was getting lighter and lighter, requiring more force to hold down.

Vesper's middle was rounding out from front to back and peeling off her shirt as it did so. Her deep blue top rode up her back as a swollen bulge of air pushed out, connecting her bloated sides. She was looking like two halves of a fox stuck to opposite ends of a large white and orange ball. Her fingers fumbled with the concealed buttons as the tightening fabric trapped them in place, and one by one they started to snap off, letting more fox flow free from the front of her garment.

Her growing bust was of no help, as it only added to the tension in the fabric and got in the way of her arms and blocked her view. Her upper arms and thighs were starting to thicken with swirling air, and her limbs creaked from her body rubbing against itself as she moved them. Her form was looking rounder by the moment. A bright and widening equator of vixen fought against the restraining cloth that covered her hemispheres, and the cloth was losing the battle as it stretched and tore, letting more air flow through Vesper's body.

"Crud, you're getting light." Ayla shifted her grip to hold Vesper by the wrists. The vixen floated upwards and twisted to dangle upside down. She had enough lift that even Ayla was feeling lighter on her feet as she tried to keep her companion weighed down. "Hey, any luck yet you two?"

Riley and the wizard were passing mixtures and magic back and forth, talking in hushed tones as they worked. "Not... entirely. For the moment we're working on something to weigh Vesper down, that seems to be the more immediate concern," Riley replied, speaking carefully as he twirled a wide-bottomed flask of metallic liquid.

"Well you may wanna hurry up, or I'll be achieving lift...off... Uh oh." Ayla looked up to check on Vesper, and her sharp eyes cut through the darkness shrouding the ceiling now that there was light from Riley's gloworbs. "Hey, wizard? I think I found what the rest of the trap was supposed to be!" She shouted with a grunt as she yanked Vesper downwards in an attempt to keep them both grounded.

"Wh-what does that mean?" Vesper asked in a panic as her body widened, eclipsing Ayla's view of the ceiling. Her eyes darted around in a vain attempt to assess the situation as her cheeks puffed up on either side of her muzzle. Her cleavage started to spill from the neck of her top and push up into her face, colliding with a puffy neck roll.

"Ceiling spikes!"

"Of course!" The wizard shouted. "How devious of my old self. Cause someone to float to the ceiling as a balloon, where they will press into the spikes and no doubt BANG! Pop!"

Ayla's feet left the floor. "Rgh! Can you make a downdraft or something then? We're going up!"

"I'll try, but if I use too much force I'll disturb the liquid air, and that-"

"Just do it!" Vesper squeaked. Her limbs were spreading wide and sticking straight out as their ballooned expansion stole their mobility. She could still wiggle her fingers and toes, but her elbow and knee joints refused to budge against the air pressure filling them. She was as wide across now as she was tall, if not slightly moreso, and the button on her bottoms finally gave up and popped off, letting her hips and waist stretch freely.

Vesper felt a wind blowing down from above her, enough to slow her ascent but not enough to stop it. The wind currents rolled off her rounded width, tickling her stretched curves. She couldn't squirm, but the attempts to do so popped the seams of her leggings, and orange fur burst forth from the dark blue like a blooming flower. Her top was hanging by a thread, now so stretched across her that it barely made for a bra wrapped around her now severely circular bust. "A-Ayla? Are we close?"

"I can't tell and you probably don't wanna know! Just trust that Riley has something in mind!"

"I do, it's almost done!" It was a rare moment of the skunk shouting, but he wanted to be sure he was heard over the sounds of wind and stretching and creaking.

Vesper rose faster with every inch added to her, and despite Ayla's size and armor she was decreasing in effectiveness as a counterweight. The wind wizard's downdraft caused Vesper to rock to and fro, making it difficult for him to keep the airstream aimed properly.

Riley stood up, glass ball in hand, this one filled with what looked like mercury. "Ayla! Catch and hold tight!" He lobbed the orb like a baseball.

"Got it!" Ayla let go of one of Vesper's hands and caught the orb with the other. "Okay, now wh-WHOA!" Seconds after the catch, the glass surface of the orb turned to solid metal and the weight of it increased several times over. Ayla and Vesper slammed into the floor from the weight, but it brought them down and kept them grounded.

