

Chapter 63 Goodmother.

Viv returned to the base camp with aching legs and found a mob. Said mob had gathered in the mine entrance's main square and people practically jumped on her when she arrived. Viv felt like a firefighter going from one catastrophe to another. Cover the convoy? Send the black caster. Need to detoxify the land? Caster. Talk to the people? The caster. Negotiate a fucking trade agreement? That's right. Her again. She was clocking more overtime than the average investment banker.

Viv's grumblings were replaced by alarm when she realized the source of the problem.

"So, do you agree that we Kazarans deserve the land and should kill and drive off any newcomers?"

Ooooh someone had lit the firecracker on a dog turd. She had to douse this before it blew off and plastered them all. Her money was on the grocery store owner. That massive twat.

Viv walked with the appearance of confidence towards the elevated ground, her mind going on overdrive.

"Viviane?" Farren said by her side with worry.

"I know. Shut up."

She stood up and watched as a wave spread through the crowd before her. Light spells bobbed in the air, giving the entire cavern a surreal aspect. Between this and the clothes, the scene was intimately familiar and utterly alien at the same time. The locals had a greenish tint to their skin and wore undyed clothes. They also stank with an aggressive pong that even the summer crowd back home had not matched. At the same time, the organic way they moved, like a giant organism, was known to her. Silence spread and people turned, and more people would turn and more groups would fall silent. It was the same strange physics that let people sing rolling hymns or stampede. The diffuse mind of the masses.

Terry Pratchett had once said that the IQ of a mob was that of its lowest member divided by the number of participants. She understood the comment but looking at all those avid faces, she realized that there was also an opportunity for something better. Not all speeches had to be for the sake of the speaker. She could... yes. She could teach them about modern values. There were opposing theories on the essence of a nation. Some were based on blood, the ethnic group, the culture. Others were based on ideas. Both had their pitfalls, but at least one of them did not promote xenophobia.

That she could remember.

At least not actively.

Viv's brain went into overdrive once more, the leadership and polymath skills helping her structure and articulate her thoughts.

"What is a Kazaran?" she asked, voice amplified by a spell.

She had silence and their full attention now. Better not think about it too much.

"A Kazaran is someone who stands with the deadlands before them and the infinite wood at their back, on that thin strip of land we call home and fights for, yeah?"

"Yea!"

"Aye!"

"A Kazaran is someone who sees Prince Asshole come for their land and, instead of bending, travels to this mine to oppose him, yeah?"

"Hear hear."

God that was such bullshit. Anyway. As long as racism didn't take hold...

"So everyone here, everyone who walked the long trail and carried their family so that they would not be slaves is a Kazaran. We are all Kazarans here, right?"

"Yeah yeah."

It was easy. She could say 'All Kazarans like cake' and people would first say yes then actually think about cakes.

"You there," she said, pointing at a man she remembered almost turned back with his family on the first day, "what's your name lad?" she asked.

He squirmed under everyone's scrutiny.

"Come on, don't be shy, Kazaran. Tell us."

"Dorrel, goodmother."

Goodwhat? Ah, whatever.

"And where do you come from?"

"Enoria, goodmother, the north. The border region, near the silent field."

“And you’ve been here for how long?”

“Five years, goodmother... me and my family...”

“Came here to find a future free of conflict, am I right?”

“Yes...”

“Someone who came here for a new life, who made the land better. That’s a real Kazaran right here. And you?” she asked, addressing a guard.

“Kazaran born and raised!”

There were a few cheers.

“That’s right, a fighter who held the line against the beastling tide, I remember you. Another true Kazaran you are, sir. And is there anyone here who would dare claim that Resh Ganimatalo was not a Kazaran?”

No one spoke, which was as much conviction as survival instinct, really.

“That’s right. She was from far away but she fought her whole life for the city. Northern Enoria, Southern Enoria, Baran, the Pure League. Hell, even Helock. It doesn’t matter where everyone comes from. What matters is that we all stand here at the edge of the abyss, together. It matters that we all came here to the mine because we wanted to be free!”

“Yeaaah!”

“When you look at your neighbors, do not think of their old homes or their native tongue, Think that they are by your side today, in our darkest hour, and that we will face Prince Twat together. For unity! For freedom! For Kazar!”

“For Kazar! Freedom!”

That roused them nicely. Ooof. Ethnic cleansing averted.

Leadership: Beginner 5

Wow, that was a nice increase, three ranks in one go. It was lucky that the Kazarans were not exactly the most educated people around and her cheap eloquence tricks had done it.

“Free Kazar!”

Hah, they were chanting now. Maybe that was why the skill increase had been so large.

“Free Kazar!”

“Free Kazar!”

“That’s right, if those Enorian noble pricks think they can come and tell us what to do, they got it coming!”

“Free Kazar!”

Uh oh.

Uh oh!

“Congratulations on your successful declaration of independence, Viviane,” Farren said, unamused. “Please tell my superiors that I had nothing to do with it if they ever ask.”

“Errr.”

//And you even had the masses do it for you.

//Truly, the Heiress has potential.

//Long may you live, Your Grace.

“Aw.”

There was another party to celebrate Kazar’s (tentative) separation from Enoria. They were almost out of booze but people took to grilling the meat Viv had gathered earlier with enthusiasm. She found herself standing on the edge of the raucous crowd with a mutated mole skewer in her hand while Arthur gnawed a giant bat wing. Apparently, her grudge extended not just beyond the grave but beyond the frying pan as well. Truly, a vengeance for the ages.

Her ruminations were interrupted by a burly mass of muscular men guided by the old bearded guy she had seen before, the one who led the remote villagers. He had the defiant look of someone who didn’t trust anyone easily, but when he talked he was polite.

“Evening goodmother. Wanted to ask you a few things.”

“Hm sure. What’s your name?”

“Ban, goodmother.”

“What’s with the goodmother?”

The man looked a bit lost but Farren, who had decided to hang around just in case Viv decided to declare atheism, answered in his stead.

“Ban here is an Enorian, like Dorrel. They came here a few years ago.”

“That’s right,” the man said.

“I mentioned that the Enorians had changed drastically since the onset of the civil war, right?”

“Yes, I think Varska mentioned it as well,” Viv replied.

“That is quite likely. Old Enorian elites had turned hedonistic when the rebellion started. There are rumors on how scandalous they were... I will not share them here. Both the rebels and the current king adopted conservative social measures as a reaction. Enorian men are encouraged to lead a regulated life rebuilding the nation while Enorian women are supposed to help... repopulate it. Goodmother is a recent term of respect used for women past marrying age.”

“Oi.”

“The marrying age in Enoria is thirteen. The title implies that you have married and already given birth to fulfil your role as a productive member of the great Enorian society. I am sorry.”

Viv grumbled but she knew that he was just the messenger. And thirteen on Nyil probably meant something closer to fourteen or fifteen on earth with days and years here being a bit longer. She expected that sort of shit from a feudal society. Obviously, she was already an old bag according to their standards, possibly a scaley cat-lady, the scales being on the cat.

And quite possibly Enoria was the most sexist country on the continent right now and she had to take it into account when dealing with them. A faction led by a woman was bound to be dismissed or seen as decadent. It was too late now anyway.

“They really mean it as a sign of respect,” Farren continued.

“Yes, well, can I say what I have to say?” Ban said impatiently.

“Sure thing but drop the ‘goodmother’ please.”

“Understood ma’am. As I said, my name is Ban. Me and the boys, that is the good folks around me, we left Enoria after the civil war. Many of us are veterans and we thought that, well, here, the old bullshit would not be the same. Beg your pardon. That is, nobles can’t just take our lands and families for a yes or a no.”

She nodded. That she could understand.

“Well, we were wrong. But what you said about Kazarans being about belief and not a place of origin. You... truly believe that?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have welcomed the Hadals here.”

“Yeah...” the man said, suddenly remembering the weirdos who had wisely disappeared off to their caves as quickly as they had come, “yeah you’re right. Actions speak louder than words. Anyway, we were thinking, that is, some of us were thinking that we should help. I bet that you have lots of guards but very few soldiers, aye?”

“You could say that,” Viv replied.

//Excellent.

Everyone turned to Solfis. His natural immobility and tendency to stay in the background made it easier for people to ignore him. Not that he was easy to ignore, but people made a conscious effort to do so to preserve their nerves.

//We will soon have access to heavy infantry armour.

//We will soon have access to heavy infantry weapons.

//We have access to state-of-the-art Harrakan heavy infantry regimens optimized for retraining.

“We do?” Viv asked.

//Yes.

//I have a great many confidential training manuals stored in my databanks.

//I shall select a number of recruits and prepare them for the offensive.

“What’s the difference between whatever you said and our own militia training?” Ban asked, suspicious.

//My program will create killers.

//Militia training will create their victims.

//Any questions?

“Nope.”

//While you were talking, Your Grace, I have contacted Lorn to assist with your own acuity reflex skill practice.

“Eh? How?”

//I have requested that people randomly throw stones at you.

//Everyone in the mines, actually.

Viv gawped.

//Small stones.

//Small stones, Your Grace.

//You will use danger sense to detect the attack and acuity reflex to stop it.

As he spoke those words, a small girl ran out of the crowd. She stopped squat in front of the group and closed her eyes, then with a mighty yelp, she threw a small rock. It clattered uselessly against a nearby support pillar.

She ran away squealing.

Viv sent a half-assed bzzt at the projectile.

“Squee?”

//We go to war with the army we have.

Training began the very next day. Viv had received instructions on how to improve the Arcane Construct skill from Solfis to allow her to set up defensive positions, and she practised at the edge of the foundries. Training implied creating a circle on the ground, which she did with a normal purge, then adding shield glyphs at regular intervals. She tried the same for the artillery spell but it was so complex that her mind couldn't latch on the construct when it was done, and that was strange because she could make it in her mind, but try to write it down and it became strange and unfamiliar. Magic was weird.

Arcane Construct: Novice 3

As long as she operated within an army and had a flat surface, taking the time to set up could help her tremendously. She only stopped for lunch (gruel and grilled rocksnout, she refused to touch the bat). Yries visitors came to help set up a well outside and another inside and she was informed that they would soon have enough water for people to bathe.

God fucking bless.

In the background, tireless workers were finishing repurposing a derelict building as latrines and another as an actual bath. Hordes of children played outside under vigilant care and

many guards and militias were moving their spears around while others were shown how to handle a crossbow.

“Come to think of it,” Viv said, “I’ve never seen the militia in action.”

“They train with the guard twice per week on the common fields,” Marruk said.

“How come I’ve never seen it?”

“They do it at dawn and while you were in the city, there has not been an instance when you were done eating breakfast by the time they had finished.”

Viv tried and failed to detect a trace of disapproval or sass in the Kark’s tone, a sure sign that she had made some amazing progress. Maybe even unlocked a snark general skill.

As Viv kept pursuing the path of sorcery, Solfis was doing his thing farther out near the ward stone.

//Rejoice, maggots.

//For I, Solfis, experimental strike golem of HARRAK, have selected you.

//All your lives, you have been eking out a living in the dirt.

//Fighting for scraps on the edge of the greatest empire that Parram ever knew.

//Feeding off its remains like worms.

//Now, fate has seen it fit to bring you a chance to exist.

//To have an impact for the first time in your miserable lives.

//Instead of wallowing in the mud like your forefathers before you.

“Hold on,” a muscular bearded man said from the backline, “it ain’t like that! I was not always a laborer. I was a soldier at the battle of Regnos. We held back the rebels!”

//Oh?

Solfis’ unblinking glare focused on the one who had interrupted him. He tilted his head, the gesture strangely organic and all the more terrifying for it.

//And what company did you belong to?

“The Arlon brigade, sir, folks from around the city.”

//And what will they sing about the Arlon brigade at the battle of Regnos?

//That you took the victory with your own bloody hands?

//That the rebels fled before you as you struck them down?

//Or that you stood and died while others carried the day?

“We held the line...” the human muttered, but his eyes were glazed and sad. His back bent under the weight of tragic memories.

The golem stood straight then. He lifted a clawed hand before his skull and intoned in his alien, disturbing snarl.

//Lo, during the fifth year of Emperor Hertan, did the Skyrend battalion take to Windscythe pass.

//For three days, they fought the combined forces of Loress in glorious battle.

//For three days, the arrows of the Merl shattered on their shields.

//For three days, the Krol charges broke on their lines.

//And for three days, Unbroken Berzerkers died on their spears.

//On the fourth day, as the sun rose, the battalion descended upon the resting foe with the fury of the Emperor himself.

//They drove the barbarians back to the river, where they drowned in the hundreds.

//Until the waters ran red.

//And their corpses floated to the ocean.

The golem had spoken Enorian, not the more subtle language he usually favoured. The tale was raw and brutal and it spoke to the men present. It was not one of bravery against all odds, as they were used to from the usual propaganda. It was one of unstoppable might, and it bore with it the enticing promise of crushing victory. Power. Being more than just a cog in the meatgrinder. Being on the actual winning side, for once in their damn lives.

“But how are we supposed to do that? We got only one month or two, and none of us are Eron the Dragonslayer!”

//I have no need for Eron the Dragonslayer.

The golem’s declaration was received with stupefied silence.

//I heard his story.

//I have no need for one who rushes alone on a doomed quest and dies by himself.

//I have need for soldiers.

//I picked each and every one of you because I saw the potential in you, the potential to be more than just spearmen dying for the cause.

//But in order to succeed, potential is not enough.

//It must be backed by effort, and a silverite will.

The men closed rank around the golem.

//We shall strike a covenant.

//I will make you go through hell.

//You will curse me.

//You will curse the day your mothers gave you life.

//Some of you will leave.

//But those that stay will become the heralds of a new world.

The bony frame leaned forward and suddenly, it was level with the considerably smaller humans. Its tone grew almost conspiratorial.

//I will share data with you.

//If entity Beebiane survives.

//And if entity Solfis survives.

//There are four chances out of five that this region of the world undergoes a resurgence.

“What’s a resurgence?”

The golem lets out a strange, sigh-like sound.

//It means that the deadlands will become smaller and the living land will become greater.

//As will those who live on it.

//Our numbers will grow until lines of steel-clad phalanx blot out the plains.

//And barbed arrows fall like winter rain on our foes.

//You fleshbags will be the first.

//The tip of the spear.

//And the first thing you will do.

//Is to ram that tip down Prince Lancer’s throat.

The crowd shifted for all of two seconds, then...

“I’m in.”

//Good.

//Let us begin.

Chapter 64: We, the People

It only took a bit over a week for routine to occur, and for the mines to transform into a hive of activity. Viv had expected more violence. She thought that the claustrophobic environment and adverse conditions would lead to a poor morale, but she had been wrong. The Kazarans had a goal. That goal was to take back their city and make the invaders pay. It was fueled in equal part by justice and spite, love for their kin and blind hatred for those who had come to hurt them. It was a clear, achievable purpose. Equally important, they had a deadline.

The term had never been so accurate.

The mines had two months of food, perhaps a bit more, and no way to get more locally. Their previous homes had acres upon acres of ripening cereals and plants of all kinds, beans and stalks almost ready to be harvested. That treasure trove had to be taken back, or they would perish. It was sink or swim.

This led to an unprecedented level of unity the likes of which Viv had simply never seen before. Perhaps the educated, modern population of her home country had grown jaded. The study of history and politics had led to a massive disenchantment, Viv thought, further developed by the failure of politicians to make good on their promises. Kazar's population was different. They were fresh and helpless against even the cheesiest tricks of eloquence. It did not mean that they were stupid, just that Viv talked to them one evening out of two and they actually listened, and believed.

That was another of Farren's ideas. They had organized an agora to let the citizens discuss ideas and express themselves. Orkan the apprentice inquisitor had also come up with a small arena for people to punch each other silly in order to close the more heated arguments.

"You'd be amazed how people become more receptive to judgement after they've worked out their frustration," the Hallurian had wisely said, tattoos pulsing merrily in the darkness. The locals had already decided to call it the 'Hallurian discussion'. Even women had taken to it with gusto. Sometimes, all out brawls or slapping contests took place as well.

And so day after day, the Kazarans discussed and prepared. Men and women dug along the surface and cracked holes in the mountainside to make troglodyte dwellings. An entire section of the tunnels had been turned into rows of basic habitation with the Yries generously providing a pair of generators for room-sized red barriers to seal the access. The bakery and smithy were hot and busy repairing equipment used during training, while those who had decided to take arms practiced day-in day-out to hone their skills. There was even a competition going on between Solfis' recruits, the guards, and Neriad's followers.

There was a lot of fucking as well.

What pleased Viv's modern mind the most was probably how she had successfully disarmed racism, at least for a while. Nobody batted an eye when Yries came with shipments of metal they traded against necessities, nor when Irao's Hadals came to deliver wood or a trussed up monster for the day's Mechoui dish. Nobody gave a shit anymore. There were the Kazarans on one side and the Enorians who were definitely going to get it on the other.

Such was the desire to make their independence a reality that they had started to work on a constitution. We, the People, it said, in order to establish a better city, establish justice, guarantee freedom, promote the general welfare and guarantee the independence of Kazar, do ordain and establish our constitution. Then it went on about the town council and who was a citizen and so on.

The beginning might have been stolen from the United States' own preamble because she had read it long ago as part as a group project. But hey, it was public domain and the locals loved it.

All in all, things were going surprisingly well. So well, in fact, that Viv was expecting some sort of catastrophe. It did not happen. Instead, they received visitors.

It happened in the middle of the day as Viv was practicing setting up her artillery spell faster through the use of constructs. A sentry whistled to announce newcomers. Viv was not aware of the sign codes but since no one was running around screaming, it was probably okay. The visitors turned out to be mountain tribe walkers. The small group stumbled forward, obviously tired. Their thin forms were hidden behind tattered black mana repelling clothes. Viv remembered that walkers had insane stamina so these guys had obviously been pushing it. She abandoned her training for now and decided to follow them. Someone would probably ask for her anyway.

Their new guests were given fresh water and finally settled in the command room, or rather, most of them fell asleep while the leader stayed awake. The council was gathered in a matter of minutes.

"We need help," the man said without preamble. Viv realized that she knew him. He was the tall and gangly guy who had hit on her once. He was well-respected among the tribes.

"Raiders have come from Kazar. They're going from village to village, killing everyone. There's a hundred of them or so."

"A hundred soldiers?" Viv asked, sensing an opportunity.

"No, not the regular soldiers we saw. Bandits. People without uniforms. We would stop them but many of our hunters are trapped near the summits to clear out a nest of feathered locusts."

Viv remembered them from the bestiary. Those were pests that could clear out an entire harvest in a couple of days. Once in flight, there was no stopping them without losing the harvest as well.

"Our caster did tell you to expect that much," Farren noted with a cold voice.

"I know!" the man spat, "but unless you've forgotten we'll be short on food this year even if things go well. If that swarm had taken off, my people would have starved. And besides, the border villages were evacuated. The bandits went after the hidden villages."

"Hidden villages?" Viv asked.

“We have villages far above the fields to retreat to in case of danger. They cannot be seen from the road, but those bandits found us anyway. It’s like they knew where we were all along.”

“Perhaps a skill.”

“It doesn’t matter. Can you help us?”

“Orkan and I are going,” Denerim said. As an inquisitor, he would always be front and center in these cases.

“How many horses do we have?” Viv asked. They had captured a few of them from the dead riders and had some to begin with. They ate a lot of cereal but could ultimately be turned to meat so they were still around.

“Twenty-seven, I think,” Brenna said.

“Well, I’m going,” Viv said. It was obvious. She was their main power multiplier. It was also obvious that they would help the mountain tribes. Those folks were not entirely trustworthy, but they were also buffer, allies and potential food providers so of course she would not antagonize them.

There was also a serious chance to kill off some of Lancer’s forces before the final confrontation.

“We have fighters as well, around fifty brave combatants in armor. Not enough to carry the fight by themselves, sadly,” the walker said.

“We should get the Temple Guards backed by archers and Viv. Solfis as well. All our elites,” Lorn declared.

In the end, they decided to go with that plan while still leaving Koro behind in case of a monster attack. The wild woman was their best pure hunter, after all. The expedition group packed quickly and Viv realized at the last moment that they had been joined by three Hadal, including a woman with long black hair she had shaved on the sides.

[Hadal strain infiltrator, very dangerous: a Hadal strain human specialized in covert operations. She has a limited control over black mana. Assassination expert.]

Nice. Viv had no objection, and the messy group soon rode out, Solfis having given clear instructions on how to keep training.

//A necessary investment of my time, Your Grace.

//If we lose you, it is all over.