Neither fox nor lizard had a chance to recover before the remaining liquid air in Vesper bubbled audibly from inside the fox. Agitated by the rough landing, the liquid decompressed itself and flooded the fox. She let out a whimper as she felt the pressure hit her body all at once. Her sneak suit could no longer continue the fight to stay on, and the strained fabric exploded off of her, raining cords of deep-blue fabric over the ground. Her undergarments remained stubbornly affixed to her body, keeping her just barely decent.

The diameter of her body now exceeded her height. She was bigger than even Ayla, who was currently tethering the vixen to the ground by keeping hold of one of her puffy paws while the other hand held onto the metal orb that was acting as ballast. "Ugh, my arms are going to be sore tomorrow, I can already tell."

"Eurgh, sorry Ayla." Vesper squeaked from between her cheeks. Her muzzle pressed into her chest as she tried to speak, getting some fur into her mouth. "Ack, pbbttt."

"It's fiiiine, I've got these muscles for a reason."

"You worked on all that mass just to hold down ballooned companions?" The wizard queried.

Ayla sighed and rolled her eyes. "You know what, yes, one hundred percent yes. Now do you and Riley have a more uh, permanent solution to this? I can hold on for a while still, but it's taxing to be strung out sideways with one arm on the ground and the other in the air like this. It's a very bad shoulder stretch."

"I have a less temporary solution, at the least. Wizard, can you fetch the cloth scraps? Also, may I ask for some spare cloth from your robe?" Riley asked. He took his portable alchemy station off and set it on the ground.

"Certainly!" With a wave of his arms, a wind swept over the party, lifting the scraps of Vesper's clothes off the ground and depositing them at Riley's feet. He then started to fuss with the collar of his robe.

"Do you need a hand tearing that off?" the skunk asked with a curious tilt of his head.

"Not at all not at all, here you go!" The wizard managed to wiggle himself free of his robes entirely and handed Riley what seemed to be a huge canvas of grey cloth with no stitching or seams to speak of. Despite this, the wizard was still just as lost in oversized robes as ever.

"Ah-" Riley started to speak, then changed his mind. "Actually, I will not follow that line of questioning, I have more critical matters." He made sure the ground behind him was clear for his tail before sitting down. He plucked a small tincture labeled "Haste" from his workstation and downed it, and then picked out a thick needle and a spool of thread from his alchemy station and got to work with the cloth.

"Oh? No alchemy whatnot for this task?" The wizard watched, but sounded disappointed.

"Clothing is difficult to fix with alchemy, I find traditional methods work much better. That said, alchemy can still help when time is critical." Riley smirked as he worked. The wizard's attention drifted to Riley's hands, and he observed that his hands were stitching seams together with the speed of a sewing machine.

It only took Riley a few minutes to complete his project, and it was laid out over the floor in front of him, taking up an area about as wide as Vesper. "Phew, there. Help me get this over Vesper, please." He got to his feet and grabbed hold of his work, lifting it up. It looked like a large fishing net woven from strips of clothing.

The wizard obliged and picked up the other side, and the two of them wrangled the net over the top of Vesper, carefully navigating around Ayla in the process. The net was affixed with four smaller metal orbs like the one that Ayla was using along with their Gloworbs for light. Below the net, the wizard's (presumably spare) cloak was stretched open like a cloth platform.

"Okay Ayla, you can let go of the metal ball," Riley informed her.

"Finally." She released it, and Vesper stayed on the ground. "Phew, good."

"Riley." Vesper couldn't turn to see him, so she waited for his reply.

"Yes Vesper?"

"Did you cover me with *rigging*? Like some kind of hot air balloon?" She huffed indignantly.

"Well. Ah. In lieu of finding an immediate solution to deflate you, it was the best I could think of. Not that I think of you as a blimp. Even if you look like one."

"Well, it's genius, like always." Vesper changed her tone, making Riley huff this time.

"Is this really the time to be teasing?" the skunk sighed.