Viv felt a measure of exhilaration when they heroically rode out in two columns, dust rising under the hooves of their mounts. It felt suitably cool. The novelty lasted exactly one hour, then her ass began to hurt.

“How do those horse girls even do it,” she grumbled, “I have high stats and I’m still sore.”

//With all due respect, Your Grace, you do not have high physical stats.

Viv glared at the compact golem mounted on Marruk’s back by her side. It was lost on him. She might as well scold a stone.

//You do have high willpower.

//I suggest you use it.

“Yeah okay okay.”

Asshole. Viv shut up and focused on staying on her saddle. Again, she was surprised at how docile and resilient the local horses were, a proof that they, too, were affected by magic. Perhaps there was even a horse breeder path, who knew? In any case, they rode hard along the path with the mountains to their left and the deadlands extending to the horizon. There were no obstructions on the trail since the convoy had passed through only a couple of weeks before. Sometimes, they found discarded items and pieces of fabric around. If Lancer had wanted to follow them, he would have.

They moved for the rest of the day and only stopped as the sun set. The walker guided them to a village where they were offered cots and a warm meal in the communal house. Viv appreciated the fact that the mines now had a steady supply of fresh water, else the enclosed space would have been suffocating with so many bodies in there. She did not react when the Hadal disappeared off somewhere to sleep. Everyone was off again at dawn, relatively well-rested. Viv felt like having a magical body was a bit like doping, except that everyone was doing it and the men didn’t grow tits.

They entered the terrasse farming part of the mountain and the mood turned dark as soon as they passed the first village. People were both harvesting what they could and loading carts, fear obvious on their sun-tanned faces. Children cried. More than a few people started praying as they passed by, yelling words of encouragement. It was a very real threat to them, while to Viv it had been nothing but a side task on her way to vengeance. Up till now. She only had to think for a second to realize what ‘bandit attack’ meant in this world. Those attackers were not there to rob people and push them on the ground while laughing maniacally. This was not some PG-13 movie featuring a sexy barbarian. It was war before the rules of war were invented.

Viv calmed down and focused on the now. Mountain laborers were waiting at crossroads, redirecting the cavalry flow as it approached. Viv was amazed by how united the tribes were in their cooperation. The sun climbed overhead and they stopped at the ‘capital’ to refill their flasks. Marredyn, the official leader, approached them. He still had that massive turban on

his head that looked like a ball. He nodded at Viv, just once, but she saw a hint of tears in his eyes.

“Go. Save my people.”

It was probably a skill, but Viv felt buoyed by his prayer. It had been genuine. Everyone rested then the expedition cut through the mountain flank like a knife. The thunder of hooves heralded their arrival and when they passed, people made way and cheered. They slowed down as the sun set for the second time. It had taken less than a day and a half to cross the entire mountain territory. A record, she thought.

Before them, the land opened in the distance towards the distant dot of Kazar. Green plains extended in a band to another mountain far into the distance while, to her left, the Deadshield Woods spread to the horizon in an ocean as deep and threatening as the real thing. Viv refocused. There was smoke climbing in the air half a kilometre in the distance. They could not see the village from where they stood as it was beyond the incline. A soldier in an ancient chainmail and a red gambeson hailed them quietly.

“Are you the reinforcements?” he asked in Enorian.

“Yes,” Lorn replied, “we came as quickly as we could.”

“You are not many but... perhaps speed is for the best. Come. Follow me.”

Everyone dismounted and followed the mountain fighter through a winding path between two grass-covered mounds, then to a camp in a hollow.

Viv was impressed. Anyone down the slope would look up and see only uninterrupted mountain slope. That depression allowed fifty soldiers to hide from view. They huddled in clumps around men adorned with slightly more elaborate gear and red cloth around their helmets. Between the red cloth and ratty armors, they looked like Roman legionaries after three campaigns in the Teutoburg forest. Their weapons were clean and well-maintained though, and the mood was serious. Denerim deferred to Lorn who walked to the obvious leader. The gruff, lean old warrior was standing aside next to three prisoners. As soon as Viv got closer, she recognized them. They were two men and a woman from the guard, the very same who had left with Corel. They appeared to be healthy, if genuinely depressed. Everyone was so focused that they barely gawped at the sight of Solfis.

“Welcome, welcome,” the mountain commander greeted, “I’m Goredyn, I command this lot. You guys came fast.”

“We rode as fast as we could,” Lorn said. “What’s the situation?”

“The situation is that the Enorians have sent their thugs to rape, pillage and kill. That’s the situation,” the man fumed.

Goredyn took a deep, calming breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, anger had been replaced by grief and frustration.

“Look, I don’t know how but they found the village. It’s too late for our folks, but I won’t let the invaders leave and take their loot with them. They die on the mountain or we do. I’ll let the... the double turncoats tell you more.”

With those words, he walked out and signaled his men to assemble. They did so in silence.

Meanwhile, Viv was left with the guards.

“You gave up and fled with Corel,” Lorn said. “Now look at you. Wearing the Prince’s colors.”

“We know we fucked up or we wouldn’t have defected,” one of the men answered in a weary voice.

“Explain.”

“Corel led us back. We arrived at the city with no food. The Enorians accepted us in exchange for information. They know everything, by the way, your location, your numbers, your abilities, they even know about the golem.”

“Then they know little. Continue.”

“Yeah well, Prince Lancer settled down with the bridgers and they started to evict locals. it went about as well as you would expect. The tree of Kazar bears nooses this year, with plenty of fruits.”

The man’s tone was particularly bitter.

“That was just the beginning though. The witch forgot an important detail when she reported the number of settlers. Two thirds of them are men, men who paid not just for land to seed, if you catch my meaning.”

Viv was stunned into silence, but the others were not. Even Afghanistan had not managed to jade her completely yet. The locals were made of different stuff. There were no rules of war on Param.

Nevertheless, Lorn socked the man hard and he spat blood and a tooth. The old knight’s face had not changed.

“Continue.”

“Right. Pfft. Since the settlers were starting to get restless, Lancer got an idea. They would find the women where they were.”

“The mountain tribes...”

“And Corel volunteered.”

“You can’t be serious,” Lorn said, finally dismayed.

“Does it look like I’m fucking lying? We were already horrified by the evictions but we couldn’t do shit. The bridgers didn’t trust us. But acting as bandits? That was the last straw. We fucked off as soon as we could.”

“They’ve captured the village’s girls, anyone who can bear a child,” the female guard said, “we need to save them before they’re brought back or we might as well slit their throats.”

“How many and what do they have? Any casters?”

“Corel leads the raid. No caster, not even those hybrid siege specialists. Careful though, the prince has one with him. I think it’s a red mage but I’m not sure.”

“A pyromancer?”

“We never saw her but the bridgers mentioned a lass. She and Lancer are an item, apparently.”

“Wonderful, but I don’t give a fuck who shags whom. The numbers.”

“One twenty, easy, but they’re mostly on the second step and many of them just abandoned their path to become marauders. Good and bad, I guess.”

Viv did not get it and it showed, because the third guard addressed her.

“Marauders have skills that suppress pain, fear, hunger. Everything. They always fight at their best. Course, they don’t fight very long, or don’t live very long for that matter. Errel, I think you should tell her about the name.”

The first guard lowered his eyes for the single second it took for Lorn to make his gauntlet creak.

“Right, so Prince Lancer is good at talking. He’s good at making it all seem your fault,” the guard told Viv.

“My fault?”

“Yeah. He had people gather near the tree and talked to us. He said that the Kazarans had fled rather than face the consequences of their actions because they were weak and lured by evil. That’s you by the way. He said that the Kazarans were lazy but that they could be redeemed if your influence was removed. I almost believed it.”

“Yeah,” the woman said, “he speaks and it all makes so much sense. Everything becomes so clear. It’s only if you pay attention that cracks begin to show. The soldiers and settlers live in a world where Kazarans are scum and deserve everything that’s happening to them. We’re lazy people who dodged both wars and grew fat on the back of the hard-working people of Enoria. That’s how they see it, because of him. Oh, uh, also, you are the Great Black Slut.”

There was a lull in the conversation as almost everyone threw a furtive glance at Viv to gauge her reaction.

“I think I preferred Goodmother after all.”

//I will be sure to claw this moniker on his corpse.

//After all is done.

“Squee!”

Even Arthur was offended and she didn’t even speak.

“You are taking this pretty well for someone who cuts stone in two,” Marruk observed.

“Wow, the scion of a conservative regime uses promiscuity to degrade and discredit me, painting me as someone to be feared and looked down upon. I also happen to be someone who poisons minds so I shouldn’t be listened to. I am shocked. Appalled. Scandalized. Totally did not expect that from him.”

“Please stop rolling your eyes or you’ll see your own brain. We get it. Can we use this in battle?”

In truth, Viv was pissed. It was just that being called a slur did not even remotely compare to the rest of what he had done. She had already reached the top of scale. He could not add to it.

“We could use me as bait.”

//I object.

“Smartly, of course. Do you think that they will engage us or flee?”

“They will attack us if they think they can win. They hate us.”

“And they think we are weak,” Gorredyn said as he returned. “What did you have in mind?”

“We create a compact formation with Temple Guards and mountain infantry in front and Viv visible. Guard three deep at the front, infantry two-deep in two wings. Archers behind. We rotate around the witch and form a circle if they try to flank us,” Lorn proposed.

“My folks can do that, but no promises.”

“I will stay out and attack targets of opportunities,” the Hadal woman said. It was the first time in two days that she had spoken.

“What?” she asked when everyone looked at her.

“Nevermind, ok we do it like this. We come from uphill, unless they have archers?”

“They don’t have trained archers,” the first guard says, “let us come with you, we have to atone for our mistakes.”

“Out of the question. You’ll atone the way we tell you to atone, and that won’t be in the next fight. Alright, form up. Archers, shoot the sentries first. Lady Bob, sorry, Vivviane, keep the pressure off us. Let’s go.”

Goredyn agreed to let the Temple Guard take the center since they had the best warriors. He took the right flank and named a squad leader for the left. The archers spread themselves behind. It took a few minutes to set up and make sure that everyone understood their role, and Marruk used this opportunity to lean in for a question.

“I know how humans treat Kark. But how can humans treat humans like that? I thought you had laws?”

“Laws and empathy apply to people, that’s why the first step for rulers is always to dehumanize the population they want to persecute. But, you know, I’m doing it as well. I’m going to throw spells at people and just focus on protecting my side. They have to be horrible, less than human things to me or I’ll hesitate.”

“Have you considered making them human and solving things?” Marruk asked, but it was more a cry of the heart than a proposal.

“Have you?” Viv retorted. She could not help it.

Marruk kept quiet as the formation closed around them.

“Your race is not kind.”

It was both an explanation and a remark. Maybe the Kark were kinder. Maybe that’s why they were losing.

They went over the ridge.

Viv felt a distinct feeling of distance from the enfolding scene as nearly sixty soldiers in packed formation walked down a slope to a mass of murderers and rapists twice their

numbers. Red capes and dull armors shone strangely in the dying light. Their expressions were grim and their eyes focused forward. It was strangely quiet for such a grand event, the calm before the storm. Viv had already experienced a local battle but it had been rushed and Varska had taken the lead. Now, Viv was front and center and as the battle line advanced, a terrible disconnect harried her neurons. Here they were, walking down a slope in a straight line behind a shield wall. Viv was a fucking combat medic for fuck sake. How had this happened?

Then a flicker in the sky made her raise her eyes for an instant. It was Arthur circling the village like some great bird of prey. The sight jolted her and she became hyper aware.

The scent of sweat.

Boots stomping on the ground.

The low earth domes of the mountain folks' dwelling gathered in two concentric circles.

The sentries on top as they turned, as they died choking on three fingers of steel. Their death rattles sent the camp into an uproar.

A particularly stupid man with no pants jumped out from cover and saw them, then shook his fist in their direction while bellowing curses. Two arrows hit him in the sternum. Blood leaked and leaked. He fell down. Thirty more meters.

No one came to meet them.

"Hold!"

'No plan survives first contact with the enemy', or so the saying went. On the other side of the walls, people were rushing around.

"Should we go in?"

"Hold," Lorn replied.

Someone was screaming orders.

"Hey," Viv asked an archer, "can you locate the enemy commander?"

"The one talking on the other side of the wall, yeah?" another replied, "I can."

"Then come next to me and throw an arrow his way."

"Into the wall?"

"Yeah."

The man obeyed and a shaft buried itself in a thick layer of terracota.

There were civilians in the village. Back on earth, that could have been a court martial. This was not earth.

“Arty.”

The relatively thin spear of black mana punched through the mud with disdainful ease. Corel screamed. Viv recognized the disgraced captain’s pitch. Served him well. Fuck terracota, and fuck him.

With this, the mob yelled and their clamor reached a crescendo. One moment, Viv could not see a single person. The next, fighters surged like ants from behind every building. The largest opening had the highest number of combatants. And women. The marauders advanced in a vague line, pushing their captives in front to act as meat shields. Viv saw bruises, wounds, denuded flesh. She shut it down.

On their side, the mountain warriors brandished their blades with resignation clear in their face. Time was short and so Viv’s mind went into overdrive.

Draw a circle under her feet to help with the wide purge net. Inscribe the glyph for direction, to help.

Draw colorless mana.

Draw more of it.

Quickly.

Outliers hit their flank. There were marauders climbing on top of walls to throw stones. Some had slings. Solfis placed a hand on Viv’s shoulder.

//I will cover you, Your Grace.

//Give them hell.

One of the slingers fell with an arrow through the skull. Another got a facefull of screeching dragonling. A third disappeared, dragged backwards by a pale arm. She had enough colorless mana now. She manifested the runes Varska had taught her. Sound had been the mage’s favorite domain.

The mountain tribes spoke Old Imperial while the invaders spoke Enorians. The two languages were close but not that close. It was the ancient language she picked for her next words.

“DOWN. DOWN ON THE GROUND. NOW.”

She did not wait to see. Black mana flooded from her core into the circle and then back into her. Black tendrils grew around like Medusa's hair. She was ready, so ready. Just had to wait...

The mountain women threw themselves forward. A portly old girl jumped on a teen and covered her head. Another unlucky one was stabbed as she fell, her hesitation fatal. There was still one standing. It would be enough. It would have to be enough.

"Purge net."

Tendrils of absolute darkness whipped through the tight ranks of the marauders with a furious hiss. Some tried to get down. Some hid behind shields. It made no difference. Viv's spells had become fast enough that she would be hard-pressed to dodge them and there were dozens of tendrils. The first ranks were shredded. Blood pooled under their mangled bodies.

"FORWARD!"

Viv suddenly felt danger and was suddenly grabbed back, her nope shield fizzling in the air. Something clanged, and she found herself looking at Solfis' yellow glare. There was a small impact on his shoulder's armor. The runes glowed in the twilight.

"Wha?"

//Archer.

//Marruk, no exposure until I am back.

"Understood."

Viv was grabbed and pushed back under Marruk's door-shield. For a few seconds, there was nothing to see except that one plank of wood. It was quite grainy. She felt a bit off.

Pretty sure someone had tried to decapitate her with an arrow.

Women started to be pulled into the formation as the soldiers let them through. Most of them collapsed. A few were crying. Solfis landed back in the formation.

"Any chance you could help?"

//There could be another archer.

//Why don't you stand up and help?

Viv did so. Their flanks were already buckling under the pressure of the bandits.

[marauder, dangerous: one who follows a path dedicated to raiding, violence, and fighting beyond one's limit.]

As she watched, a man with his throat slit managed to grab a shield and pull a mountain soldier forward where his allies stabbed him.

“Werfer.”

Another furious hiss. The mass of bodies smashing against their lines evaporated. Some bandits dodged back or ran with smooth speed. Others fell to the ground and were melted anyway. As for the rest, they found themselves between a death cloud and vengeful blades. They died in droves.

“Got anymore like that?” Lorn yelled.

“One or two,” Viv replied. All the spells she had cast had been high consumption. She was already getting tired.

“Then do the other side!”

At the front, the Temple Guard had managed to recover most of the captives by virtue of stabbing any foes that approached. All of their fighters were far into the third path at the minimum and they made short work of attackers, particularly the pair of inquisitors who were virtually unstoppable. Viv trotted while Marruk left her spot in the formation. This side had collapsed more so the spell wouldn't be as useful. She cast it anyway. Men fell and died. The spell ate through them, not in the way of acid but as if whatever part of their body was touched just went missing. A few used spells, goutts of light and fire to try and protect themselves but their attunement was pathetic. The werfer ate them too.

With the lines buckling, the battle turned into a more general melee. Some of the soldiers on the edge broke formation to rescue wounded allies or fleeing girls. Arrows and stones flew through the air. By Viv's side, Marruk crumpled skulls and spines, one overhead strike at a time. As for Viv, she could feel her conduits struggling to draw mana from her core and that meant that she was close to empty. She decided to pace herself by throwing the occasion purge spell, focusing on the most beleaguered soldiers. It was more important to protect her allies than to kill now.

Despite her best efforts, soldiers fell under the marauders' relentless assault. More than a few fighters got caught off-guard after inflicting fatal wounds, only for their foes to strike at them with renewed vigor. Without the chain mails there would have been a lot more fatalities.

The battle devolved into a grind. All the slingers had been taken out at this point so savagery fought against cold anger and lost. At one point, Viv's side was reduced to less than thirty fighters covering the wounded but Viv's surgical strikes and the quality of their own soldiers carried the day.

The marauders never broke. They fought to the last man. Viv cast until her conduits were empty and drawing mana raked her soul. Solfis never left her side, though he sometimes lunged at a passing foe like a moray out of its hole. She stopped counting the times when someone she hit would stumble and fall because she had removed an important part of their nervous system. No flesh wounds for Viv.

The mop up began.

For Viv, it meant standing around looking like she was not about to faint. For the others, it meant finishing off stragglers. The mountain soldiers in particular executed the wounded with the slow but brutal manner of those whose exhaustion warred with an undying hatred. All the women who had failed to join their circle had died. Viv counted six of them dotting the field, unarmed forms obvious in the background of marauders in thick cloth dyed white and blue. It stank of shit and blood.

Viv saw a temple guard calmly walk to a mewling bandit and stab him in the chest. She turned to Lorn who had stayed near the large group of wounded they had been covering. He had used all the life mana he had and was now standing guard.

"Don't take this as a challenge," Viv said, "but doesn't righteous war imply taking those who cannot defend themselves prisoners?"

He took it as a challenge.

"Oh, sure. Let me do the accelerated version of the events."

The knight took out his sword and walked to a wounded bandit on the side. He was beyond help, eyes closed, breath short.

"I'd like to imagine that I took this man, healed him, dragged him back to the mines, put him in a prison that we do not have and gave him food that we cannot spare. The day of the trial has come. You stand accused of murder, rape, banditry. The sentence is death."

Lorn killed him. It was probably a mercy.

"Neriad asks for it, but He lets us define what is righteous. Right now, finishing our foes cleanly is more than they deserve but I'll do it anyway. By the way, you may want to check the village. Won't be long before Corel breathes his last if he hasn't already. Black mana wounds are extremely hard to heal after all."

Viv decided that leaving would be for the best. She could not even help with the wounded without keeling over anyway. Arthur landed nearby, maw dyed red, and they walked into the village.

Chapter 65: Birds of a feather

Viv's older colleagues always had a faraway look when they mentioned Serbia and Kosovo. Now, Viv knew why. Out of all the heinous things people could do to each other, the wholesale slaughter of civilians topped the list, if not by horror, at least by frequency. It should have come as no surprise that funding an expedition to take land did not attract the most empathetic people, and that gathering raiders out of the group would lower the bar even more. Viv had simply not thought about it.

Corpses were strewn haphazardly through the rings of buried houses. Boys. Men. The raiders had bound older women to the flat walls of the communal hall. Their white hair fluttered in the wind under scarlet scarves. The slingers had used them for target practice. Farther down the road, cages waited, some of them open and their captives crashing on the ground in tears. The three Hadals were liberating the rest with a pilfered key.

"Marruk, could you let the others know that the prisoners need help?"

The shield bearer left without a word. Distaste was clear over her large face and Viv could guess why. The Kark had made her opinion of human practices clear enough.

They found Corel lying on his side in a pool of blood. Anybody on Earth would have died of shock minutes before but not him apparently, not with the stats fuckery. Viv wondered how that worked exactly, was it magical energy that carried oxygen to his brain? Because most of the original fluid filling that role had left his body. Viv's spell had hit him in the left clavicle. It had left a crescent of missing flesh reaching to his shoulder. Where the spell had hit, flesh and armor had been sheared off cleanly. There were no signs of burn or acidity. It was just gone. She noticed in passing that the spell had punched through at least two walls before digging into the ground. It had been a risk. There could have been civilians, but in her mind, eliminating a powerful leader had been worth it.