"Not a lot else I can do, let's be honest here. Can you control the ballast on the metal balls?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Because this would be perfect for floating us all across this damn lake! You can manage the ballast, our generous patron can handle propulsion, and Ayla, you can take it easy. Rest your arms. Come on! We've been stuck here long enough and I want to get out of here and get deflated, so let's go!"

"That's... a remarkably good idea for you, but are you sure you don't mind being used like this?" Riley asked, even as he started preparations.

"I sure as hell do mind, so don't get used to this. It's just the fastest solution we've got so we may as well use it." Vesper grunted as the rigging was fastened securely and the ballast was reduced to get her floating a few feet off the ground. They gathered their things and her passengers scrambled onto the cloth beneath her, gathering into it like a taut hammock. Carefully, Riley had them lift higher into the air, enough to keep them above the lake of liquid wind, but well below the spiked ceiling. Once they were at a proper altitude, the wizard generated a wind current to push them forward.

The trip took a few minutes and was graciously uneventful. The team descended on the other side and disembarked, making sure to weigh down Vesper. Ayla was assigned to pulling her around. The far side of the room was empty aside from a door that looked almost big enough to squeeze Vesper through. Almost.

Ayla clicked her tongue. "Oh boy. Alright, everyone else through the door, grab some rope as you pass by, I'm gonna need you all to pull while I push."

"Eh?" Vesper's hands wiggled helplessly. "Can't you all just go on ahead and come back for me?" she suggested as she gave a nervous glance at the doorway.

"And what, leave you alone for who knows how long when you can't even defend yourself or run away?" Ayla scoffed.

"Precisely! Besides." The wizard grabbed a handful of rope as he walked through the door. "There's no exit through the entrance. The only way out is forward."

"That means you're getting through here one way or another Vesper. Try to relax." Riley gave her ballooned side a pat, making her body reverberate like a drum. "Oh. Hmm. Sorry."

"I-it's fine." Vesper huffed. The feeling of his hand against her taut hide was strange, but not unpleasant. She tried not to think about it, but she was about to have a lot of trouble putting it out of her mind.

"Alright, ready? Pull her in!" Ayla commanded.

At her word, Riley and the wizard pulled on the ropes, and Vesper was pulled against the doorway. She was pulled almost halfway through before her circumference became wedged in the doorway, pinching her body around the middle and dimpling her stretched skin. Once she stopped moving, Ayla braced the back of her arms against Vesper, making sure to keep her claws facing away from her inflated companion. The big lizard widened her stance, and her leg muscles tightened as she rooted herself in place before shoving forward with the strength of her arms and the weight of her armor-clad body.

"Erk-!" Vesper grunted as Ayla impacted her body, making her creak as she was shoved partway through the door. She stuck fast at the widest part of her and winced from the pinch

around her middle. It felt like she was wearing a corset that was laced too tight; a feeling she had only experienced twice before now.

"Sorry about this Ves!" Ayla backed up to get a running start, and then rammed Vesper through the door. The ballooned fox yelped from the impact as it pushed air to the front half of her body, making her cheeks briefly engulf her muzzle before the pressure bounced back and equalized. Thankfully, her body survived the rough treatment, and Ayla's strength was enough to force the fox through the door and into the room on the opposite side.

The room beyond the door was filled with large, luminous bubbles that drifted around the room several feet above the ground. Each was a foot or so in diameter and opaque. A locked iron door sat on the opposite side of the room, and there were markings carved into the stone wall around the door. Riley adjusted Vesper's ballast to keep her on the ground, away from the bubbles for now. "Good, you're in. I'm wary of the bubbles, so I'm going to keep you grounded for now, alright?"

"I appreciate it, the last thing I need is to get any bigger. Would you mind taking a look around?"

Riley chuckled. "Well it's not like I can ask YOU to do it."

"Why do you have to- ugh, fine. Just go."

Riley's first order of business was the obvious exit door and the etchings around its perimeter. "Hmm... I see. So the key is inside one of those bubbles. That's too simple though, anyone with a bow or magic could easily pop them all one by one. Wizard, can you tell me anything about this room?"

"I do somewhat remember this one in fact. Writing the solution around the door is partly a misdirection you see! Only one bubble contains the key. The rest contain an array of deadly traps. Monsters, natural disasters, deadly poisons... The list goes on and on really."

"I see. So how do we tell which is the right one?" Riley braced himself for disappointment.

"Well I don't remember that."

"Ah well. In that case, Vesper?"

"Huh? What's up Riley?" the ballooned vixen's ears twitched at the sound of her name.

"I don't suppose you can still pick locks in that state?"

"Er." She wiggled her hands. "I probably have enough dexterity, but I need two hands to pick locks, and unfortunately mine are currently a few feet apart."

"Well, so much for that option. In that case, we'll just have to figure things out..."

There was a lull in the conversation as Ayla joined them and they pondered the current situation. Vesper was the first to break the silence.

"Hey, wizard, wind magic is your thing right?"

"That's right."

"Got it. Riley, can you let me up to the ceiling?"

"Hmm? Oh, sure. What's going on?" The skunk approached Vesper and did as he was asked, adjusting the density of the metal orbs without having to touch them. Vesper slowly rose to the ceiling, harmlessly bumping some of the bubbles out of the way on her way up. She thought about how similar she was to them, drifting through the air at the mercy of stray currents... and then she growled, putting the thought out of her head.

Her suspicions were confirmed as her back bumped against the ceiling. While the bubbles appeared opaque from below, they were translucent from the top, allowing Vesper to see the contents of each of them as she peered at them beyond the horizon of her own body. "Hah, I was right." She smirked to herself and started looking over the bubbles, squinting to see their contents. "I can see through these from up here!" she shouted down to her team.

"Really? How did you know about that?" Riley asked, shouting up from below.

"Call it an educated guess! Normally, someone would have used wind magic to float across the lake in the first chamber, so I figured this room would also have a solution related to wind magic," Vesper explained.

The wizard let out a giddy giggle. "Foxes are clever indeed! That IS the solution! Oh, but flying takes up so much magic, it's easier to bring them down than myself up."

"Aahhh, so that's the game! Well, don't bother with it now, I'm already up here." A glint caught Vesper's eye as she spoke. "Ah-hah. Hey Ayla, can you take four paces forward, turn right, take about... fifteen paces forward, and lift your sword?"

"Can do, blimp boss." The big lizard counted her heavy strides until she was in position, then lifted her sword up, using the tip to point at the bubbles while making sure not to point it *too* close. "This the one?"

"I heard that. But yes. Pop it!"

Ayla stabbed the bubble with the tip of her sword, and it popped like any normal bubble would. A pristine key was released and Ayla caught it in her free hand as it fell. "Nice call Ves, I got it. I'll get the door, Riley, you get the sphere."

"Har har, I'm glad at least someone is enjoying this." Vesper snorted, and her hands twirled, trying to gesture the way they used to.

Riley brought Vesper closer to the ground while Ayla unlocked the iron door and pushed it wide open. It was as large as the other door they had come through, meaning it would take a bit of shoving to get their brilliantly blimped defacto leader through. Like last time, Riley and the wizard used the rigging ropes to pull, and Ayla shoved from behind, eventually getting Vesper into the following room despite grunts and protests about the rough treatment.

The iron bars opened into a dark and winding hallway that seemed to slope up and down and loop around itself at points. The team used the Gloworbs attached to Vesper's rigging to illuminate the passageway and search for anything suspicious as they made their way forward. Ultimately, the trip down the hall was uneventful until near the end. A soft glow came from the end of the tunnel up ahead, and a low, constant droning sound grew louder as they approached.

"Ah-hah! The final chamber is up ahead!" The wizard leaped in excitement and floated back to the ground. Vesper, Ayla, and Riley exchanged glances, anxious about what would be up ahead.

As they stepped into the final room, the source of the sound became clear. High above, the room was filled with huge circular fans that whipped up the wind and hummed as their engines spun the blades round and round without end. The fans were arranged in a circle around a central glass shaft that was a dozen meters in diameter.

Vesper bobbed in the wind, and her team kept a grip on her rigging to prevent her from twirling around. The wizard's robes flapped about, and Riley's tail was tossed side to side whenever it caught the wind. They had to shout to hear one another clearly, and they gathered along the wall near the door where the wind was weakest.