Corel saw her then, and smirked in the bitter fashion of those who have lost too much to cry. It made Viv feel angry, with the background of slaughtered civvies. Someone who had stooped so low had no right to feel sorry for himself.

"Squeeeeee."

Arthur had left to sniff the body of a kid. She did not appear to understand, and neither did Viv.

Corel knew things. She had to... she had to ask him.

She was just too angry.

"I suppose this is my fault as well?" she asked loudly, arms spread to expose the disaster around.

"Cockroaches clinging to their mountain slope. Useless. Let Kazar down," he growled weakly.

"But not as much as you, Corel. I simply don't get it. You were a cop for fuck sake. I know that it was you who showed the raiders the path to the hidden mountain refuges. Only a local notable would have known and you are the only turncoat so far."

"Talk all you want," the man gasped, "Kazar is dead. The one that mattered, not the gathering of idiots you'll use as a stepping stone, Bob the Calamity. Resh was the city. You are just a parasite moving its corpse around."

"Are those your last words? Is this how you want to end up, killed in a bandit raid you led yourself? A slaver, murderer and a rapist? Because the woman you admired died?"

Corel was gasping now. He had stopped trying to save himself and the last of his life was quickly leaving. Viv knew that interrogating him now would yield no results. He was too stubborn, and he was dying too quickly.

"Better to destroy it all... than let you steal it..."

"You are insane."

"Hah."

The fallen captain's eyes left her and focused on a point by her side. Inquisitor Denerim had come, followed by his apprentice. He was both livid and detached.

"Are you here... to judge me?" Corel rattled.

"Yes."

Denerim's hand whipped like a snake and fastened on the fallen captain's forehead. Meanwhile, his eyes shone like orbs of molten gold and the hair of his grey-streaked beard lifted from some invisible wind radiating light from some unknown source.

"Know what they endured," he roared.

Corel screamed. He screamed until he died.

Denerim shuddered. Viv was a bit disappointed. No information from the man, and yet he did suffer an absolutely horrendous and pathetic death so there was that. She would take all the victories she could.

“You need a moment?” she asked.

“Yes, please. Sometimes, I learn things from such punishment but this time I did not. I am sorry. It had to be done.”

“Don’t worry, it was not like I absolutely had to kill him with my own hands.”

“No, ah, I forgot that you were a traveler. Sometimes, carnage can give birth to aberrations. Abnormal monsters that actively hunt humans. I had to purify Corel’s soul or dark magic could have focused on his powerful resentment to turn him into something even worse.”

“Ah yes, Farren mentioned something of the sort.”

The discussion petered out. A dozen soldiers were helping the caged prisoners down and towards the main group under the watchful gaze of the three Hadals. Temple guards went from body to body to touch them and stop them from rising as revenants. The wounded were taken care of by their fellows with bandages and magic. Not for the first time, Viv felt completely useless. Fortunately, Solfis had a great sense of timing.

//Your Grace, there is the matter of the archer that tried to kill you.

“Oh yeah. Are you ok by the way? I saw damage on your frame.”

//The mark six version of the mage-killer frame has an integrated self-repair mechanism for long deployments.

//At the cost of durability.

“It’s the first time that I see you damaged.”

//Indeed.

//We operate under strenuous circumstances and I had to make do with improvised equipment.

//In an optimal setting, the dragon bone would have been treated with precious oils.

//And the glyphs would have been etched with silverite powder or an equivalent.

//The use of second-rate materials has led to this.

“Maybe we can give you an armor or something.”

//No, Your Grace.

**//Anything you come up with now will reduce my overall performance.
//Please consider that my loadout was designed by the Empire's top engineers.
//The mage-killer can absorb and disperse all but the most devastating of spells.
//In exchange, my frame is vulnerable to physical damage.
//An armor would reduce my mobility, which is where my greatest advantage lay.
//I am a strike golem, not a guardian golem after all.**

"I realize that I never asked about your abilities. You told me that you were dedicated to hunting monsters and high-value targets but I never dug deeper into the question."

**//You saw what I could do when I slew the necromancers.
//This was an accurate demonstration of my capabilities.
//With my current frame.
//As for why I stayed by your side instead of hunting, it was to protect you.
//Since this was the battle's only point of failure.**

"What do you mean?"

**//You are a smart and resourceful heir, Your Grace, just as I had hoped.
//For example, using an arrow from a scout to guide your spells is a method that was recorded in my database.
//But it did not occur to me, because my ability to think outside of the basic parameters remains limited.
//It did occur to you, which shows that I can trust you to fulfill your role.
//As such, I calculated that we could only fail if you were disabled.
//I also calculated that there was a not-insignificant chance that the prince would send an assassin to take you off while you were distracted.
//By using the fallen captain as bait.
//It is the sort of cheap, honorless tactics my prediction algorithms have come to expect from that thin-blooded upstart.**

Solfis walked and led Viv and Arthur to a small hovel behind which a man lay dead. He was dressed in what she could only qualify as a medieval Ghillie suit, complete with terracotta dust and pieces of grass. The interesting part was his bow, which was very large and looked deadly. It was made from a dark sort of wood Viv had never seen before.

[Killer yew bow, enchanted: this bow requires a large amount of power to draw. It is best suited for dedicated paths.]

It looked nasty, but not as nasty as the barbed javelins that served as its arrows.

"So, Prince Lancer gathered all the disgruntled among his group and threw them at us with the hope that they would inflict enough damage before they died."

//Historical records hint that just getting rid of them could have been an equally important objective.

//A summary analysis of the marauders' equipment indicates that most of it was their own.

//The quality is simply too low to have belonged to a proper regiment.

//Additionally, there was a high likelihood that you would show up.

//Hence why he sent a sniper to take you off, just in case.

"He's really taking the cheap investment, high return approach every time. He must really need the money."

//Would that alter your plans, Your Grace?"

Viv thought about it for a moment then shook her head.

"I don't think so. The way I see it, he's going for the low-hanging fruits in a bid for his father's seat. He got the money from the settlers, then he'll get the money from the slaves he'll bring back since there are at least six to eight hundred people who did not evacuate in time. He's fulfilled most of his objectives, and after he's gone he won't really care about Kazar. It was never a strategic objective anyway."

//The iron mine will change this.

"Yes, but only after he takes the throne, I think. We're all secondary concerns to him. He'll want to do the bare minimum then piss off to the power race that will come with the season for war. We wait for him to leave, then we take the city back."

//I must ask, Your Grace.

//You take the city back then what?

//You will be the most driving element in what is technically a separatist revolutionary government.

//Against one of the continent's most powerful kingdoms.

//Is this how you envisioned your stay in Nyil?

"No, I guess not."

//What will you do then?

"I have not decided yet," she lied.

Solfis leaned forward and his yellow orbs pulsed once in their cavities. He tilted his head. To Viv, he looked smug.

//I see.

//I, Sofis, am delighted to see that your objectives now go beyond just going back to your home realm.

Viv cursed in her mind when she realized that he was completely right. At first, she had been a tourist. Clearly, Nyil had a lot of stuff going but it did not really concern her as she was just a transient. Now, she cared. It was like going to some obscure country for two weeks of hiking, getting trapped there by a government crackdown and joining the guerilla. She had been pulled in so deep that even if someone popped out from nowhere to offer her a ticket back, she would not accept it.

Not while Arthur was vulnerable, not while over a thousand people depended on her for their survival.

And not, she had to admit, until she had her revenge.

“Fuck.”

//Welcome home, Your Grace.

Viv glared and was quickly reminded that glaring at Solfis was an exercise in futility. The cold shower of the recent realization also calmed her down. Revenge was good but she would not drag Kazar into it. She would find another way. And if Prince Lancer actually won both the throne and the war, she would probably have to give up, at least until she gathered a lot of support. She was not completely insane.

Damn.

What a world.

//Should we return to the group, Your Grace?

“Hold on, let me get the bow and arrows, no need to let them go to waste. Let’s go and talk to the Hadals. I’m curious.”

They moved out and found that all the civilians had been freed and moved. The Hadals were now lounging on top of the cages like sated tigers. Their leader, a woman, followed Viv with their eyes as she approached. She dropped gracefully down when they were close enough.

“Hi,” Viv greeted, “we have not met yet. Can I ask your name?”

“Two-Six,” the other replied in the same raspy voice as Irao. She was smoother than him, less awkward. There was also a bite to her tone and posture that Viv normally enjoyed but was a bit too tired to appreciate right now. Two-Six shared the same skeletal traits as Irao. They looked more exotic on her, and a tad softer as well. Black hair reached to her shoulders, tied in a ponytail that was a bit too thin. She had shaved both sides of her head and Viv thought she looked a bit like a goth who had adopted the man-bun. She immediately felt guilty for the unkind thought.

“Well, hello Two-Six. Folks may not say it since you’re a recent addition, so thanks. I appreciate you getting those slingers off our backs and rescuing the civvies.”

Two-Six nodded and so did her two bald companions.

“Appreciated. The mountain warriors actually did thank us. Lorn did it as well. We are pleased. And relieved.”

“You were testing to see if integration was possible?” Viv asked, curious. The woman smiled in return.

“Not integration. Cooperation. Living together. Most of us still struggle with... normal people. The lads and I are second generation Hadals. We have less of what makes us us, so we are better able to function around normal people.”

“I was not aware that Hadals had different, errrr, strains?” Viv asked, trying not to make it too awkward, but Two-Six just laughed.

“No, I mean that my mom was a Hadal but my dad was a normal human.”

“Oh.”

“She told me that a large amount of mead was involved.”

“I see.”

She was trying to test her, Viv thought. Two-Six’s mouth smiled but her eyes didn’t.

“Half of our group are first-generation. They tend to survive better because they were better-trained, you see? It’s hard to make it to adulthood when half of the world kills you on sight.”

“Hopefully this will change now that you have joined us,” Viv answered.

“Yeah. Hopefully. I know that you took a risk and expect us to pull our own weight so I decided to join the war effort. More of us will assist as time goes on and we... recover. This is the first time in my life that I can show myself for what I am and not get hunted.”

Contrary to Irao, her eyes were black, not yellow and slitted like a cat, but as Viv watched they shone red in the dim light and she thought there might be some illusion at hand. Obviously the Hadal was still on-guard and Viv only understood too well why she would protect herself. After what must have been decades of persecution, any entity that welcomed them must be seen as a trap. It didn’t really matter to Viv so long as the woman carried her own weight.

As Viv pondered, Two-Six came to a decision. Her mask of casual snark disappeared and her expression grew serious but not aggressive.

“Look, I’m not going to threaten you. You know what we can do, we know what your golem can do. Just think, though. Right now, most of us wait for the hammer to drop on us. If you are what you say you are, you stand to gain our eternal gratitude. All the remaining Hadals survived for a reason, and all of them will eventually make their way here. I’ll be your hand in the dark in the meanwhile, but please just give it a real chance. You won’t regret it, I swear.”

“I was honest when I said that all were welcome regardless of species so long as they behaved,” Viv assured, “I just hope that one day you will trust me enough to believe those words.”

Again, utter platitudes, but the Hadal liked it, or so it seemed. Viv decided to move and check on what was going on before the conversation grew awkward. It turned out that the Temple Guards had things well in hand. The mountain soldiers, less so. They had fourteen fatalities out of about fifty fighters. It was an incredibly high number. Most armies would have broken long before it happened. As such, she and her allies had to wait for a full day before everything got sorted and the bodies were incinerated using very efficient pyres. The return to the capital was not the triumphant march Viv hoped it would be. They had many of the rescued civilians with them who were to be split among distant families. The handful of small villages Corel’s raiders had found were nothing but graveyards now.

Marredyn, the mountain leader, took Viv apart during the humble celebration feast he insisted on having. They made their way to the stairs of his long house and she caught a few discussions that were happening between mountain folks who could understand Enorian and her own archers.

“So, the rules that direct how we live together are called the social contract, right? But a social contract is implicit. That’s just a fancy way to say that it ain’t written down, you see? So, you got to write the rules down or else old Ramak down the street can say it’s ok to eat your apples and you say it ain’t and it’s a right mess. So first, you got to write the general mood of the rules. Principles. And there comes the constitution... “

She felt like she’d started a cult.

Marredyn didn’t seem to notice. Up they went, under the rafters. The mountain leader’s office was small and made of wood, and more importantly only contained a handful of papers. It reminded Viv that she was on the frontier of a world that didn’t have much of an industry that she could see, and that Marredyn had to govern without notes. She wondered if he had a skill for that.

As for the leader, he sat down heavily and stared at Viv with hooded eyes. They reflected under the orange glow of a pungent candle. He waited for a few minutes, long enough for Viv to grow distinctly uncomfortable. Only her habit of ignoring cheap tactics prevented her from squirming.

She didn't think that Marredyn was doing it on purpose.

"You are going to attack Kazar and try to retake it," the old man finally said.

"Yes."

It was no secret, or at least no secret to anyone on her side. Marredyn was on her side. If he had not been there before, he was now.

"What will happen if you succeed? Will you change the terms we had with Mayor Ganimatalo? After all, Kazar will have to be rebuilt."

"I don't even know what terms those were, and I'm not interested right now. We have a saying where I come from. Don't sell the rathclaw's pelt before you've killed it."

It was a good-enough approximation.

"I see. The mayor allowed us to trade not just with the Church of Neriad but with some select armed forces I will not name for confidentiality reasons. She took a ten percent share in return."

He leaned forward.

"If you waive that fee for the next ten years, we will lend you soldiers. Fifty well-trained mountain warriors with their equipment, just like those you fought alongside with today. Think about it."

Viv did not have to think. She felt something in him that she recognized in herself. It was the leadership skills. She understood it better than. Leadership was possibly one of the few skills where progress came from without, not from within. It was a mark of the world on her soul that told the other: here is a mover, here is a shaker, and here is someone who gets shit done. Marredyn outclassed her completely, but she had another one social skill well-suited for the situation.

Viv let it happen. Something rose with her anger. It was the same vague feeling that permeated her being when she was doing, shall we say, aggressive negotiation.

She leaned forward in return.

"You know, we found traces of your deadland walkers scouting the mine while you were away."

The man blinked at the *non sequitur*.

“Now I can appreciate that you look after your own first and foremost,” she continued, “that’s why you sent people sniffing around the mine for opportunities even though the Church of Neriad claimed it first. After all, it’s a cruel world. Likewise, I can understand that you want to cover yourself against a leader who you are not familiar with.”

Her intimidation aura spread throughout the room and even the ever-canny Marredyn took a deep breath.

“But what I can’t tolerate is people fucking with me, because I represent Kazar and fucking with us is not something that’s in your best interest. Not now, not ever. So I’m going to be perfectly clear. You will send those soldiers because you can’t afford to ignore your villages being so casually destroyed and your people murdered and taken. You are going to send those soldiers because if you don’t do shit, when I return in one month, someone else will be sitting in your chair wearing that fancy turban. I’m not someone you screw with that easily, old man, and I don’t appreciate you trying.”

Leadership: Beginner 7

Intimidation: Intermediate 5

Hm. That intimidation rise was slightly worrisome.

“Fair enough, young one, fair enough,” Marredyn replied with a chuckle. He showed no more signs of tension. “You will forgive an old man his tricks. I was not asking for much, I assure you, but I agree. It was inappropriate. Please accept my apologies.”

“I’ll accept actions, not words. Also I have a proposal.”

The old man’s eyes glinted with the fires of greed. It would take more than Viv to affect him in the long run, it seemed.

“Do tell?”

“We could train your men for food.”

“Our men are already trained.”

“Your men are trained like a militia handling well-made but antiquated equipment. You have lost much of what you used to be.”

“And you have found a way to recover it?”

“I have.”

He remained silent for a while.

“What we have lost, eh? We have lost much, and not just training methods. We are those who didn’t stray far and returned as soon as we could, but the deadlands stopped receding. They had reached an equilibrium.”

“There is a way to claim back more ground and you already use it. I can make more ward stones. Although, we both know that it’s not what you need. You need to reclaim your legacy. You need more breathing room than just the leagues of harsh terrain you stubbornly cling on. You need to live, not just survive, or you will never fully flourish.”

“You are exaggerating. We have traditions that keep us strong. However, I have to admit that we could accomplish much more with more means. Suppose we accept your offer of training against food, what then?”

“You can always join us through a military alliance.”

Marredyn laughed.

“No, I know what you are going for. We will not bend to a Kazaran. Never.”

“We shall see how things develop, shall we? In the meanwhile, I need an answer.”

“Two hundred crates of fresh greens over the next two months by weekly delivery. A hundred of various tubers and millet to feed my fifty men for this duration. This is a generous offer. Please do not push me now.”

Viv made a quick calculation. Two hundred crates was a massive amount, practically a full warehouse. They had only brought several times that number to begin with. It would not just stretch their food, it would also bring variety to everyone’s diet, an important aspect of morale. Marredyn’s offer was indeed generous. More importantly, her political instincts told her that the old grumbly man had thrown his pride into the mix. To object now was to invite a worse trade and she would accept it anyway. They were desperate.

“Deal. And thank you.”

“We have suffered more losses in soldiers yesterday than we have in the past two years combined. Thank me after this is all over by bringing me my people back. ”

“That is the plan.”

Chapter 66: The Gathering Storm.

Training picked up. The mines now had the peculiar mood of a home army camp on the eve of deployment. Half of it was all business, but the other half did their best to make the circumstances more pleasant. The baths were kept clean and well-flooded, there were new constructions rising every week and a few kind souls had spent a lot of time and mana to create bushes of wildflowers, bringing some much-needed green to the desolate place. Viv spent her days either practicing outside or accompanying convoys to and from the Yries camp and specific hunting grounds that only the Hadals dared travel. She fought the moles again, the bat, two giant worms, a sort of trap lamprey that dropped from the ceiling and a particularly pungent gut spiller. The Yries asked her to help clear the vale outside their cave which she did for a few more services. Her efforts bore fruit and she got a pleasant surprise after a particularly intense practice with the inquisitors.

Mana sense, mana manipulation and mana absorption have merged into the advanced skill: mana mastery at novice 1

It was a breakthrough, one that had a distinct and lasting impact on her perception of the world. Mana pervaded everything, absolutely everything. Even the stones had a potential, an impact on their surroundings that went beyond the mere physical. The entire world of Nyil was... malleable. Someone powerful enough could turn it into a salt plain or an eternal garden. It would take an impossible existence but it was technically feasible. Mana colors were not true colors but categories of intents left on reality. She could taste them, feel them, see them... not manipulate them since she did not have the proper distribution though, and that was strange.

She could see the red around a lit torch, but she could not grasp it with her mind. It felt strange to her, distant, though not alien. It just did not recognize her. The part of her soul that moved the world did not have the limbs to touch red mana. Trying was a strange and frustrating experience, but the frustration lasted only so long as she didn't try to touch the black. When she did, well...

Once, Varska had said that using mana was struggling against the will of the world. It certainly felt that way with colorless mana which was simply raw potential. Black mana was an entire different beast altogether. Before, it was like an overeager Labrador puppy. Now, it was a bloodhound. Even if Viv's control was far from perfect the energy still flowed in and around her with lithe, deadly grace. It begged to be unleashed. It almost felt... alive.

Lost Heiress: 1/10

Her attunement had also reached 24.2%. The idea that such an abstract concept could be measured with math baffled her to no end, yet it came from the god of magic so who was she to judge? Concretely, she was on the verge of casting her artillery spells the way they were meant to be, not their simplified version. Her mana channels also reached the mage level and her ability to cast continuously increased dramatically. All in all, it felt like a massive improvement after months of relentless pursuit. She sometimes wished she had gotten it a bit before, but quickly told herself that it may not have helped much.

The Yries made good on their promises and they delivered heavy armors and weapons with regularity. The trainees selected for this week's shipments immediately switched to their proper gear and discarded those that had been pilfered from revenants. The armors themselves were iron, very dark, and made by means unknown. They had a glassy, pitted quality to them that gave off a raw vibe that worried her until the town smith and the church conducted some tests.

"This is prime work, if ugly. I threw an axe at it and the thing barely got dented. The owls sure know how to build things."

Meanwhile, the rest of the goodies arrived, mostly Yries crossbows. Those were not new. They were the sort of cobbled-together weapons the strange beings had used on the revenants, yet they were effective and the guards took a liking to their own. Many took to decorating their weapons with some turning into real works of art. The only parts left untouched were those dedicated to firing and they were mercifully standard so bolts were interchangeable.

Viv got her silverite tool delivered with the black mana stone used as pommel. It was not a short staff, of course. She wasn't some sort of field marshal. It was a knife.

A big ass knife.

To stab people, because why not have the option? She was going to bring that thing into battle and did not see the point of looking like a cheerleader. It also came with a sheath that complimented her off-grey robes pretty well.

The design was both simple and exquisite and truly showed what a master forger could achieve when skills and magic were involved. She didn't think that a modern computer-based cutting machine could have done any better. Most of the surface was left untouched except for a few shield glyphs that immediately proved useful.

'Pok'

"Aw, DAMMIT!"

'Hss'

“Hah, I got it this time.

“Paf.”

“Gah, not the shin you ASSHOLE!”

Day after day, the children of Kazar would sneak up on her and throw small stones to help her train acuity reflex. The skill allowed her to cast at an incredible speed when in danger, replacing finesse-based reflexes with mental ones. It was an incredibly useful survival tool and she was more than happy to see it develop. The only problem was that she was convinced that the little twerps had gotten skill increases too. They were merciless. Solfis had even been forced to implement one hour breaks between attempts so that she could practice in relative peace.

Arthur was a bit surprised about the violence at first, yet she understood the concept of ‘mock-battle’ and training.

“No.”

“Squee?”

“Not you too. No.”

“Squeeeeeee...”

She was not the only one making progress. A month after the start of the training, Solfis went to visit her as she was recovering near the well. He had brought Ban with him. The old, retired militiaman looked even more thunderous and wiry now, all lean muscles like taut steel cables. His long white beard jutted out of his heavy helmet while his dark gaze zeroed on Viv with laser-like intensity. As for the Lost Heiress, she was trying to chill and the atmosphere had just turned dead serious.

“Yes?” she asked, regaining her composure.

//We have achieved success, Your Grace.

//Ban has reached a milestone and he is able to upgrade his path.

//There is only one condition left to achieve.

“I need to swear allegiance to the Harrakan Empire,” Ban said, looking miffed, “Can’t say that I’m ecstatic.”

“The Old Empire? The one that blew up completely?”

**//You are considered as heiress to the empire, Your Grace.
//I am aware that I stretched the rules to nominate you when we met.
//However, it appears that the Dead God, Nous, has a sense of humor.
//Ban must swear allegiance to you.**

“Errr, fine? I guess? Is there a ceremony or...”

“Not so fast,” the old man stopped her. He took a deep breath, quite flustered.

“Look, I swore to myself that I would never bend the knee again to any man. Or woman, I suppose. I am forced into a situation I don’t like one bit. That said, hmm, if it will improve our chances against Prince Lancer then, harrumph, I suppose that I can make that sacrifice. However...”

And there Ban’s expression grew so dark that Viv could have sworn that it was a skill. It was particularly impactful because Ban was quite strong, his black armor was quite thick and he had a full metal practice stick that looked like it weighed a ton.

“Betray the ideals you’ve shown, ask me to kill children or the like, and you’ll get my spear through the guts, even if it kills me. You won’t see it coming but you sure as Enttiku will feel it going out. We clear?”

“Perfectly clear.”

Solfis didn’t say anything so Viv assumed it was all fine.

Ban sighed again, a powerful movement that shook his whole torso.

“Right. Right. I, Ban, son of Greror, solemnly swear to serve the heir, long may she live, for the good of the empire and its people. Gah! Harrak eternal.”

//Harrak eternal.

“It... It’s working.”

Viv inspected the man as his eyes grew wide as saucers.

[Harrakan heavy recruit: dangerous, a man who follows the path of the Harrakan heavy infantry. He focuses on heavy pole weapons, group formations and squad tactics.]

Ban relaxed and his eyelids fluttered.

“By Neriad’s balls that is one powerful path. If this is the norm then no wonder real infantry tore us to shreds. Fuck. This is so unfair.”

//Ah yes, the world is unfair.

“Don’t patronize me.

//But it is quite nice when it is unfair in your favor, is it not?”

“... Yeah.”

//Let us stack the odds.

//Back to it, recruit.

“It feels so strange not to be called a maggot anymore...”

//That’s the spirit, recruit.

//Now go back to training with the other maggots.

Viv watched them leave and returned to her practice.

The next pleasant surprise happened one morning as a regular Yries convoy reached town. The owl-creatures had come often to trade stuff and the Kazarans had only been too happy to oblige. It had the added effect of giving jobs to the less martial members of the community. This time, the visitors were unexpectedly joined by Lak-Tak, the large female stone-weaver. She requested to see Viv and a crowd gathered before the mine’s entrance to watch the scene, with the light of the morning sun shining from behind the mountains.

“Friend Viviane, you have been truthful and fair in your dealings with us so far. After we were chased from our homes, we had a poor opinion of your species. We still do, but we think you and Farren and the others might pave the way forward to greater cooperation.”

Lak-Tak spoke in a slow and determined voice, each syllable clipped but perfectly clear.

“Thank you, Lak-Tak. It means a lot coming from the Yries,” Viv replied, appreciative.

“Yes. By greater cooperation, we mean more exchanges and more trades. You can even come and visit sometimes but generally we would like to be left alone.”

“Of course.”

Blunt.

“To symbolize our friendship, we have designed a shield that will prove useful to you. We remember that you were hurt by a quarrel. This shield will stop the quarrel and arrows that will come this way. Please note that this is not an oath. Also, please note that the shield only blocks quarrels that hit it, you still need to hide behind.”

“Oh, thank you. That will be very useful.”

Marruk grumbled something but Viv thought that it was a delicate attention. The powerful Kark fighter could only ‘gate-keep’ (haha) the enemy from one direction at the time. And it was true that the Yries quarrel that hurt her had passed through her partially-formed shield, only looking a bit corroded. The snipers probably had arrows that were even more efficient. It did not hurt to have more protection, not to mention that she usually didn’t use her hands to cast anyway. That was more of a mage thing. She was much more instinctual.

“This is a very thoughtful gift,” Viv added in her most earnest voice as she was handed her newest piece of gear. It felt nice to get free stuff once in a while.

“You are welcome. Please kill Lancer. If not, please keep him away from us. After that, please remain the same.”

“I will not turn on you, if that’s what you fear. I promise.”

“I think that you believe your own words. I also know that humans desire much. I hope that you remember this moment when it will be convenient and easy to go back on your word. Then, you will know your own measure.”

“Yeah. And I hope it never comes to that.”

“It will. Iron is very valuable. Goodbye, Viviane the Lost Heiress. Stay alive and stay yourself. The drill is almost finished, we will send it up soon.”

The Yries passed a spindly limb over her heart, or at least Viv thought it was her heart. It might have been her gallbladder. She nodded once and departed with the other Yries squawking excitedly at the sight of greenery. They were gone soon after.

Viv looked at her shield. it was round and surprisingly light given its girth. It came with a harness that she had to wear to fix it on her back, which allowed her to just reach for it over her head in an instant. The surface was sheer and grey except for a single inscription on the side that did not feel magical.

“It’s the symbol for Yries!” the town smith grumbled, “can’t have you go into battle wearing foreign colors. Gimme dat.”

Viv did because the rest of the crowd cheered at his words. The piece was returned to her later with a flat layer of metal half a finger thick added on the opposite side of the symbol. The smith had inscribed the tree of Kazar on it. It was rather cute

“I won’t mess with that inscription of theirs. For all I know, it’s part of the enchantments and besides it’s bad luck to erase an artist’s signature.”

The added layer probably messed with the balance but it was not like she knew how to wield a shield anyway. She inspected it.

[Reinforced Yries Aegis (enchanted): this masterwork was designed specifically to protect its wielder against piercing attacks by spreading the impact over its entire surface.]

Nifty. Now she only needed a proper helmet.

Training continued, with Viv keeping her shield with her to protect her back at least. Eighteen more trainees changed paths over the next two weeks while the rest dropped. A few of the guards gained skill related to crossbow-handling and integrated them in their existing path. The mountain tribe soldiers did not change paths since an oath of allegiance was required. The army of Kazar was close to taking shape and Solfis successfully requested joint maneuvers. Viv found herself spending a few afternoons hunkering behind Marruk, walking around behind ranks of infantry. The golem had advised the adoption of a combined line of shields and ranged weapons, in this specific case crossbows, which was effective in small scale battles. Viv had no idea if it would work or not. She was not a student of military history to begin with, and skills would fuck with her assesment in any case. Better to let the experts decide.

Lorn had approved.

It was impressive how important formations were perceived to be, and how much effort was spent making sure that the army would hold together until past the wall where it would (hopefully) split. Even with skills backing the movement of the soldiers, there were accidents and bumbles. They did little to soften the sight of three hundred men and women moving in unison to reclaim their home. She just hoped that most of them would make it.

So far, the army was a patchwork of different forces. She could count on the twenty or so Temple Guards still alive, the deadliest force they had. Then came the twenty Harrakan heavy infantry. Together, those formed the core of their shock troops. Behind, they had fifty borrowed mountain soldiers with decent weapons and armor and another hundred guards in leather, gambeson and the rare brigandine. The crossbowmen were all guards. Over a hundred poorly-equipped militia made up the rest of their force. Viv and the others had done their very best to recover and repair equipment from the hordes of revenants they had slain but no amount of gear would turn them into anything else but chaff. They were useful for holding the line and that was it. Viv hoped that they would not pay too heavy a price for their courage. Finally, Kazar also had its hunters and a handful of Hadal strains, but those would operate by themselves.

Things were taking shape.

Food was growing scarce, and yet their diet remained varied thanks to the hunts and mountain tribe deliveries. Viv was growing tired of the eternal broth and congees. She missed desserts. She also decided not to voice her opinion on the subject.

Finally, after almost two months of exile, it happened. Viv was getting changed in her assigned room which had windows over the mine entrances when she heard a voice.

//You may want to wait a minute.

“I have news,” Irao’s raspy voice came through the door.

//And it can wait a minute.

//There is a fine line between lack of social graces and lack of common sense.

//See that you do not cross it.

“I’m presentable!” she announced, clad in a comfortable dress.

Irao let himself in and stared at her for a second.

“Yes?” she finally said.

“I want to say that I did not want to see you getting changed. I also find you pretty but too dangerous and have no romantic interest in you. It is a nice dress though.”

“I’m not flirting with you Irao, the dress is for my own comfort.”

“Oh, sorry. I wanted to make sure.”

Outside, the golem let out a strange warble that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

“You had something to say?” Viv asked, split between amusement and cringe.

“Yes. Prince Lancer finished overseeing the land theft, gathered over three hundred slaves and then departed. He left Kazar in the hands of a nobleman with over a hundred bridgers to back him up, as well as one earth hybrid caster. He departed three days ago.”

Viv immediately bounced forward, her feet carrying her past her humble cot.

“So this is it. We need to alert the council.”

“I had my kin do so. You may join them when ready.”

Viv grumbled about having to change back into her slightly damp and sweaty robes. Gogen’s brood kept the place, and Viv’s underwear, clean. They still needed a few hours to do so. Viv made her way down to the main square and met everyone in the room. Some of the resting warriors saw her pass and gave each other knowing elbow bumps. The hunters and Hadals had reported movement and the preparation of a convoy so everyone was expecting news any time.

“So, this is it,” Farren said. He was distinctively paler. His fingers worried a corner of one of their few inventory books without him realizing it. Lorn nodded, expression grim yet determined. His group had suffered the most casualties relative to their size since the beginning of the year.

“Let’s give ourselves a few days before the main group leaves. The scouts can go now. As for the main convoy, it will be soldiers, then the medical group, then the smiths and quartermaster and finally the non-combatants, as agreed.”

It was decided not to split the Kazarans. Unarmed folks were just prey without dedicated fighters to protect them so they might as well follow. It was sink or swim anyway. If the Kazaran army failed, the population would have to choose between slavery and death.

Viv hoped it never came to that.

“We are ready with medical supplies. Our alchemist did his best, and we have twenty-three batches of flesh-mending potions to split among the fighters. They are low quality due to lack of, well, everything, so do not expect miracles.”

“We are fine food-wise. We rationed in order to have enough for another three weeks but we can increase the rations for a few days so that everyone goes to battle well-fed,” Farren added.

Viv was looking forward to that, she had lost a bit of weight and she didn’t have many reserves to start with.

Denerim spoke next. The inquisitor had remained aware of his status as an outsider, so his interventions were few.

“I suggest that we hold a mass prayer before...”

His words were interrupted when a soldier barged in. His eyes found Viv immediately.

“Goodmother! That is, mam. Your drake is very sick. It has collapsed on the ground.”

Fuck.

Chapter 67: Fever

Viv was off the room before the soldier could utter another word. She sprinted out the door and out into the complex in front of the mines. It wasn't too hard to find Arthur because kids hung on every corner, running around in panic. They all pointed towards the baths.

Viv ran. She spotted the dragonette's prone form and slid by her side. Her body radiated heat.

"Eeeeeee."

Fever, a big one. Viv took the heavy creature in her arms and hissed in pain, changing her posture. The scales scalded her. Had to bring down that a bit, as Arthur was decidedly uncomfortable. She ran into the baths and dove into a nearby pool still wearing her dress. Arthur shivered. Her clawed hands pierced Viv's skin a bit and the caster grit her teeth, but her charge sighed in relief.

Viv's mind was a mess.

She should have paid more attention to the dragon instead of spending so much time training and doing politics. She should have checked her health. She should have interacted more with the small one, instead of doing the bare minimum for months, because she thought she was too busy. She was a shit surrogate mother. Now Arthur was burning and she didn't know why.

As despair gripped her heart and the fever kept going, Viv inspected the dragonling in her arms. At first, she felt very little because of her turmoil, but soon her perception became more acute and the strands appeared clearly to her mind. Arthur had colors about her. More specifically, she had all of them. Ropes like a kaleidoscope shimmered across her skin while her horns appeared to pull mana from around. Viv could see thick black tendrils emerging from her own body. It did not hurt at all, nor did it feel intrusive. Her mana was full and this just looked like overflow being captured before it could dissipate.

Viv had never noticed, never paid attention.

"Squeee.."

"I'm sorry. I'm here now."

The dragonette held Viv hard, clearly dismayed. Viv felt the incredible power in her limbs. She had witnessed Arthur tear revenants and men to ribbons in mere moments, yet even now in her hour of pain, the little one only used enough strength to keep herself latched. Viv cupped some water and rubbed a snout she could not see, above her shoulder. Arthur's breath came raspy and hurried.

"What's wrong with you, won't you tell?"

And she did.

Viv watched, mesmerized, as Arthur used blue mana to manipulate liquids, more specifically the water they were in. Characters coalesced with slow purpose. They were blurry, but readable.

S.

A hard C.

W.

E.

“Squee,” Viv summarized.

“Squee!”

She didn’t know what she expected.

“I don’t know why you have a fever. I don’t know if you’re sick or poisoned or about to blow up. Do you need me to get you anything?”

Arthur grabbed her a bit tighter.

“Alright, I’m not going anywhere. We can just stay here and wait it out. You can relax.”

And she did try but it proved difficult. Arthur was on and off, sometimes moving and sometimes sleeping fitfully. Viv had to lay back against the bath’s stone walls to let her arms rest a bit. At some point, Marruk brought her a bowl of something she gulped down without tasting it. Kids would occasionally whisper from beyond the walls in frantic voices. There were no changes. Late afternoon turned to evening, and evening, to night, and Arthur was still burning. Viv had to change bath because the previous one was quickly turning nice and steamy.

The hours went on.

Viv tired and let her mind wander. She yawned. Someone knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

“May I come in?” Farren asked.

“Eeeeeeee!”

“Hm let’s talk through the door, Arthur is feeling territorial.”

“Fine. I would like to point out that the moment we have been waiting for and working towards is finally upon us. We need to make ready to depart. As much as I appreciate you taking care of your pet, you are carrying the hopes of over a thousand people. Don’t you think that you should set your priorities straight?”

“Calm down, Farren, Kazar isn’t going anywhere. A few hours won’t make a difference.”

“What if it’s not just a few hours? You rushed out of the council like a charger. We just stopped existing. What if it’s a day? What if it is five?”

“What if? What if? With what ifs I could bend Lancer over and make him sing an anthem. What’s your point?” she asked, annoyed.

Farren sighed and it was clear that he, too, was angry.

“You are placing your pet over all the people who followed us into the deadlands. That’s my point. What is wrong with you? Don’t you see how much you are risking? Is it even dying?”

“She, and I don’t know, and she’s not a pet.”

“You don’t even know. You could let ‘her’ stay under supervision and take care of what really matters.”

“She’s sick and worried and I will take care of her until she gets better. People are not dying right now, Farren. We can afford to let Lancer’s main force get a bit fatter just in case he gets any idea and decides to head back.”

“This isn’t about the timing, it’s about your decision-making.”

Both were raising their voices then. The kids around the bath house were making themselves scarce.

“How about that then, since you care about what matters? Kids love Arthur, she’s the mascot. If we left her to scream alone and dejected on the eve of departure, what will it do for morale? Have you considered it?”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I am not. Her scales are so hot I would burn myself without the water.”

“Fine, I see that you have made your mind. Have it your way, fearless leader. I just thought that your words meant something. I thought that you were rational and reliable. Neriad’s cock. Pah!”

Viv’s eyes went wide as saucers at the unexpected rant. Farren was usually so composed. What crawled up his ass, she wondered? Besides, he was full of it. She was not letting the

invasion down, just taking a short delay because Arthur was a few degrees short of the gold melting point and that would affect her pouch, which she was still wearing.

The dragonette squeaked weakly and Viv poured some more water on her snout. Farren could deal, and the invasion was still on schedule but it did raise an important point. In a way, Viv had had it easy. Not the whole almost dying and snipers things obviously. In the social way. None of her allies, or friends, had been at each other's throats despite their numerous differences. She had only made minor efforts to gain the trust of those who counted the most in her eyes. Arthur. Solfis. Marruk, though it had taken some time. Varska, technically, since the mage had not survived her betrayal. Farren... Farren was a weasel even if he meant well.

Yeah, she was lucky.

All those people in her life had become solid and her family and friends back on earth had grown blurry despite her improved memory. It had happened so progressively that she had not realized. They were... not in phase with what was happening to her. If earth had not blown up, they would probably be moving on now. By contrast, her new world was solid in a way that she had not experienced before. They all had their thing. Marruk always kept an eye on her back. She also hated wasting food, even scraps. Arthur liked to take out her two gold talents and look at them before she went to sleep. Solfis had upgraded his opinion of the surrounding mortals from meatbags to useful tools. They were very real and very alive and it had not cost her much to bring them around. Perhaps today was a real test of her character.

She was ok with her decision.

Arthur was important to her. The invasion would not stall if they delayed half a day. She would not sacrifice the little one for a perceived schedule, even if it made Farren mad and possibly destroyed her reputation. There were many uncertain things in Viv's life. This was not one of them.

Evening passed and it was now night. Arthur stopped hugging her to drink clean water once. Her temperature had not dropped. There was no change that Viv could see so she stayed as she was, the earlier worry less now that Arthur didn't look to be in pain. Her thoughts wandered to music. She had loved music on earth, and she now missed it more than ever. The melodies were still alive in her mind, yet it was not the same as listening to the original. She hummed a few under her breath to Arthur's delight. At some point, the dragonette untangled herself to attend to a natural need but she returned quickly, temperature already rising.

"Can you write anything else in the water?" Viv asked, now curious.

"Squee?"

"Whatever you want and only if you feel like it."

Once again, Arthur manipulated the flow of mana closeby like it was a part of her. New characters appeared.

'Mama.'

"Awwwww!"

'Gold.'

"Maybe later, you have to recover first, yes?"

"Squee."

Feeling chuffed, Viv returned to being the dragonling's cat tree, the eucalyptus to her koala. She yawned harder. Tiredness caught up and she managed to sleep by half an hour increments, until Arthur woke her up once again.

Her temperature had dropped. In fact, she was getting cold.

"Arthur? Arthur, are you alright?"

The tiny one had closed her eyes and was breathing fast.

"Arthur?"

The dragonling was now letting out a congested breath doubled with a kettle-like whistle.

"Hks hks hks HKS KSHAAAA!"

A sound like a woosh and Viv fell back. The bath was made entirely out of stone. That stone was now on fire. Angry red flames smouldered on the ground and the far wall in tiny puddles of death. Arthur sniffed once more as her breath returned to normal.

Viv felt a very distinct caress on her forearm where Arthur's head had been resting, the specific jolt of nerve endings realizing their neighbors had died an ignominious death. Any time now.

"Aaaaa FUCK! OW!"

"Squee?"

Viv lifted the flame-spitting lizard like a handbag and crashed in yet another pool of frigid water. Every hair on her forearm had been vaporized and she could see a reddening track where Arthur's head had been resting. Third degree burn.