"You said this was the final chamber? That means the artifact is here somewhere right?" Riley asked.

"Yes indeed! In fact, I can see it way up there!" The wizard pointed near the top of the glass tube. It was difficult to make out, but there was a small wooden box suspended in the powerful updraft, bobbing up and down a few feet with tiny shifts in the air pressure.

"Is there a trick to this one too?" Ayla asked as she squinted up at the bobbing box.

"Well yes, in a way. I'll have to carefully reverse the air current to lower the box to the ground. If it lands too roughly, it might break, but if I try to go up and get it, I'm likely to be shot out of the end of the tube like a cannonball and splattered on the ceiling."

"Well that sounds horrifying. Please don't do that." Vesper tried to get a look at the box herself, but couldn't tilt her head back far enough to get a view of it. She grumbled to herself and briefly considered asking Ayla to tilt her back for a better view, but quickly discarded the embarrassing thought.

"Well, sounds like you know what to do for this one, and you're the only mage here, so I guess we can sit this one out?" Ayla asked as she leaned back against the wall, careful not to let her armor clunk against the stone.

"I would prefer it if you did in fact! It will be easier for me to feel the winds." The wizard made his way to the center of the room, robes whipping in the winds. Once he was directly under the glass tube his loose robes pulled upwards from the immense, vacuum-like updraft. His hat remained firmly on his head, but the brim flapped about. He rolled up his sleeves (revealing more sleeves underneath) and concentrated his magics.

Riley felt the shift in air pressure along the fur on his huge tail, and Vesper felt the vibrations of the shifting pressure across her taut hide. Ayla's tongue flicked out. She was less sensitive to things like changes in air pressure, but she could see the wooden box descending through the glass tube, dropping a few feet, floating for a bit, then repeating. As she watched, the descent became increasingly irregular, and the box started to teeter towards the edges of the tube, coming close to smashing into it at points. Then, all at once, the box zipped back up the tube and came to a slow stop back at the point it had started.

The wizard hung his head. "Well ding dong it all. I'm not sure I still have it in me to maintain that."

Seeing his disappointment, Riley and Ayla approached with Vesper in tow.

"It must be more difficult than it appears," Riley commented as he shielded his eyes and looked up into the shaft, already trying to think of a different solution.

"Quite so. I'm not quite the wizard I was when this place was built, and now I worry I waited too long to recover the amulet... What's worse is that if I had it in hand, I would be strong enough to retrieve it!" He paced around in frustration.

Ayla spoke up. "Maybe we can tie some rope around your waist and float you up, then pull you down after you get it? Would prevent you from overshooting it, and we got plenty of rope we can borrow off Vesper," she said, giving a tug on the ropes she was using to drag Vesper around.

The wizard grumbled and gave some thought to the proposal. "I suppose that could work. Just be certain to fasten it tightly! Vesper, you don't mind if we borrow some of your, well, rigging?"

"I can spare it for a bit, yeah. Seems like the quickest and least convoluted solution." Vesper gave a stiff nod that made her bloated neck creak.

"Alright, let's get to it then." Without really thinking about it, Riley and Ayla brought Vesper closer to the wizard, leaving her floating just above them, and just under the opening to the glass tube.

"Uh, uh oh, guys?" Vesper felt the wind catch under her just a moment before her body lurched upward. Ayla shouted as her arms were yanked up and her feet left the ground, and Riley was flung upwards, causing him to lose his grip on the rigging and tumble into the air before falling to the floor. The wizard broke his fall with a cushion of air, but he still landed roughly, hitting his head hard enough to stun him for a moment.

Vesper was now weighted to one side with only Ayla hanging on, and she started to spin around in the air current as her ascent accelerated. "Whooooaa whoa! I'm g-getting dizzy!"

Ayla grit her teeth and clung on as tightly as she could, but the spinning was loosening her grip. "Crap!" The rope slipped out of her hand and she was flung across the room. Another air cushion prevented her from smashing into the far wall, and she managed to land on her feet. Unfortunately, Vesper was well out of reach now.