It hurt like a motherfucker.

“Aaaaaaa sa mère. Awawawawaw.”

//Your Grace, your vitals are—

//ABSOLUTE OVERRIDE: IMPERIAL HEIR IN MORTAL DANGER.

“Don’t you fucking dare you bone twit. Get me a healer, stat.”

//ORDER ACKNOWLEDGED.

“Squeeeeeeeee!”

“It’s ok. Ugh. Nothing too serious.”

It was, in fact, quite serious. Pretty sure she had lost a lump of flesh, but this was the land of magic and she was not amputated yet. The cool water helped the abominable pain.

Pain tolerance: Intermediate 9

Earth her would be screaming on the ground right now. Not much of a comfort. It REALLY hurt, but she could not show it because Arthur was inconsolable.

“Squeeee...”

“That’s fine honey, just a small accident. You didn’t do it on purpose.”

Viv started to sweat and her breath accelerated as well, but she had to keep a strained smile for the panicking Arthur instead of stringing insults at eighty decibels like she wanted to.

“I swear I’m not mad. It’s fine.”

Farren burst in with a health potion and Denerim in tow while Solfis peeked in from the door. The inquisitor had the strongest healing spell out of everyone present. Viv guessed that he had a rather high attunement for someone who was not a mage.

“What in the name of Neriad happened here?” Farren asked, all anger dissipating. He looked like he had just woken up.

“Hks hks hks hks...”

Viv grabbed the dragonette by the neck with her intact hand and aimed the head towards the far wall.

“KSHAAAA!”

It was a sneeze except that every droplet of snot had been replaced by napalm.

Farren froze at the sight. He looked at the flame burn for a while, weaker but still hot enough that the room’s temperature was increasing.

“Can I get the fucking potion?” Viv asked.

“Hold on, let me take care of you first. It’s not my first burn,” Denerim said. He started using life mana on Viv’s arm. The flesh of the burn slowly melted into a pinkish puddle. It was a horrifying sight.

Viv’s burn was as large as half her palm, which meant quite large for a forearm. Denerim revealed damaged muscle fibers. Viv averted her eyes when they reached the bone. She returned her efforts to making sure Arthur could not see the damage. In vain. The dragonette was already stronger than her by an order of magnitude. She managed to free herself gently and looked at the damage.

“Squeeeeeeeee.”

“It was an accident, alright? I will be fine.”

“You will have a scar,” Denerim corrected.

“SQUEEEEE!”

“By the gods man, will you shut up? Ugh.”

“Sorry. Not used to kids.”

“Ahem,” Farren said. “I feel like an idiot.”

“You don’t say...” Viv replied. She could not help herself. Her annoyance was getting to her.

“Not for my previous statement and I stand by it. I just realized that with all the implausible strangeness related to you, the golem and sorcery and everything, it simply never occurred to me to take a closer look at your drake. Now, I assumed it was a marsh drake since it’s a relatively easy species to tame, even without skills. An albino drake, to be precise. Something a rich heiress would have. I assumed it had been teleported with you and that its status was obfuscated to mask your origin. Now, I feel like a complete imbecile.”

Farren smiled. It was fake as hell. His eyes had grown manic.

“This is not a marsh drake.”

“Indeed not,” Denerim said, still working on Viv’s arm.

“Marsh drakes don’t spit fire. No magical species with scales and wings spits fire except for that specific one, and now I know for sure that you are an outlander.”

“Oh?” Viv said, “Finally figured it out, did you?”

“I had suspicion like half of the leadership of the camp I suppose, but now I know for sure. No native of Nyil, not a single person, not even a madwoman, would act like that towards a fucking dragon.”

“Squee!”

“Language.”

Farren blinked and realized that the hard-breathing and slightly off put dragonette could follow the conversation. Arthur huffed and closed her eyes before catching Viv again in a hug.

“You are completely, fully insane and you will be vaporized just like everything in a league’s radius when the old ones find out, but right now we cannot do without you, and there is no adult dragon around here anyway. I just pray that you are not in the village when it happens.”

“So you must see why it’s also in your interest that we delay the expedition for a day, right?”

“... No?”

“Alright, just imagine that an ‘old one’ figures out that you mistreated a young dragonette by leaving her alone in her hour of distress?”

Farren swallowed his saliva with some difficulty.

“I’m going back to bed and when I wake up tomorrow, everything will be better. Goodbye.”

He left.

Arthur and Viv had been successfully distracted for half a minute and went back to their previous activity: squealing and trying very hard not to do so, respectively. Denerim was done anyway. Viv’s burnt tissues had been melted off and only healthy tissue remained. He spread half a flesh-mending potion on the wound and had her swallow the other half. It tasted like lukewarm herbal ass. Or freshly regurgitated cow vomit perhaps. She gulped it down anyway.

“Lots of folks make the mistake of applying flesh-mending potion directly to burn wounds. It just makes the flesh hard and scarred. You would need a healer for a full recovery.”

“Are there burn-specific potions?”

“Of course there are but flesh-mending is general purpose so potions are far more common. In any case, it appears that young Arthur’s fever was related to her biology. Congratulations on your growth, young one.”

“Squee!”

“I just hope that there won’t be too many more surprises along the way,” Viv said.

“You can always write a book on proper draconic education and health,” Denerim deadpanned.

“Squee.”

“She likes books. In any case, if you feel better we will leave soon but I think that you should sit that fight out,” Viv said.

“Squee?”

“The enemies have bowmen, Arthur, and you are still weak. You should rest.”

“Squee!”

“Of course you can come with us. I’m not leaving you here alone. Let’s go to bed if you’re getting better. Your mother needs her rest.”

It felt incredibly weird to say that word out loud, but Viv was okay with it, she realized. She also wondered how dragonlings managed in the wild. Did they instinctively find a lair to huddle in? Or did their mothers usually watch after them for long periods of time? She didn’t know and suspected that the research on the matter of dragon-rearing simply did not exist here, just as Denerim explained.

Viv collapsed in her cot and Arthur became her weighted blanket. They were woken up halfway to noon by Marruk.

“The convoy has started though people have decided to let you sleep a bit more. We’ve got horses and an escort. You can nap a bit more and then we’ll catch up.”

“Alright.”

When Viv was ready, the mines stood empty. She noticed that people had taken the time to clean and organize before they left, and the familiar ground now stood halfway between the dusty wreck they had first found and the survival base it had become. Outside, the greenery would remain for a while. The Suncult Marea on Varska’s memorial was still going strong

and the Yries had agreed to take care of it. They would send a few of their own here to secure the entrance.

She looked at her progress.

- Current status:
- Mana channels (mage)
 - Extreme compatibility
 - Divine spark: luck
 - Draconic Surrogate Mother

- Mana distribution:
- Black 100%

Current attunement: 24.3%

She was strong now, almost as strong as Varska had been in terms of battle potential. Less flexible, but much more devastating. Varska had not been a battle specialist, after all.

Physical		Mental	
Power	16	Focus	35
Finesse	20	Acuity	35
Endurance	23	Willpower	36

Both endurance and willpower had increased by one. She didn't have a baseline but she thought that it was not great for such a long period of effort. Solfis had mentioned that strenuous circumstances (as in actively being in danger) or targeted exercises would allow rapid progress past this point, but not to expect miracles. She has grabbed all the low-hanging fruits. From then on, it was a question of commitment. That was fine though. Under Solfis' advice, she had focused on controlling her abilities instead of expanding them. She could already shear a man in half from fifty meters away with the strength of her mind. There was no need for additional firepower. Now, it was about using it properly from afar and then living to tell the tale.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Novice 7

Arcane Constructs	Beginner 3	Danger sense	Beginner 6
Leadership	Beginner 8	Intimidation	Intermediate 5
Acuity reflex	Beginner 5		

She had seen progress around the board except in intimidation. It wasn't fair that Farren had not been scared by the revelation. She supposed that he was mad more than anything else. In any case, she had the means to protect herself from snipers and the like. Unless Lancer had left a nasty surprise, they had a chance.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Apprentice 8
Hand to hand combat	Apprentice 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7		

This had not changed except for pain tolerance. She discreetly pulled the sleeve of her enchanted robe and checked her arm. All the hair was gone and some parts remained a little bit red. She also had a scar. It was more a light discoloration than something truly mangled, luckily for her. In a way, it looked like a flying dragon looking down. Viv shrugged and chose not to think about it for now. It was a scar. Fine. She had other scars. She would have more scars before this was all over.

It was time to go.

With one last look at the abandoned base, she rode out.

Chapter 68: Swing of the pendulum.

Viv reached the tail of the convoy by afternoon. Her borrowed horse trotted merrily along the line of well-organized and neatly packed carts. Gone was the image of refugees groggy and stunned by their misfortune. The Kazarans moved on with cold determination hiding their

deep fears. She saw it in the fake smiles, the deep sighs and the licked lips. Those people were terrified, but they had hope, and so they were throwing themselves down the lion's jaw hoping to kill it before the fangs snapped shut.

It was the same with the fighters. At the top of the column, they marched in good order. The militiamen had turned their pilfered cloth armors and weapons into a semblance of uniform by all wearing a white upper shirt. Grey flags bearing the tree of the city floated on top of spears like so many pennants. The core of the army, both newly made Harrakan heavies and mountain soldiers went ahead in neat ranks. Finally, the elites under Lorn and Denerim opened the march, with scouts fanned before them. They, too, showed nervous calm and well-contained anxiety.

The first night came.

Despite their decent speed, it would take almost a week to head back. A lot of people had trouble sleeping despite their exhaustion if the amount of late night strolls and isolated couples were any indication. The morning came with a copious breakfast. They had decided to go for broke and finish their reserves. If they succeeded, they could just get grain literally off the stalks and eat them boiled. If they failed, well...

The convoy passed through the mountain tribe territory on the third day. Villagers came to wave red cloth at the passing fighters and sing songs of encouragement. Laborers in the field cheered for the Kazaran fighters and their own. A few of the villages distributed fresh water and flasks of extremely powerful booze at crossroads. The convoy took on a festive air. That night, the council gathered.

"Any indication that we're walking into a trap? Lancer could have pretended to leave."

"I don't think so," the man in charge of the scouts replied. His name was Michar and he was seldom present, preferring to stay on the field. "We followed their tracks for a good fifteen leagues and a few of the Hadals went much farther. The Prince is gone with two thirds of his troops."

"Can they be trusted? The Hadals, I mean." Lorn asked.

"I think so. They're damn good, I'll tell you that, If they decide to lie, there isn't anything we can do. But I trust them. They showed their worth during several hunting missions."

"Alright. Then we shall proceed as planned."

Viv eyed the only Yries to join the strike. He was a tiny one named Rak-Tok and he had brought with him the key to success: a SUV-sized, self-propelled drill that looked like someone had fixed the digging part on a steampunk locomotive, modified for speed so that it could keep up with the column. Viv wasn't sure how it was powered and dared not ask.

It looked suitably badass.

The mood turned more serious as they went over the mountain. On the afternoon of the sixth day, they arrived at the edge of the chain. Beyond, the green wall of the Deadshield Woods expanded to the horizon, and before it, the thin golden stripe of ripe fields. Finally, sitting on its small elevation in the middle of that defiant band was Kazar herself, shining red under the lilac boughs of its great tree while the twilight sun bled across the land. Their prize, waiting for their return.

They drank and made merry on that last afternoon of free time. They were far enough that the scouts had absolute control of the place. In fact, they reported no enemy agents. There were just a handful of militia in a waystation at the feet of the mountain. Viv didn't drink, she meditated instead then told a few stories to Arthur who was still convalescent. They went to bed early.

They woke up with the aurora.

Every soldier put on then checked their gear, including Viv who had also found a standard helmet her size. They assembled in a column and walked down the mountain. The bodies of the enemy sentries lay by the side of the road, throats sliced open in ghastly red smiles by their scouts. Those soldiers who had not known combat saw the bodies and shivered. A few lost their breakfast but no one gave them shit for it. The army advanced without a cry, their approach covered. The pallid pink lights of the early morning caressed the plain.

They went past many fields. Those who had stolen their land had barricaded themselves in their warprize homes, aware of how tenuous their claims were. The scouts made sure that no one left to warn their enemy. The Kazarans stopped close to the city at the edge of the deadlands, just behind a ridge. It was the shortest uncovered distance to the walls.

There was a lull when soldiers went from march formation to ranks, with the crossbowmen arraying themselves behind the shields. Viv stepped to the front and waited until everyone was ready. They were looking at her. They were expecting a speech. Viv made a circle and cast the sound enchantment, the only colorless one she had truly mastered.

"Kazarans, this is it. The moment we've all been waiting for. The conclusion of two and a half months of gruelling work and selfless sacrifices to reclaim what was taken from us. All of us gave their all to make today happen. We trained from dawn till dusk. We fought through confusion and despair. We never doubted. The world is not fair but if there is one group here on this gods-forsaken continent that deserves a lucky break, it's us."

"Yea, aye," came from the ranks.

"Success isn't assured. Success is never assured. What we can do is prepare and when the time comes, go in with no fear and no regret. I will tell you this, there is no need to regret. We have stacked the odds in our favor. Every piece of equipment we could make, borrow or steal, you're carrying them right now. Every technique and skill we could use have been

practiced till our fingers bled, and if there is anything more we could have reasonably done to prepare, well, I can't think of it. I'm proud of all of you, and when we all go down that hill, don't look behind, but know that you are carrying the dreams of your loved ones and that they could not have hoped for better champions. Now, remember. Fight hard for your home, look after your neighbors, and give those fuckers hell. I'll see you lot on the other side. For Kazar!"

"For Kazar!"

It was on. Orders fused from every officer. They knew what to do.

"Form up, form up!"

"Hah!"

"For the temple..."

"... for Neriad!"

"Harrak eternal!"

"The mountain will never fall!"

Rak-Tok locked himself in the cockpit of the drill and made the engine roar. Horn calls shook the air at the front of the formation and far, far in front of them, alarm bells rang in answer.

The line of fighters crested the hill with sun and fate at their back.

Viv had been in battle before, back on earth. She had also faced the beastling horde but this was different, it had been rushed and more police operation than true war. Now she felt an energy in the line of fighters that modern warfare lacked. Squad tactics brought with it a sort of excitement that could not compare to two hundred fifty throats yelling battle cries and descending down the slope with the slow momentum of the nascent avalanche. It was partly her doing. She had taken the spirit of the mob and sublimed it into the spirit of the warband. The allied yells ballooned her, pushing her up and front with imaginary wings. In front of her, the walls neared slowly. They were walking fast, not running. The drill had to get there first.

Viv saw activity far into the distance, near the gates. The enemy was probably thinking that it was their destination since it was the only way in, but Viv had made it this far by creating her own doors and she had brought a fucking tunnel borer.

They were walking on fields now. The slope to the wall was very near when Viv's danger sense screamed at her and she dove. At the same time, Marruk raised and angled her shield, which had been reinforced. It still looked like a door though.

A massive arrow clanged against its surface and was sent twirling through the air behind them.

"Try again, bitch," the stout woman muttered. She never swore. Viv looked at her own shield and thought the poor girl might be feeling offended.

//That two-storied mill right in front of us, Your Grace.

//On the roof, left side.

"Purge!"

A black line like a thunderbolt surged from above her head and smashed into the roof of her target, sending gravel and stones tumbling down.

//He dodged by jumping off.

//I will hunt him later, but I fear that he might not be alone.

"Let's just stick together for now."

The boring machine approached the wall and slowed down. The engine roared and the drill started to turn. It moved on at a slow pace.

For one moment, Viv feared that the walls might resist. They had been enchanted by Varska and then possibly upgraded by a siege specialist. She need not have bothered. The Yries creation went through it like an incendiary round through butter. It barely slowed down. They saw its butt go through the breach and then the Temple Guard followed it. They were in.

The drill turned as it was instructed, letting their elites establish a beachhead. Viv looked on amused as the Yries went to open a second one, which was not exactly in the contract but could not hurt their chances. The wall was now a human-height pile of rubble, over which their side was climbing carefully as the footing was unsure. Viv followed the vanguard and they were inside of the city.

It felt unnatural seeing all those white stone houses with flattish roofs, so familiar and yet alien now, harboring invaders and foes. As she watched, a few militiamen with spears and the white and blue of Enoria ran away in terror, followed by a pair of men in full plate and conical helmet. Those were the bridgers, and they were as well-equipped as she feared.

"We need to move to the center of the city," Lorn ordered loudly, "single column."

They had expected resistance immediately but as far as Viv could tell, the foes were still gathering around the gate. It was worrisome until she remembered that if the entire enemy army was inside the walls the defenders were pretty much fucked.

The troops moved on with Viv encased in ranks of soldiers and Marruk before her, Solfis by her side and her new shield over her head. She was searching for the earth caster and leaving the rest to her allies. The fabric of the world was quiet for now. Everyone was saving their strength. The colorful weave of mana smoldered at a low pace, waiting to be unleashed by hundreds of minds. It was quite the spectacle.

//I have located the archer.

//I will intercept while the buildings offer you cover.

//Please do not be reckless.

Solfis must have calculated that this offered the best odds. Viv hunkered down as the column progressed at a snail pace. They had to move past a few blockades that looked improvised but were annoying enough to delay them. Two minutes into the slow trek, screams erupted from behind. Lorn moved back while the column stopped and took cover. Viv thought that it was a bad idea, they had to keep moving, but she was not in charge and frankly didn't know shit about battling other humans. Solfis landed by her side, right claw bloody.

//The Enorians have formed hit squads to slow us down.

As he spoke, there was another yell not far behind and an Enorian fighter in chainmail crashed on the streets, throat slit.

//Two-six has taken exception to it.

"Alright, Temple Guard with me," Lorn ordered, "Ban, lead your men to the main square, double line with crossbows. Deploy when you see the foe. Cover the witch!"

"Aye!"

The Temple Guard left the front on an intercept mission and Viv found herself only three lines and one Marruk away from the front, which meant that she could see stuff again. The old man Ban was perhaps new at being a heavy but this was clearly not his first rodeo.

"Move up, you asshole! What are you waiting for, an invitation?"

They came to another obstruction, this one just a few overturned carts. Ban had his men lift them and push them aside under cover of a forest of pointed quarrels. They were through in fifteen seconds.

"Enough of this bullshit, we're going in!"

The heavies roared and the city guards behind answered in kind. They accelerated.

“Where are the snipers?”

//No signs, Your Grace.

//They may be waiting for you to be distracted.

“I’m not moving a foot away from you,” Marruk declared. Her yellow eyes searched rooftops and elevations for danger.

Finally, they were in the main street between the city gate and the square where the tree and Varska’s tower stood. The way widened enough for ten men to walk abreast. The formation spread out. The Harrakan heavies took point once more, not slowing down with the guards just behind. The militia covered their backs. They moved up and Viv was getting tired trying to feel earth mana. They found the enemy as they rounded the corner.

Anchored between the temple of Neriad on Viv’s left and large houses on her right, there was a line of militia with shields and bows. An officer in mail and with a shiny sword stood upon a low wall. He pointed his blade at Viv and yelled, voice improved by magic.

“Here she is, the Great Black Slu—”

Twang.

Viv looked sharply to the side to find that Corel’s replacement, investigator Tars, had fired her crossbow. The man reeled and reached for his cheek where the bolt was now firmly embedded. He fell backward.

“None of that now,” she simply said.

“Hold there!” Ban yelled. “Crossbowmen readyyyyyy!”

The two formations stopped fifteen meters from each other. Viv could see a mole on a terrified militia’s face. Some of them had clearly been dragged from their beds.

“Fire!”

Both sides shot at the same time. The Enorians were using short bows, hunting implements, mostly. Their arrows plinked against the thick shield wall of the heavies, bounced off massive helmets. One of them found an eye and the soldiers simply pulled it out and crushed it. Their side, however, was using Yries-made crossbows. At such short range, they were absolutely lethal.

Viv watched the first rank of militia get mowed down. Many fell with screams and many more kept tumbling with every passing second. There was still no trace of the earth caster.

But... Viv was a pure caster and he was not.

"I should be on the offensive," she realized.

//Yes.

Viv cursed and started blasting purge spells, making sure to stay vigilant. She was too used to someone telling her what to do when it came to pure battle operations. Her inexperience impeded her.

"Fuck. Purge!"

The spells had a devastating effect on the Enorian militia. They yelped and pulled back in disorder until the Kazaran side lost sight of them behind the curve of the slope. They had retreated to the square.

"Forward!" Ban ordered.

They moved on. Viv saw more of the temple on the side. Neriad's statue shone under the early morning sun. The tree was so close. A few more dozen steps and she would see Varska's tower.