"No no no ACK-!" Vesper barely fit into the glass cylinder. Her body and bust pressed against every inch of the internal circumference as she slid up the tube from the tremendous cycle of air pressure. Her body squeaked against the glass as it was dragged upward, and her ascent slowed as friction reduced her speed. Her great mass plugged the tube, breaking the air cycle. She got about halfway up before stopping completely.

With the wind blocked off, the fans deactivated and the wooden box fell, but to everyone's relief (except perhaps Vesper's) it fell right into the vixen's ballooned cleavage, cushioning the fall. "Hrmpf...! Of all the undignified... G-get me out of here!" Vesper shouted the last part, and her voice echoed up the tube and off the ceiling.

Riley got to his feet and rubbed the back of his head. "Ouch... Ah, I suppose we have a different problem to solve now," he mused as he mentally switched gears from the previous problem to the current one.

"Can we just smash the glass? Ves should just float down," Ayla suggested.

"I would prefer we not do that, thank you," the wizard interjected.

"Fair enough, let's leave that as a last resort. Riley?"

The skunk's tail swished to and fro. "If I could increase the weight of her ballast to the maximum, she would probably become heavy enough to dislodge naturally, as she's only barely wedged in... Unfortunately, we're outside of the necessary activation range. I'd need to get within a few meters of her, but I'd only need a moment to do it."

"I could throw you," Ayla suggested as she peered up at Vesper's bloated orange and white form above them. "And catch you on the way down, of course."

"Can you get me all the way up?" Riley seemed surprised by the suggestion.

"I think so? You're not that heavy." Ayla was trying to mentally judge the distance against her own strength and Riley's weight and aerodynamics. His tail would create a lot of drag.

The wizard stepped forward, clearing his throat. "I can assist with an updraft."

Ayla grinned. "That'll do it. Alright Riley, time to fly!"

"If you insist."

Alya crouched down and cupped her clawed hands together to make a foothold that Riley placed his foot into. A breeze whipped up around them, rising into a pillar of upward wind focused tight around Riley's body. "Alright, one, two three!" Alya flung Riley upwards with all her might, and Riley leaped from her hand at the top of the throw. He shot upwards through the glass shaft, wind whipping through his hair. He felt weightless as the pillar of rising air kept him rising with the momentum from the throw. Vesper's gigantic form rushed toward him, and for a moment he worried he might crash into her. He drew in his limbs and stopped just short of a collision, floating for a moment before gravity caught up to him. Before he fell, he reached out a hand and waved his fingers.

Vesper yelled as she felt herself drop. It was a slow descent as she slid back down the way she came, bumping against the glass and wiggling her extremities to try and get herself to slide down. Riley fell faster, making it to the bottom of the shaft before Vesper made it halfway. Alya caught him in both arms and set him on his feet. The skunk straightened his outfit and he and Alya stepped away from the glass shaft as Vesper finished her descent and bounced against the floor.

"Ghrnngg... Can one of you grab this artifact so we can be done with this?" she asked, trying to use her snout to point to the wooden box in her ballooned cleavage.

Alya stepped forward and grabbed Vesper with one hand and pulled her down so she could reach the box and pluck it free. "I got ya." As soon as she let go, Vesper bobbed upright again. She rolled it over in her hand, making sure it was still intact before holding it out to their client. "All yours. Not a scratch on it, luckily enough."

The wizard giggled with giddy excitement and hurried up to Alya. He plucked the box from her hand and produced a key from his robes that he used to unlock it and pop it open. He wasn't shy about showing off his prize either. It was a gleaming, square-cut gemstone in a pale, milky-green hue that was placed in a silver setting and hung from a matching necklace.

As soon as he put it on, the gemstone flashed and a whirlwind whipped up around him. It felt like a tornado was forming around him, but the howling winds lasted for only a moment before they were quelled and the room went quiet.

"Ah, thank you all so much! The power granted by this Wind Stone was a bit, eh, excessive when I was in my prime, but now that I'm older it makes up the difference quite nicely! With this, I can carry us out of here in a snap! Please gather around." He gestured for everyone to huddle close.