Time slowed down as she finally found what she had been expecting. The smell of blood and shit faded as wind picked up and carried the purifying aura of thousands of purple leaves forward. She was already hot under her helmet, and everyone was breathing heavily. Under her feet, a massive trap activated. Someone had buried a circle under the stone and triggered it just now.

Viv breathed out as hours of intensive practice let her flood the ground with black mana, just like her lover had shown her. The ravenous power wreaked havoc through the carefully crafted construct, splintering it. The trap hiccupped and died. Black mana kept expanding until the enemy caster cut all contact. The main enemy army came into focus then, with the bridgers at the front this time. Armies placed chaff at the front when defending and elites when attacking. They were obviously waiting for the spell to activate. It wouldn't.

It was too late when they realized that it had fizzled out. Most of the heavies and mountain soldiers were already on the plaza. There was one fateful moment of suspense when both sides looked at each other in perfect silence and Viv could see the white of the eye of a kid in armor to the side, then the officers roared at the same time and two massive waves of metal-clad humans rammed each other with skill-backed fury. The sound of impact was more car accident than battle.

"Werfer."

Men screamed and died and the lines wavered, yet they held. Viv remained vigilant, she still had not seen her enemy. Every second, she arced a simple purge spell above the head of

her allies and shoved it into the enemy lines out of sight, but it was getting difficult to focus. Her new mastery of mana played against her.

Humans were magical here. They all had some measure of attunement to some colors and skills used mana, and there were a lot of those being thrown around right now, but it was not all. They were pushed, needled, reinforced by the powerful emotions animating the crowd. Viv realized that she had never truly understood how deep the resentment ran in her allies' mind. She did now. The battlefield was a scene of purposeful, methodical savagery. The officers bolstered men who exchanged blows around or through shields, steel weapons stained red. The mana of the world danced exquisitely and she made the mix darker with every dark spear she threw.

Her side buckled and they would have bled much more without Viv's steady strikes and Tars' vicious point-blank range crossbowmen. As it was, the fight was too vigorous to determine a winner. The bridgers were simply too disciplined and battle-hardened to fall to their much less experienced opponents. In the mighty din of battle, Viv's mind would have lost focus without the magic changing her to her very core. Calculations and concepts ran on overdrive and she felt more than saw the coming retaliation.

"NOPE!"

A vast shield spread over her line, the largest she had ever conjured. Many bridgers covered but it was defensive and blocked a hail of obsidian spears ready to rain upon her side. Compared to Varska's attack against the beastling wave, it was small and pathetic. The void devoured the conjured stone and her own attack followed shortly after. Viv cut a summary circle and glyph under her feet for more oomph, then she conjured the true form of her 'arty' spell. Charged with the meaning of annihilation, the projectile launched with the power, momentum, and penetrative power that qualified it as her first war mage construct.

"Blast."

A javelin as thick as a leg curved gracefully through the air and to the point of origin of the spell, the second floor balcony of a manor. She saw a wall rise defensively in a mere second. The spell went through it without slowing down.

//I see blood, Your Grace.

//I shall make sure that the caster is no longer a threat.

//Two-Six is covering you, but please be careful.

Viv nodded and focused forward. She was at the highest elevation of Kazar and Kazar was the highest elevation around, therefore the number of places from where she could be shot was limited. With the snipers a lesser concern and the caster disabled or about to be, it was time to go to town.

"Move us forward," she told Marruk.

The stout guard pushed through and replaced a wounded soldier in the battle line. Viv peeked from above her shoulder and dove immediately back. A small arrow was intercepted by Marruk, not one from a sniper but from a militia. It didn't matter. She knew exactly where the foe was.

"Purge net."

She aimed at the highest concentration of bridgers and flayed them. Their armors were solid enough that she failed to cut them to pieces, but the wounds were so devastating that her victims fell in droves anyway.

"Purge net."

Again, the spell flared and again it was received with a concerto of cries. Her side was pushing now as the others collapsed under the devastation, but as the heavies advanced, the front extended and Enorian militias could now join the fray. The lines stabilized once again and Viv simply kept casting, killing again and again and again even as she could not see exactly where she was hitting. It was like lobbing grenades into a sealed room and felt... almost cruel. Solfis returned quickly with a man in uniform dangling helplessly from his grip. He was surprisingly alive.

//The earth shaper unexpectedly surrendered, Your Grace.

Viv imagined what her own reaction would be when facing a magic-absorbing bone terminator and 'surrendering' definitely topped the list, so she was honestly just surprised that it didn't happen more often. She dismissed him for now to focus on the closing battle.

There could only be one outcome at that point. Viv's side had too many aces including a spellcaster on her third step. Lorn's Temple Guard's suddenly appeared from behind the bank and smashed into the militia's flank. Tars' guards and the Kazaran militias also had the same idea and they had managed to flank the mass of Enorian defenders. It was too much for the defenders. A large chunk retreated to the town hall while individuals ended up surrounded, begging for mercy. They were disarmed and taken aside.

Both groups reorganized in front of each other, almost within spitting range. For some reason, there was no exchange of arrows or quarrels while this happened, which Viv thought was weird before realizing that she had stopped casting spells as well. A momentary truce, perhaps?

Lorn took the tip of the formation and Viv realized with worry that Koro was not among their numbers. She could be just hurt though. Similarly, the seriously wounded were taken back while fresher combatants took the front. On the Enorian side, the remaining bridgers had formed a line three-person thick in front of the entrance. They were needed by an angry-looking officer with a deep, precise gash in his shoulder that Viv thought she might have inflicted. He looked livid with anger. And blood loss, probably.

“We offer you Neriad’s peace,” Denerim said without anyone’s input. Viv frowned but she realized that she was using a religious order as warriors and she could hardly blame them for being, well, religious.

“Surrender now and you will be held prisoner humanely, until you are judged.”

“It’s a lie,” the enemy officer screamed, “they are under the spell of the Great Black Slut. Do not trust a word that comes out of their mouth!”

Denerim’s face showed a perfect mix of disbelief and annoyance. He closed his eyes and whispered a few words. A golden radiance fell behind him on the statue of Neriad in front of its temple. An otherworldly wind lifted the inquisitor’s dark and grey hair, now tinted a radiant gold.

“Neriad is still with me.”

“It’s a trick!” the officer growled, though many of his men looked less than enthusiastic.

“Do you mind if I say a few words?” Viv asked. Denerim sighed heavily.

“I am not convinced that it will help coming from you, but... sure, be my guest.”

“Alright lads, you lost. You can surrender according to his terms, or you can deal with the rest of us.”

Solfis, still holding the wiggling form of the earth shaper, stabbed forward with his right foot. A man who had pretended to be dead screamed and dropped his knife as he was dragged up.

“No! P—”

Solfis calmly grabbed the man’s head with his right claw and pulled with the casual grace of a sommelier opening a bottle of champagne from a great vintage. Arterial blood spilled in the deafening silence. Marruk took a few swings of her gore-covered mace while, left and right, guards reloaded their crossbows with malicious intent.

Intimidation: Intermediate 6

“No!” the officer said, “We are Enorians, we will never give up against an agent of vanity and fornication!”

“Alright, then the truce is over,” Viv declared.

Her words floated in the air even as her own size looked surprised at the abrupt end of negotiations.

“Purge.”

Viv’s spell was overcharged and as fast as she could make it. The deadly black spear skewered the officer in the throat then went up. He fell like a stringed puppet.

“Truce! Now, who’s in charge of you lot?” Viv asked the terrified ranks.

“Hm. You are?”

“Good lad. Drop your weapons and come out slowly, single file.”

It was over. The prisoners lined up with fear and doubt but without resistance. Viv let the Tempe Guard handle them as they were more familiar with the rule of war.

“I should go help with the wounded,” she said.

**//Your Grace, remember that the Enorians have a political leader.
//We must capture him and receive his rendition.**

“Oh yeah, and then submit this lot to judgement. I take it that raping and enslaving the defeated counts as a crime, yeah?”

//Indeed Your Grace, according to Enorian and Neriad tradition.

It was then that the earth shaper spoke. His voice was pretty calm for someone who was so obviously terrified.

“Oh then let me state for the record that we had nothing to do with the way your dead were treated after the battle. It was the Prince’s decision, I swear.”

Viv wondered what the fuck he was on about, then realized that by ‘battle’ he probably referred to the readguard action in which Varska... Varska...

Wait.

“What the fuck did you say?” she asked with a deceptive calm.

“I... uh...”

Solfis lifted the man and smoothly smashed his head against the pavement. He lay there, mewling.

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST SAY?”

“The... the fallen were declared traitors to the kingdom, the gravest of crimes. Their remains were brought to the deadlands and... discarded. I am so sorry.”

Chapter 69: As deep as lava

“Where is Prince Lancer? Where is he?”

“In the forest! In the woods!”

Viv snapped out of her rage when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She was standing in a circle with only Marruk and Solfis by her side. The others had left her some space. The hand belonged to Denerim. The veteran inquisitor was smiling bitterly. From so close, the crow's feet near his eyes and gray in his hair made him feel dignified, more sympathetic mentor than deadly warrior. Viv took a deep breath and frowned.

And looked.

Black tendrils ending in thin blades rose all around her, coiled like cobras. Some of the appendages were dangerously close to her prisoner while Denerim himself stood twisted to avoid two. His apprentice, Orkan, stood a few paces behind. He, too, had his attention on the roofs.

“Viv.”

“Yeah yeah.”

He did not have to give her the grand speech, she was an adult. Yadda yadda executing prisoners bad yadda yadda let go of your anger and embrace the lord or some such trite shit. She got the idea. The prince was gone and surrounded by soldiers. She had to be... realistic. The tendrils were reabsorbed.

“The enemy baron is still in the town hall according to prisoners. He's attempting contact with the prince,” Denerim continued.

That got her attention.

“Contact?”

“He has a two-way communication device, apparently.”

“Let’s go.”

Viv was going to commit the fantasy equivalent of screaming in a phone. The last of the Enorian prisoners were being carried away and the path to Resh Ganimatalo’s old quarters was clear. They strode to the baron’s quarters, easily recognizable by the four guards surrounding it. Denerim ordered them to surrender and they did, which showed that they had good instincts. Viv pushed the door and...

“Locked.”

She called forth black mana but Marruk stopped her.

“Please, let me. It would be nice if we had a door to close later.”

“Right.”

Marruk kicked the door open, and by that Viv meant that the stout warrior booted the piece of wood and it flew off against the opposite wall with a resounding clang. The Kark had the grace to look embarrassed.

“Sorry, my power increased a lot lately.”

“You love doors but hate hinges, huh?” Viv noted as Solfis went through the threshold. Once more, Denerim and Orkan were covering her back. It seemed that her closest allies were not letting their guard down.

Inside, they found the room devoid of decoration save for a simple office filled with documents. A man stood to the side in a decorated doublet. Viv recognized the same sniveling asshole who had delivered the prince’s ultimatum three months and an eternity ago. He was near a white altar, its surface covered by the flaming figure of a young nobleman in elegant cloth. This was not a metaphor. The prince’s likeness was made of flames which danced merrily in the air and bathed the room with warmth. It frowned and turned as they entered.

“Your army is captured and defeated. We have come to accept your unconditional surrender,” Denerim said.

“Never! The warriors of true Enoria will no longer tolerate—”

Viv tuned out the man’s babble. All she could see was the prince looking positively princely and even annoyed in this typical way people who think themselves superior have. The sneer. The upturned nose. The vague shame of being seen in the same room. Her deep resentment latched on his fine features, the brown hair that reached his jaw and the circlet adorning his handsome brow. He did look like royalty alright. For now.

“So you refuse to give up the city?” she finally said, cutting through the heroic verbal diarrhea.

“Over my dead body!”

She gave a quick look at Denerim who shrugged uncaringly. Orkan chuckled.

//Unfortunate phrasing, meat.

Viv’s purge cleanly decapitated the nobleman even as he finished drawing his sword with a flourish. The prince’s expression turned even more sour. The fire that made his body shifted when he leaned forward. The height of the altar was designed to allow his reflection to look down upon those he spoke to, one more petty act, but Viv was tall and Solfis, taller.

“You will regret this action. To kill your better is a heinous crime, punishable by death” he said in a deep, flowing voice. The sound crystallized Viv hatred.

Another moment tinged with the unmistakable gaze of fate weighed on the traveler’s mind. She dismissed it. Viv stood at a turning point and there was nothing on this planet that would prevent her from walking the path she had picked the instant she heard of the device.

Lancer was out of her grasp.

That would have to change.

“Oh no, the asshole wants me dead, big news.”

Lancer’s face twisted in barely contained fury and she knew she had been right. One of the aspects of modern life on earth was exposure to many forms of content, but on Nyil, this was not the case. Viv wagered that Lancer had been raised in a Puritan environment with clearly defined social roles. She also wagered that people knowing their place was important to one who so readily sacrificed pawns to his great cause.

Prince Lancer had never been roasted by a commoner.

She had to make it sting.

“But we both know that you won’t do anything about it, you coward. You’re going to run back home with your tail between your legs like the glorified robber you are because you’ve already got what you wanted. All those speeches about Enoria and Kazar are just horseshit you fed your goons to part them from their money. You came here, played slaver and thief then absconded into the night with your ill-gotten gains, and you won’t return because the only thing you need is daddy to notice you. You don’t give a shit about those you left behind, they are just idiots you conned, you half-assed circleted highwayman. Fuck off. Solfis, I don’t want to see that cockless fuckwit’s ugly mug one second longer. Turn that thing off.

//It will be my pleasure.

The prince had grown aghast during her tirade and had tried to interrupt her but she had just yelled louder and steamrolled the conversation. Now that she was done, his outrage finally exploded.

“You DARE! You—”

Solfis picked a small statue from inside the fire image and the spell dispersed. The altar shut down. Silence returned to the room.

Viv felt emotionally drained. Ranting had been an exhilarating experience, but now the consequences of her action loomed and the weight of the other’s gaze pressed on her shoulders. She turned to face their judgement.

“He will come for us now,” Marruk said, stating the obvious. “Maybe he would have left us alone before but now he will come back to wash his honor. You provoked him.”

“Do you mind?” Viv asked, and she found that she cared about the Kark’s answer.

“Will you go find Varska’s body?” the shield warrior asked in return. Viv blinked at the unexpected question, but the answer was obvious.

“I’ll try. Revenants don’t move that much so maybe, with the beacon... Maybe the bodies didn’t wander off far.”

Three months was a long time, even at shuffling speed. God. That fucker.

Marruk nodded to herself.

“One day I may return to my people. I stay with you now because you care. If one day I fall, it comforts me to think someone will look for me and bury me for myself and not because tradition and propriety said it should be so. You also care about Varska and that is why you are angry. You pursue a blood feud. We Kark will always respect a good blood feud. Also, you are from far away so every person you stand for here is a foreigner. It means a lot to me.”

So, that was that. Orkan just bumped his chest with a predatory smile. It changed his face from punk rocker to knife-wielding psychopath.

“Very Hallurian of you, Viv. I approve!”

Denerim just shook his head.

“I serve the god of righteous combat, Viviane the traveler. I can tell that slaughtering unarmed prisoners is bad, but the causes of wars remain a much more nuanced concept.

Perhaps you condemned your followers to death and slavery. Perhaps you will triumph and prevent an evil man from ascending to the throne. I do not know, and I will not lose myself in pointless considerations. It is enough for me that you stayed your hand when you could have killed the earth shaper.

“Yeah... but honestly, I don’t understand why Lancer even did those things? Why desecrate the bodies? Why do such a thing? It’s just evil for the sake of it.”

“As for that, I can answer,” Denerim said. He stepped forward and pointed at the dim altar. A symbol lay on its base: a crowned helmet inside of a circle.

“The sigil of Maranor, Goddess of Power and wife to Emeric, God of Luck and the current head of the pantheon. Only one who has her blessing can set up such a construct.”

“So the prince worships her?”

“Yes, and that would explain some of his morally questionable choices. Maranor rewards those who apply and pursue power without compromise. Making an example out of traitors and sacrificing agents all fit within her values.”

“Wait, is Maranor a dark god?”

Denerim looked at Viv with pity.

“Not all light gods are benevolent, Viv. There is still a difference between abandoning bodies without burial and eating them to turn into an abomination. Yes?”

“Okay, okay... So he really can’t let the insult go then?”

“If he truly wishes Maranor’s favor, he is obliged to squish you like a bug. If he is to undo the stain on his reputation, he must eliminate you or the other heirs will use his failure against him. Your outburst may have come on the spur of the moment, yet it only hastens the inevitable. He will return for Kazar.”

“Yeah. Okay. Well.”

Viv’s mind stumbled to a halt. She stood victorious in an office with a cooling corpse by her side, blood staining the embroidered doublet. Her allies occupied the room, each one an alien from her perspective. Outside, the army she had gathered was taking possession of the city. She should have felt joy, she thought. Relief and exhaustion competed in her brain instead. Even her anger had fizzled out. It was just too much.

Viv gently slapped her cheeks.

“Right. Enough moping, I want to go help with the wounded first, then we have to create a prisoner’s camp. Wait, where is the earth shaper?”

//I let him go with the other prisoners.

“Right. We need to create a camp for... fuck. Five hundred people? What a nightmare.”

“Not to mention that the new tenants must be evicted. I would like to supervise this, if you agree,” Denerim said.

“Not a political mission...” Orkan moaned, but he shut up after one murderous glare from his mentor.

Viv shook her head and they left. She ordered a city guard to ‘clean the mess’ as she passed by and grabbed Tars from the main square.

“We need somewhere to put the prisoners and the evicted. I was thinking about the fairgrounds with our festival tents if we can find them.”

“Pretty good idea. I’ll get those and the soldiers probably have tents as well. We’ll set a perimeter and start working on getting those leeches out of our homes.”

“Right. See if the earth-shaper can erect walls, make himself useful. Siege specialists must have ways to move dirt around.”

“Ah, I almost forgot about him. Are you going to the infirmary?”

“Yes.”

“Do hurry then.”

Viv went on. She walked past Enorian soldiers sitting dejectedly on the ground, most of them lowering their head when she looked. Many of her fighters saluted or hailed her but something felt wrong. She expected happiness. Instead, the Damocles sword of retribution hung heavily in the air. She had sold this as a reclamation and that was what her side expected. The current war had touched people to the most personal part of their beings, and resentment ran deep in their cold gazes. Denerim, Orkan, Marruk and Solfis formed an unyielding square around her until she entered the temple’s first floor, now reconverted as an infirmary. Denerim used all his life mana on a heavily wounded man then excused himself. Solfis addressed Viv as well.

//There should have been more sniper action during the engagement.

//The most likely conclusion is that they escaped.

“Would they, though?”

//Soldiers are much less willing to fight to the death than marauders.

//Especially for a lost cause, and especially on foreign soil.

//Nevertheless, I shall coordinate with the Hadal to make sure that they do not resurface.

//Please keep Marruk and Orkan by your sides at all times.

“Will do.”

Brenna, the head healer, arrived just as the golem departed. The older woman wore a white apron stained red and she had her gray hair up in a sensible ponytail.

“Here to help?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I appreciate it but your time is better spent keeping the cleansing under control. We have hundreds of people with life mana eager to help right now, so the situation is not dire. There is someone asking for you though, if you are willing. I was about to send a runner.”

“Asking for me?”

The woman’s dark eyes searched Viv’s face for the gods knew what. She licked her lips.

“He’s dying.”

“Then lead me to him,” she replied without hesitation.

Brenna led her deeper into the complex and stopped before a closed door.

“Don’t exhaust yourself mentally or we all suffer,” she said.

“I cannot not see him,” she replied, hoping she was making sense. The nurse’s expression of grief and sympathy hinted that she did.

“I see. Just, keep what I said in mind.”

The man was not alone in his room. There was a young girl with red eyes trying very hard not to cry and a nurse who was continually casting something, probably a painkiller. Once again, Viv knew that the man should be dead but that magic and stats kept him going. He was missing a good chunk of entrails below the lungs. She could see the glistening mess of reddish guts hanging in by a thread. He looked seventeen, still even had pimples. A hooked nose. His breath was sharp and labored.

“You... you came!” he gasped.

She smiled.

“Of course I did. What’s your name, soldier?”

His hand was cold and sticky. She held it in a strong grip.

“Gotra mam, city militia. Back in Kazar. We sure showed them... ey?”

His voice was weak and he had to stop for breath. It wouldn't be long.

“I killed their baron. It's over. The city is ours again. We won,” she tried.

“That's good.”

Then, after a while.

“I'm scared.”

What could she even say?

“We are all here for you.”

“It's that Enorian squad. They attacked us by surprise to slow our troops down but we stood our ground.”

“You did. We succeeded because you were here to hold the line.”

“So I was not useless?”

“No. You fought for us all and because of you we have homes and fields to return to. You made this happen. If Neriad really helps those who fall in righteous combat, I don't think he could find a better candidate than you.”

Words words words. Just sound and wind. That was fine though. It was about being here for him. That's what mattered.

“Good. Good. I remember walking with everyone in line, and we had your back. You were at the front with the Kark and Solfis. It was my honor.”

“No, Gotra. I assure you. The honor is all mine.”

He nodded.

“I think I'm ready now. Goodbye sis.”

The girl cried now and the priestess muttered a prayer. A golden wind rose and washed away the stench of blood and offal. The boy was gone. The girl thanked Viv for coming and the nurse gently shooed her away. Viv moved out. Her bodyguards remained silent.

The Lost Heiress walked slowly back to the exit when a sigh in a deep alto distracted her.

“Koro?” she asked.

The tall Amazon woman was resting in a chair, expression vacant. Viv approached and realized that something was wrong. Koro was no longer in armor and the sleeve on her right hand was loose.

“Koro?” Viv repeated.

“Oh, it’s you. Good show in the battle.”

The tall woman lifted her limb, which had been amputated at the elbow.

“A fire strike. I was covering Lorn. Too much damage to reattach.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Koro smiled bitterly.

“It’s fine. I still have a hand and my mouth. It’s enough to ask Yan to marry me, right? He can’t need both?”

Viv stepped forward just in time to receive the crying head of the amazon on her armored chest. She caressed her thick hair while her ally bawled her eyes out. It was a rather short but very intensive display of emotion.

“I’m sowwy...”

“Hey, hey,” Viv said, and she leaned forward until their eyes were level.

“Arm or no arm we’re not leaving you behind, alright? You are not left behind. You’re one of us, now and forever. Alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Sorry. I’ll be good, promise. I’ll complain to you later over a cup, just go and make yourself useful, tiny caster.”

The skies outside were remarkably cloudless. The stench of blood was starting to lift. There were a few smokes rising over the city but nothing too bad. A man was dragged forward by four guards, followed by a woman with a black eye and her arm in a sling. She was grim. He was furious.

“I welcomed you into my home, whore!”

The irate man fought on as the soldiers put a noose over his neck and hanged him. The tree of Kazar was already bearing many unusual fruits. Farther on the plaza, enemy civilians

massed under the pitiless gaze of soldiers. They were getting rowdy. She approached, wondering where Denerim was.

A tall man with a thick beard saw her and yelled. His voice was backed by a leadership skill. She could feel it.

“How can you do this to us? We are citizens of this country and the rightful, legal owners of those homes! You rebels have no right to treat us like that.”

Aaaaaaand that did it.

The few birds grew silent. Kazaran soldiers and workers alike took a fearful step back. Wings of abyss exploded above Viv’s shoulders, splitting and coiling with her fury as the world seemed to take a deep breath. Sound glyph swirled around her quickly reddening face like a flock of crows. The wisest among the Kazarans placed their hands on their ears in anticipation, and winced.

Then Viv exploded with the roar of a fighter jet taking off.

“No right? No right, you say? I’ll tell you by what right you are being clumped here. You are guilty, you hear me? You are all guilty. Every last one of you motherfuckers deserve to die. You paid money to steal the land and labor of people here. That’s what you fucking did, you thieves. Don’t lie to yourselves. You stole what wasn’t yours because you couldn’t be arsed to create your own wealth. You came and caused the death of hundreds of folks, because of greed. Kids have died. Countless people have suffered because we didn’t matter to you, because you didn’t see us as people. The person I loved is dead because of you. And now you come to me and make demands? You dare? You fucking dare? Now that you’re on the receiving end of the beat stick? You assholes. You unbelievable, irredeemable pieces of shit. You fucking cowards. I will fucking kill you if you open your mouths. I will gut you like fishes and eat your fucking livers. You will get your collective, disgusting asses to wherever we say you go, whenever we say you go, or I swear on every last god of this miserable ratfuck hellhole of a planet that I will have Solfis tear you limb from limb and make your children watch. And I will enjoy it! Now you have exactly ten fucking seconds to sit your asses down. Obey or die. Shut up or die. I’m this close. This fucking close. Just go ahead, limp dick. Push me over the edge. See what happens.”

He didn’t push her over the edge.

Most of the prisoners were sitting down under the sonic onslaught already. A few more were casually thrown among the rest by guards who picked pieces of cotton from their ears and returned to their previous mission after the outburst was done. Viv huffed, anger momentarily spent. It would come back.

It always did these past few days.

She realized that Solfis was standing close, head tilted.

//We are on schedule.

‘What?’

//Nothing, Your Grace.

//I confirm that there are no hostile snipers within the walls.

//I shall remain vigilant, but my core is now at 50% and I will conserve energy until you can charge me again.

“Sure.”

Viv moved around a bit but people seemed to have things well in hand. Denerim and the guards were overseeing the ousting to keep lynchings to a minimum while Tars made the prisoners build their own camp. Civilians were resettling, with squads moving out to liberate the closest farms. The wounded were all cured, though still weak. Viv expected that a city council would happen in the evening. It was still early morning now.

“Let’s check Varska’s tower,” Viv suggested.

//Lead the way.

//We can use the opportunity for a debriefing.

Not looking forward to that.

Chapter 70: No Ivory Tower

Viv pushed the door to Varska’s tower with some effort. The hinges hadn’t been worked in a while.

“I’ll help,” Marruk said.

“It’s fine,” Viv grunted. Better not let Marruk Doorbane near. The air hit her. It smelled musty and a bit off. The air had always carried the fragrance of flowers before.

The first floor had been ransacked but not destroyed. Only the oldest and rattiest loveseats remained. A few pieces of fabric were scattered across the room, mostly undyed local works. The windows were shuttered. Viv made to open the nearest one but Marruk held her back gently.

“Opening the window yourself is the number one way of being shot by archers in a city. Let me do it,” the Kark said.

//Marruk is correct.

//Although the risks are small, let us remain cautious.

//At least for a week.

“Alright, alright!”

Viv’s steps left footprints on the stairs’ dusty floors. The second floor, the one belonging to the housekeeper, had been emptied of food and valuable cooking implements. Varska’s room had been on the third floor. It was completely empty.

//I estimate that most of the stolen furniture can be found in the surrounding residences.”

“They can fucking keep it.”

Varska’s tea room had been deprived of its sets. The table was still there. All around, wardrobes and cupboards leaned with open drawers like drooling rejects, lustre long gone. Marruk opened the window to let the air and light in. It did not do the room any favor.

Viv crashed on her favorite couch. She didn’t feel the need to check upstairs and see hundreds of hours of magical flora rotting in their pots. The smell was enough.

“So. Yeah.”

//Would you like to talk now?”

“I feel like a stiff drink and being left the fuck alone. Nevermind. I messed up. I was too defensive, too conservative. Too slow. I should have been much more aggressive to force the enemy caster to react. Most of my spells are variations around ‘throw destructive black mana at things until they die’ as well. I should have expanded my list. As it was, I only did half the damage I could have done and our side suffered as a result. ”

//I respectfully disagree with your assessment.

Viv cut short, surprised. Solfis was always the most critical of her teachers during everyday practice.

//Your assessment was that you saved too much power instead of using it.

//If you had used more power, the battle would have been won much sooner.

//If you had prepared more spells, the battle would have been won sooner.

//Is this understanding correct?

“I guess?”

With the windows open, the freshness of lilac leaves replaced the scent of dust. Viv's adrenaline decided that it was a good time to make its exit. She yawned. Her exhaustion was more mental than physical, and only the fear of a mass lynching kept her from requesting a nap.

//Your Grace, listen carefully.

Viv forced herself to wake up.

//Every decision in battle or politics is a choice between several options.

//This choice is made with incomplete and often incorrect data.

//When you planned the reconquest of Kazar, you and I aligned on a training regimen.

//We worked on your defenses.

//You practiced with great rigor.

//You could not have worked on this and developed yourself offensively at the same time.

//Thus, an arbitration was made.

//I believe that at that time, it was the correct decision.

//Any plan must strike a balance between refining the path to success and eliminating the points of failure.

//The acquisition of men and equipment increased our chances of success.

//Keeping you alive eliminated the most critical point of failure.

//Thus, you worked on keeping yourself alive.

//And it worked.

//As is, I estimate that you are responsible for close to fifty percent of overall enemy casualties.

“Seriously?”

//The enemy wore heavy armor.

//It helped against everything except for you.

//You did well, Your Grace.

//You accounted for ambushes and the sniper, hence your caution.

//As a result we have suffered minimal losses and you are unharmed.

//This is close to the optimal result.

“When you put it like that...”

//You are correct in identifying what needs to be done next.

//It does not mean that it should have been done before.

//I am stating the obvious since your mental abilities appear to be impaired right now.

“Hey!”

//Heir's moping successfully ended.
//Returning to main objective.
//We must consider the next step in your indoctrination of the locals.
//As well as your personal training.

"There will be no indoctrination."

//Prince Lancer will return next spring, summer at the latest.

Viv fell silent.

//Barring any catastrophe on his side, he will come to avenge his shame, destroying the city in the process.
//This time, there will be no fields to return to.
//He will see to it.
//Unless, of course, you manage to stop a far superior force with what we have on hand.
//This endeavor will require a mobilization of the local population at an unprecedented scale.
//We must therefore consider the indoctrination of the locals.
//Or you could leave them to their fate, of course.

Solfis' malevolent gaze lowered on Viv as he stood by the door. He waited for her answer with alien patience.

"How do we proceed?"

//Today's battle had over 90% chance of victory.

"Wait, really?"

//Yes.
//It would have been unwise to spread that belief, however.
//The memory of a desperate struggle will serve the meatbags well.
//Human nations are built on beautiful deceit.
//But please consider that the Prince's first attack could have theoretically been repulsed with massive casualties.
//And the risk of quick retaliation.
//During today's siege, the enemy was missing two hundred trained troops and most of their elites.
//At the same time, we had acquired material and almost a hundred trained soldiers.
//When the Prince returns, he will have a decisive force.
//You must prepare to oppose him.

"We're already fully committed, I don't see how we could get more at this stage."

//Your role is not to come up with every solution, Your Grace.
//Your role is to gather allies to do it for you.
//There will be a purge, then the harvest must be completed.
//During that time, the meatbags of Kazar must be led to accept that the prince will return.
//And that they must work to prevent his success.
//All the details can come later.

“Are you sure that he will come?” Viv asked. “I will assume that it will happen no matter what, I’m just curious as to why you seem so confident.”

//I agree with the point that Denerim made.
//My algorithms also return that an Enorian candidate for the throne may not leave a rebellion unresolved.
//Not if they wish to wear the crown.
//Your very existence undermines his claim.
//The prince will come for you, one way or another.

“You also kind of want me to kill him, don’t you?”

//Of course, Your Grace.
//Few things please me more than crushing a man’s dream before I crush his ribcage.
//Especially provincial, thin-blooded upstarts.
//One is allowed to enjoy his work.
//And I enjoy my work more than most.

“First we go through the current crisis and then I’ll start working on the next step.

//As you wish Your Grace.
//As long as you do not wait too much.
//As for spell-casting, I assume that you understand what is required.

“I need to become a caster that can work around an army.”

//I deem this response as inexact, Your Grace.

Viv let out the kind of full-chested sigh of annoyance that replaced a screaming tirade.

“Please expand.”

//The spies reported the presence of a war caster, a red mana specialist, if you remember.

“Lancer’s girlfriend.”

//She is the one you must stop.

//The likelihood is high that she is well-trained and capable.

“How do you figure?”

//Lancer is arrogant, but he is not a fool.

//He will not bind his fate to a second-rate mage.

“Maybe. Do you have a training regimen then?”

//We will work on long-range battle as part of the imperial war mage doctrine.

//Meanwhile, you remain an instinctive caster.

//Therefore, it falls to you to come up with new spells and ways to use your skills.

//There are no black mana war manuals in my knowledge database.

//There is no rush, let the idea float on the back of your organic, messy mind, Your Grace.

Viv thought about it and considered something else.

“You know, I intended to keep a low profile but that’s pretty much impossible now. There are weapons from my world, projectile weapons. I think that I may be able to replicate them.”

//Can your weapons pierce through three fingers of steel?”

Viv considered the question.

She did not have access to modern materials and finding the proper ingredients for black powder would be difficult. Charcoal and sulfur were most likely doable, since she remembered that sulfur was yellow, stank, and often appeared near volcanoes. With this, any alchemist worth their salt(peter) would be able to find it. Unfortunately, she didn’t have any idea where to start nitrate, much less potassium nitrate. Try as she might, she could not remember the first thing about it. Not even its color. It was probably mineral in nature? Maybe? She didn’t know. Between the time it would take to experiment with alchemy and the average physical ability of the people here, it would take a very long time before she could create something with the stopping power to take down a superhuman fighter in a steel armor three-centimeters thick. Hell, even the average gramma could probably survive a 9mm round to the chest here, at least for a while.

On the other hand, she could disintegrate a mortar round mid-flight.

“Probably not.”

//Unexpected.

//My next question was to ask if it was worth condemning Kazar in the long run.

“What do you mean?”

**//Perhaps you remember the traveler who created the Hadal strain of humans.
//He was slain, and his work was buried.
//I estimate that the appearance of new destructive technology will lead to a similar result.**

“How would they even know that it’s a foreign technology? Even here, inventions must occur organically.”

**//I am sorry, Your Grace, but such secrets fall under the purview of Maradoc, who blessed you.
//I fear that, if his clergy takes an interest in you, he will favor them**

“So, no deal?”

**//Perhaps we can pursue it in secret, in the future.
//If we have several years and can hold against every other nation of the continent.**

“You can still bring new ideas,” Marruk said, “like guerilla warfare.”

Viv and Solfis stopped and stared at the quickly blushing Kark.

“What? We have a forest between the enemy and us. Is this not perfect?”

“We could get to them before they get to us...” Viv considered.

**//The crossing of the Deadshield Woods will be fraught with peril.
//For them.**

“Ok, let’s keep that in mind and get out,” Viv said as she took a quick look outside, “because the tree is running out of branches to hang people from.”

Mass executions ran throughout the day, with screaming men and sometimes women dragged to the main plaza to face their end. Viv went to Denerim as soon as she found him.

“I thought that we were supposed to prevent... this!” she hissed in his ear. The inquisitor looked at her with undisguised annoyance.

“You set them on the path, remember? As for me, I’m not here to prevent justice from being dispensed. I’m just here to make sure it’s done to the guilty and without torture.”

“Was rape always punishable by death?” Viv asked with some doubt. She was pretty sure that the guilty received a public lashing.

“It is when committed by enemy forces, at least since your council gathered and voted the law in effect. It happened early in the afternoon.”

“What the hell was Farren thinking?”

“He voted in favor after working in the hospital for an hour. For someone who is decent at moving hearts, you are woefully bad at understanding what dwells in them. Popular justice quickly veers to the chopping block, Lost Heiress. Remember that next time.”

The inquisitor left her to stop another lynching. Orkan approached and patted her shoulders, red tattoos reflecting the torches nearby.

“He’s not mad, don’t worry.”

“This is not how I envisioned victory.”

“First conquest, ey? Don’t worry, you get used to it.”

Viv sure hoped the fuck not.

By nightfall, the Kazarans had run out of rope, but not out of axes. Viv was reminded of the Terror, that dark period of history that followed the French revolution. Paris had been stained red by the blood of the beheaded in an unprecedented frenzy of governmental violence. It only ended with the investigators facing the guillotine themselves.

“I can’t go out there and stop this. They would not understand,” Viv muttered as yet another head joined the pile.

//Why would you, Your Grace?

//Every invader that falls is one less mouth to fill.

//And one less prisoner to guard.

The lost traveler excused herself behind a pile of crates and quietly threw up.

Viv slept in Resh’s quarters that night, then moved to the mage tower the next day. The events of the previous day had hit her hard, not because she was unused to the violence of this world but because this time she had a hand in it. Conflict in Param obviously involved a long succession of war crimes. It was just the first time she was responsible for one.

Fortunately, she had an emotional support dragon.

“As a recognition for your help these past few months and to mark your growth and flame-spitting, I am proud and happy to grant you... your third gold talent!”

“Squeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Viv watched Arthur paddle excitedly to her lair and religiously open her pouch to add this new piece to her collection. The pure, untainted joy acted as balm for her sour mood. The morning had not been kind.

The prisoner camp was growing, with the prisoners themselves working to cut wood and build the dwellings they would use. The earth caster was instrumental in creating larger structures, which proved necessary with the influx of newcomers. All the farms from Kazar to the mountain had already been liberated, with clumps of Enorians joining them every hour from the other side. Lorn had ordered the dead to be detached and properly buried with last rites. Viv hoped that it showed a shift to a more humane approach to justice, but the Temple Guard captain soon revealed his hand: he was freeing rope for a new batch of victims. In particular, the advance of Kazarans across the fertile strip was known and a few irate Enorians had burnt the farms rather than see it fall in the hands of their previous owners. The arsonists' corpses now swung in the wind.

For the rest of them, Viv finally gathered enough presence of mind to put her foot down. She ordered that every person from now on would be judged in the traditional Kazaran way, inside the temple of Neriad, and after investigations. She presided over them herself and managed to slow down the executions at the very least. Denerim had a few words on the matter.

“At least, you are learning. I wish you had had the courage yesterday.”

“It's my first time, alright?”

With the guilt lessened, the minutiae of the conquest spread over a week. The mountain warriors left, their duty fulfilled. Seized properties had to be redistributed. Several issues arose, such as someone asking for their half-payment back after it turned out that a promised loom had been taken by the prince's expedition. The defendant claimed that it was not his fault that the loom had been taken. Viv judged in favor of the plaintiff, but made sure to hammer a reasonable repayment deal between the two before sending them off. She had never expected to be practicing corporate law in a fantasy village surrounded by the undead.

She also made sure that the prisoner village would be getting enough food. Thankfully, the harvest was proceeding as planned and they would not starve anytime soon. She organized the first shipment of grain to the Yries quickly after that, then it was time to decide what to do with the Enorians who had not committed too many atrocities.

“We could just send them into the woods and let the monsters deal with them,” the newly-minted trade representative offered.

“No, please, especially not people with families,” Farren said.

“We could have them clear new sections of land,” Brenna said instead. “That way, they will be able to grow their own crops next year.”

“Will the Kazarans ever accept them, though? And having them clear the forest presents a few risks. First, the noise may attract strong monsters and second, hard work requires more food. We must be cautious because we have no more reserves.”

“I have a proposal,” Viv said.

The rest of the folks in the town hall’s meeting room turned to her. They sat around the same table where Lancer’s messenger had delivered the prince’s ultimatum. His blood still stained the carpet.

“I can create more ward stones, push the deadlands back. It will be much easier than clearing the forest and the land is much more fertile. We can make a big show of having them labor for the city for a set duration, say three years maybe? Then they are officially forgiven in a ceremony.”

“I still say, let them walk back to Enoria,” Tars grunted. She touched the scar on her cheek.

“This would be murder without escort and we know it,” Farren replied, “Viv’s proposal has merit. It also gives us the time to ransom them back if possible. What about the revenants, however? Those lands you speak of are occupied.”

“I will go to the place where our fallen were disposed of and activate the lure beacon. With any luck, we can recover the bodies and clear the area at the same time.”

The others nodded.

“Proposal accepted then. The last item on our list is the relocation of the Hadals to the scout’s forward base...”

It turned out that the Hadal wanted to occupy a dark, underground cave in the forest that the scouts had been using as a supply cache. Nobody had any objection since the scouts favored the move themselves. A few of the second generations had already started to come and trade meat for commodities. With everything stable, Viv decided that it was time to reclaim the dead. The meeting ended shortly after.

Viv set out at dawn the day after following a breakfast of boiled wheat-equivalent. It was a shit beginning to what was shaping out to be a shit day. Solfis, Arthur, and Marruk were coming, though the golem was starting to run a bit low on battery. A smattering of soldiers was joining as well, including a few Temple Guards. They had all lost people in the escape from the city and were eager to reclaim their bodies, which would be carried in coffins stored on a pair of carts.

It was a miserable procession through the desert. The earth shaper had told them where the bodies had been dumped: near a bridge over a chasm. The silence as they made their way was becoming so oppressive that Viv turned to the others for conversation.

“You know, if Varska had died in some senseless war, I think I would be done grieving by now. It has been two months. Instead, every new insult applies a fresh coat of pain and now... I just can't let it go. Not anymore.”