The team crowded in, bringing Vesper as close as they could with her roundness. With a flick of his fingers, a wall of wind encircled them. It roared and howled, but they barely felt a breeze standing in the storm's eye. It raged for only a few seconds, and when the winds dissipated, they found they were back outside the large entrance doors. It was just past noon, and all of their stuff was right where they left it outside of the dungeon.

"Ahhh, that IS so much better. Thank you all for your flawless assistance!" The wizard gave a bow to the party.

"Well, almost flawless." Alya ribbed Vesper with her elbow. "Now that you've got that and we're all done here, can you get Ves back the way she's supposed to be?"

"Yeah, I'm really over being a dirigible here."

The wizard was silent for a moment, then tilted his head. "Put you... back? Did I not say anything before? Your condition is quite permanent! I didn't make that solution with reversal in mind. It was meant to keep out intruders you know, and have them burst moments later!"

Silence blanketed them all for a moment. Riley was the first to speak again.

"I thought you meant-"

Vesper cut in. "What do you *mean* it's permanent?! I can't live like this! I can't move, I can't pick locks or sneak around! I'm out here in my undergarments! I'm a glorified blimp that has to be led around by ropes! How am I supposed to make a living like..." Vesper's rage quickly tempered as the wizard produced a large bag that was stuffed with gold coins. She could tell by the sound.

"Eh-hem..." he cleared his throat. "As thanks for a job well done, and compensation for your new state of living, I am willing to pay *each* of you three times the originally agreed-upon amount."

Ayla's tongue flicked out, getting a faint taste of gold, and Riley's tail fluffed out as big as it would go. Vesper's mouth dropped open and bounced against her ballooned neck.

"T-triple? Each?"

"That's right. Additionally, I will put in a good word with my mage's society, so you can expect higher-paying contracts to come your way. That's the best I can offer I'm afraid!"

Vesper didn't give it a second thought. "We'll take it. This contract was a pleasure~" She grinned down from between her huge cheeks.

"Excellent! I'll have the payment sent to the same address as the original. I may even deliver it myself now that I can zip around! Ah, well, take care you three! Ta-ta!" In another rush of wind, he was gone, leaving Vesper bobbing in the breeze.

Ayla looked up at the face of her ballooned companion. With Vesper's sheer diameter, she now had to look up to look her in the eyes. "Well you changed your tune pretty quickly. You're really okay with this?"

"Of COURSE not!" Vesper grumped. She'd have crossed her arms if she still could. "But I figure we take the money and the reputation boost and try to find some other means of reversing this. Just because he can't doesn't mean it's impossible. Right Riley?"

"This is more of a magical condition than an alchemical one, but I cannot rule out the possibility of a cure existing in some part of the world. For the time being though, you may have to get used to this," he said in his usual calm tone.

"Baaahh. I'll still have you two though, right?"

Ayla gave Vesper a playful shove with her free hand. "What, you think you can shake us off just because *you're* the big one now? Sorry gal, I'm not the jealous type, snrk." Ayla snorted and started to push Vesper toward their packed supplies.

"Hey, what're you doing, oohf!"

"Hey Riley, help me load up our gear on the new transport blimp will ya?"

"Happily."

Vesper groaned. "Oh come ON! Are you serious?"

Ayla nodded. "I can't carry all this AND hold onto you, so you gotta hold it."

"Ugh, fine. The first thing we're doing when we get back to town is hitting the tavern! I don't care how tough it is to get me in there, I need a drink!"

"Likewise."

“Yeah, same.”

The two mobile party members attached their camping gear to Vesper’s rigging, and Riley lowered the ballast to let her float just barely off the ground. He and Ayla pulled her along, through the valley and back toward town. She was lighter than carrying the gear on its own, but she was a new challenge in her own right as she dragged in the wind and bobbed to and fro in the gentlest breeze. Her companions joked about her condition, and she snapped at them with grunts and groans, but aside from the topic of the teasing, it was the same as any trip they had taken before. Even as a gust of wind lifted her higher for a moment, she couldn’t help but smile to herself, happy to have friends that would stick with her no matter what.