“The essence of a blood feud,” Marruk said with an understanding nod. She seemed to be in her element.

“The Enorian princeling tried to trample us, now we must kill him and his followers to let the world know not to trifle with us.”

Viv stared at the Kark's content face.

“Sorry, did you not leave because... you know?”

“Because blood feuds are destroying our civilization? Yes. But if you are already in one you might as well go all the way.”

She leaned forward.

“Do you have any blood feud stories from your homeland?”

So Viv told everyone about the Count of Monte Cristo.

Chapter 71: Change

The expedition set up behind the bridge. Viv crossed it to deploy the lure and then trotted back to defensive positions. The plan was to use the bridge as a chokehold. The revenants would rush to the lure, and, finding no target, turn their undying hunger to the only people around with a pulse. It also gave them an avenue of retreat provided that nothing managed to gnaw on their horses while they had their backs turned.

The plan worked well. Without a necromancer to guide them, the mass of creatures was just fuel for a devastating Viv. Most of the early stages were spent throwing mass yonks into the melee and killing the rare elite. The first change happened after fifteen minutes. Solfis had been inspecting their assailants with glowing eyes. He suddenly moved forward.

//Target acquired.

The massive golem crawled on the other side of the bridge by digging his talons into the very stone. Viv judged that it was more disturbing than being swarmed by reanimated bodies. At least those had joints. The golem returned shortly later with a writing revenant bearing a grey undershirt.

//Target retrieved: Sonali of the scout corps.

He looked just as mummified as the rest to Viv, but when Solfis drew closer she could see that the gambeson was newish, undyed and embroidered in the way the locals affectionated. The corpse was also relatively fresh.

“That’s Sonali alright. Poor bastard was about to return to Baran too,” one of the crossbowmen said. The revenant was disabled and purified by Torm, the highest ranking servant of Neriad present. He was the shield bearer who had pathed up during the ‘failed lich’ battle, easily recognizable by his drooping moustache, ponytail and receding hairline. He placed the purified body in one of the coffins, which was then closed.

//I have recorded the names and appearances of the missing.

//I shall retrieve them as they arrive.

//Please do not cast... mass yonks... on their backlines, Your Grace.

“I understand, and I have a favor to ask.”

//Speak.

“Do not let me see her.”

Solfis nodded slowly.

//I understand, Your Grace.

The morning went on and most of the guards sat down, with a few of the more adventurous crossbowmen taking potshots at elites and showing them to Viv. Once or twice per hour, Solfis would move forth and through the fumbling masses to retrieve a single body, which was then identified and put to rest. The carts filled with the dead. The inevitable happened around noon.

//Target acquired.

//Please avert your eyes, Your Grace.

Viv stopped casting for a full minute, which finally allowed Marruk and Torm to practice a bit. Viv looked at some of the revenant milling behind them, on their side of the chasm. A strike team of guards went from one to the other, disabling them and dragging the bodies to a pyre. They checked for loot, of course.

Arthur landed with a detached head in one claw and a purse in the other. Viv emptied its contents.

“No gold, sorry...”

“Squee.”

“You know, if you find seven silver talents, the banker will gladly exchange it for one gold talent.”

Arthur’s jaw fell open, revealing an impressive array of serrated teeth.

“Squ.... Squeeeeeeee—”

“And she’s off. Maybe I should have kept precious metal exchange rates to myself,” Viv muttered. The dragonling had climbed to the sky and was already diving back on a nearby target.

//It is done Your Grace.

//Torm put your companion at rest.

//You will be relieved to learn that her body did not suffer further abuse after her demise, beyond being discarded.

“That is plenty enough.”

//Indeed.

//The coffin has been shut, if you wish to return to casting.

//As for one of your previous comments, I have decided to share a self-reflection with you.

//If someone had defiled my creator Irlefen’s body, I would have pursued them to the end of Nyil.

//And made them suffer until their mind broke.

//Mostly, I find the concerns of organics futile and petty.

//In this case, I understand that the mage was dear to you and that the insult to her memory must be repaid in blood.

//You know that I will support you no matter what.

//I want you, Your Grace, to know that I support you because I want to.

“Thanks, Soflis. It means a lot coming from you. I appreciate it.”

//Excellent, Your Grace.

//Now please remember to make sure that I do not need to avenge you.

“I promise to do my very best. Alright. Enough of that, time to thin the herd.

Viv returned to the fray and disintegrated revenants by the dozen. On the other side of the bridge, ash from the dead reached knee height. The slaughter continued into the afternoon until the last stragglers were disposed of by roaming groups of looters. Everyone piled the meagre findings on the ground by the cart containing the sealed coffins. The expedition had found all but one of the bodies, the last one perhaps too damaged to have been moved. There were still revenants down the chasm.

“Solfis, could you carry me down? I want to finish the job. Arthur, come back please.”

The golem easily descended the sheer cliff with Viv held under the armpits. They found a moaning pile of broken bodies under the mighty arches.

//They will regenerate given time.

//Do you wish to start casting now?

“No need. Come on, Arthur, give me a hand here.”

“Squee?”

“Well you’re not going to match the desolation of Aristan without practicing a bit, you know?”

“Squee!”

The small dragonling extended her neck from Viv’s own arms and hacked and spit a bit, culminating in a rather unimpressive performance. It looked like she was projectile-vomiting termite. Nevertheless, the results spoke for themselves and the pile quickly ignited. Viv then remembered why she usually preferred her own, cleaner method.

It was the smell.

Just inhaling the smoke was basically getting airborne burnt human flesh into your lungs. Viv shuddered and they made for the rest of the group. The loot was quickly divided between the participants, Viv getting the lion’s share, and they were set out to leave when one of the guards hailed her. He looked extremely pleased with himself.

“Goodmother! Sorry, Your Grace. Your Grace, I have pathed up!”

“Congratulations!” Viv said with genuine pride for the young lad. The others heard him and everyone gathered to offer their heartfelt pleasure, but the guard was not done.

“Inspect me, Your Grace!”

Viv did so.

[Witch-pact crossbowman]

“It’s because of the Yries weapon. The path allows me to use it to the maximum of its abilities. It is a good path, Your Grace!”

“Wow, I don’t know what to say. Is this fine, though? What if the weapon breaks?”

The man waved his hand dismissively.

“Weapons break and get repaired. Or remade. What matters is that I got it from another race. Oh, wait until I tell the others!”

The man seemed happy and the atmosphere improved on the way back. She slept fitfully in the tower and moved out the very next morning to handle the next pressing matter: the fate of the prisoners.

It didn’t take long to find a handful of men to get rocks. In fact, there was an abundance of crossbowmen eager to get a few headshots, probably because of the new path. Unfortunately for them, the place was almost empty. Fortunately for Viv, she didn’t have to carry the local equivalent of menhirs.

They proceeded the same way as they had back at the mines. Solfis helped her engrave the glyphs and she cast the spell when she was ready. It quickly turned out that once per day was her maximum, which only surprised her, and the golem managed to recharge his core while she recovered.

On the evening of the second day, the council accepted her proposal and she announced to the grimy-faced prisoners what their fate would be. Looking at all those desperate eyes shining in the twilight sun, they probably expected her to skewer them with pitchforks and then oven-bake their babies. The promise of new land and freedom after only three years gave them the sort of suspicious hope that waits as much for deliverance as for the other shoe to drop. The first to get land would be picked at random and stay in the camp until they built their dwellings. It would also prevent the Enorian from growing idle and the camp from acquiring the deep stench of overcrowded villages. The guards reported that tensions and incidents decreased. Of course, Viv did not stop there. She had the perfect, modern solution for handling mistreated minorities.

Propaganda and mental reconditioning.

Every evening, she would tell how they had been lied to, how they were victims of Prince Lancer who stole their money and left them to die. The Prince had seduced them away from the path of righteousness with his pretty words, then had abandoned them to the Kazarans’

righteous fury. But not all was lost! In their immense mercy, the Kazarans understood only too well what it meant to be downtrodden and after a more than reasonable punishment, the offenders would be redeemed.

Viv used light makeup and a sober dress to present herself as virginal and distant, yet another victim of the prince's lying tongue. She told them of her efforts and how she would create good soil for them out of the deadlands and, more importantly, she told them what they wanted to hear. That it was not really their fault, and that, deep inside, they were better than this.

Strangely, it was easier than talking about the constitution and she immediately understood why. She cared about those Kazarans who had fought by her side even if they were not perfect. The Enorians could go fuck themselves. She wouldn't go out of her way to ruin their lives but if they got eaten by a passing wyvern she wouldn't shed a tear.

It was two weeks after the conquest when Viv did what she felt was important. She organized general elections for every position in the city, including her own, as a way to mark the occasion. They had won, had what was shaping up to be a bountiful harvest, and Irao had reported that the prince had left the Deadshield woods. Viv ran on a platform based on her successes and her aura as the one who had introduced democracy to start with. She didn't even have to resort to Solfis-backed negotiations with the handful of misguided rivals who opposed her. If anything, she had to rein in her supporters who were rather invested in her success and had the weapons to back it up. It was the Athenian democracy all over again.

Eventually, they ended up with almost the same names and a new representative for the laborers. Voting booths had been a huge success, as had been the application of purchased dye on the thumb of the voter to show participation. The people of Kazar were... proud. Invested. Things were moving, most of them of their own accords. Most people were busy with the harvest.

It was now time to experiment with magic and make use of Denerim's continued presence to work on regrowing limbs.

//This is a good place, Your Grace.

Viv looked around and agreed. With new stones set at regular intervals, they had freed acres of arable land. It would take a while for the farthest expanses to desaturate, however, which

gave her a window of opportunity to experiment. The place Solfis had selected was a small basin between two low rises. A few stones emerged from the packed ochre dust haphazardly, while scraggly black growths clung to the rocky slopes. The ubiquitous dark clouds of the deadlands still clung stubbornly overhead, pushed back slowly but surely by southern winds.

Viv sighed. It was desolate. Just what they needed. Now that they had stopped, however, she was struck by an unexpected bout of nostalgia.

“You know, we had a thing called *the internet* in my old world. It was like a magical network of knowledge that covered cities and houses and that almost everyone could access. It let us check the sum total of our civilization’s knowledge.

//Your nation must have been great indeed.

“Not really. Most people used it for jokes, erotica, cat photos and the spread of stupid rumours.”

Solfis remained silent for a while.

//I am at once disappointed and unsurprised.

//A contradiction.

“Yeah but I digress. I used to have a good friend I met through the internet and whom I actually never met in real life. He was a person who took great delight in exploiting systems, finding loopholes, those sorts of things. He was at his happiest when he used a tool for an unintended purpose with great effect. I wish I could talk to him now.”

//Does this relate to experimentation?

“Yeah. I realize that I’m pretty good at learning magic, if my fast progress is any indication, but I’m just... unimaginative. I have this awesome power at the tip of my fingers and I’m just using it to melt things.

//Arguably, you do this very well.

“Yes but I can do better. I need more tools if they exist. I need to consider stealth, mobility, and utility. Anyway, I will start by experimenting with the ‘change’ meaning. Try it out a bit.”

Now that there were no immediate crises, she would take the time to explore new things, starting with one she had not touched yet.

It was partly out of fear. The concept reminded her of the roiling, pus-filled ball of putrid flesh they had faced in the mines. The failed lich. The memory of that stench still haunted her nostrils on occasion, giving her goosebumps. It had been that bad.

Enough of that now.

“Bzzt.”

Viv tried to charge her most basic spell with the meaning and... failed. She was familiar with annihilation but this was radically different. Black was the color of entropy, in a way. Annihilation was merely the most drastic and final expression of it. Change as a concept implied that something came after.

Viv tried again. She willed the spell to alter its target, and it did. She felt the bolt leave charged with meaning, and when it hit, the dust reacted. Plumes of earth grew from the ground like a time-lapse, then the spell stopped and half of it fell back in various sizes of granulated sand. What was left behind resembled a sculpture in a zen garden, if the zen garden was curated by outer-space squids.

“Hmm.”

She tried again with various degrees of power. The dust she hit would change shape and become more compact, or more porous. Sculptures hit a second time expanded quickly then collapsed. On a hunch, she refined the concept.

‘Change into a wall.’

The next spell was, well, more wall-like. It still looked like a prop from a cheap sci-fi movie but it did reach waist-height.

//I detect residues of black mana in the structure.

//It will make it resistant to spells.

//However...

Solfis picked a small stone and casually tossed it at the sculpture. It shattered.

//Any decent soldier may simply run through it.

“I see. It might also block line of sight, which is valuable in itself. Let’s experiment a bit more.”

Casting on an actual stone as opposed to dirt led to similar results, though slower. The stone walls still looked eldritch and menacing. They had the same organic appearance as what the Yries built but none of the elegance. Solfis tested them and found that they were slightly more sturdy.

//Do you believe that you can form better walls?

“Probably. I need to get used to the concept first. Annihilation requires a lot of power and conviction, but change is very flexible. They are really different. In fact...”

She tried to annihilate a wall with a purge net and found that the meaning came to her sluggishly. It probably would not affect her later, but she didn't think the two meanings could work together at all.

Viv slowly worked through more experiments. Through practice, she realized that she could make the walls go higher by affecting a larger area and forming a hole next to it, which led to an obvious discovery.

"Alright, so I cannot really create matter. The dust walls are simply unpacked dust, that's why they are so flimsy. Same for the stone, I draw it from below. Whatever I touch will probably retain its original mass, only change form. Similarly, the tighter the construction, the more effort it takes to deform it."

**//It implies that you can create fast but fragile obstructions while on friable terrain.
//Rocks will allow you to make sturdier structures but they will also take more time and energy.
//Is this assessment correct?**

"Let's find out."

A few more spells cast on the rocky slopes confirmed the golem's hypothesis. Perhaps it would change when she got the hang of using the concept a bit more. Whatever. She would practice, but she was not done with experimenting yet. The next target was obvious. She had to cast it on something alive.

"Bzzt."

The dark, scrawny plant got instantly mangled.

Viv had used only the smallest hints of power. She approached the shredded matter for some impromptu dissection. The leaves were either shredded or fused like acid scars. The core had been half shorn while the rest had become ossified.

//This is the concept you wish to use to regrow limbs, is it not?

"Yeah I see what you mean. That concept is to regeneration what a chainsaw is to surgery. With that said, I can probably fine-tune it to work with a life mana construct. It will just take some practice. We need more live targets so I propose that we walk to the forest."

//As you wish.

The stroll let Viv clear her head. The new concept was playing tricks on her mind. It resonated within her, vast and unexplored, a thought that was not just her own. Annihilation was visceral. Angry. A thing as straightforward as a blade. Change was ethereal and complex. Abstract. Mental. Flexible. Both concepts existed within her and outside of her.

They were part of magic and, as such, they belonged to the world. She merely touched upon them. It felt incredibly strange to 'acquire' ideas in such an organic fashion. There was no earthly experience that could quite compare.

Viv considered what Varska had told her. Mages took a more analytical approach to casting and she wondered if it was not a bit of a mistake. You could read, or be taught that concepts gave spells a meaning corresponding to a color's facet but you could not truly understand it until you experienced it. Love and rage could not be explained with words. They could be alluded to or evoked but not truly, truly rendered. It was the same with casting. Although, perhaps it was still the most efficient way for a lot of people.

Viv arrived at the edge of the forest almost an hour later at a brisk pace. The ward stones she had placed were really expanding the living lands. Now it was a matter of seeing if the encroachment lasted.

"Bzzt."

Viv attempted the spell on a few trees, turning them into modern art exhibits, or so she thought. The inspection skill disagreed.

[Mangled trunk: remnant of a deep wood fir submitted to destructive black mana.]

"To change its form in real time, the acolyte of Gomogog we fought back near the tree must have had some incredible control."

//I estimate that divine assistance should be credited with this feat, Your Grace.

"Do you think that I could target a tree and turn it into some sort of regenerating monster?"

//Statistically, if you destroy every tree in the Deadshield Woods, you might be successful once or twice.

//Although my algorithms return that it would be an inefficient use of the next centuries.

"Right. There is one last thing I want to test."

Viv coated herself with the armor, but infused the parts with the meaning of change. Immediately, the infantry armor shape she was used to melded and weaved. It looked like she was wearing liquid dark fog. There was no apparent effect until she took a step forward and the surface shifted a bit.

//Can you make the armor stop changing so much, Your Grace?

She willed it and the multiple tendrils and vaporous patterns covering her floated instead of writhed. It lasted until she moved and the thing shifted again. Viv was about to ask what Solfis meant when the golem's skull snapped to the side. Viv about-faced with some alarm,

but it was only Irao standing straight by a damaged tree's remains. He was still wearing his dark armor. His slitted yellow eyes considered Viv without much emotion.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I felt an unknown camouflage and came to investigate. I check every major anomaly on our territory."

"Camouflage?"

//The Hadal is correct, Your Grace.

//The armor changed with its environment in a way that gives you stealth capabilities.

//Additionally, the stealth effect is reinforced by a distractor.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Your coat actively deflects the attention. Some of my abilities work in a similar way," Irao explained as he circled her with interest. "It is sloppy but you have only been at it for seven minutes."

"Do you use black mana as well?"

The man nodded.

"Yes. Not the same meaning as you thought. I use obfuscation. Different process for a similar result. I can show you."

And he did, but try as she might, Viv did not get it.

"You must deny the world and have the world deny you."

Irao used his abilities, even intentionally lowering their efficiency after Solfis suggested it. She still failed to understand.

//It might be good to let the idea decant in your mind, Your Grace.

//Imperial records show extended periods of time between concept understandings.

//Your spongy brain matter can only adapt so fast to the raw fabric of reality.

"I guess."

//You may also have a low affinity for a concept that centers around hiding.

//You tend to make yourself highly visible.

"What do you mean? I hid all the way from Harrak to Kazar!"

//And now you are heading a revolution.

“Well... Ok I guess.”

Ah, the hypocrisy. Looking down on her father only to follow the exact same path. The apple didn't fall far from the tree and all that.

Viv felt the worst kind of annoyed, she was pissed at herself.

“Alright, I shall name the camouflage armor... Sneaky Ghillie Lemon Squeezy.”

//May I object?

“No. Next, we are going to pay Denerim a visit. We need to create a roadmap on that arm regrowth thing.”

Chapter 72: The New Normal

It was evening and Viv invited Denerim and Orkan to have dinner in her brand new tower to discuss the spell. It was hers now, well, hers and Gogen's since the taciturn cleaner had moved in with one of her brood. Viv merely had to pay her and budget for food. With the grains and other things coming in, they had delicious fresh bread with nuts, eggs, green vegetables and tubers in abundance as well as grilled monster skewers. Spice was a bit lacking now but the fresh, magical ingredients made up for it.

“You know, I almost expected you to leave quickly now that the city is back in our hands and we have kept atrocities to a reasonable level,” Viv said.

“I would have if my god or my hierarchy had called me back. As it is, we have a little project that interests me greatly and is worth staying in Kazar,” Denerim added.

“And at the Spotted Feather!” Orkan added, eyes dreamy and brain filled with tits.

“Ahem.”

“Sorry mentor, what I mean to say is that inquisitors must sometimes remain for extended periods of time in the same location because not only does it allow us to settle down and get back in touch with the realities of the common folk, it also let people get used to our sight so that we do not remain symbols of impending doom.”

The Hallurian nodded to himself, tattoos mostly dark in this peaceful setting. His handsome angular face had gained a smug expression that suited him strangely. Denerim, of course, was not amused.

“Orkan, what did I say?”

“Be sensitive?”

“No. Well, I said that too. I meant, do not share confidential information with strangers.”

“The incredible secret that men can be horny is safe with me,” Viv said, “I assure you. I will never spread this most sensitive piece of information.”

“Mentor, should we also hide the fact that the man we’re supposed to report to is a massive twat?” Orkan asked again.

Denerim sighed deeply. The time had come for Viv to rescue the conversation.

“So anyway I wanted to talk about the healing spell.”

“Yes,” Denerim grumbled, “that would be best. Have you acquired the change concept yet?”

“I have, but just barely. I need to practice more, but I have found a few things. To begin with, black mana does not create flesh which means that it will have to come from somewhere. Does life mana create tissue out of nowhere?”

“Tissue? Like a hanky?”

“Shut up, Orkan. To answer your question, not really. People who recover from grievous wound are often weakened for a little while and must eat a lot to recover. Could we use... something else’s flesh?”

Denerime looked worried and Viv thought that it was a stupid idea.

“No but we might be able to convert a nutrient soup by, hmmm, liquefying something else’s flesh.”

“What’s a nutrient?”

“Orkan, if you spent more time studying the healing scroll I gave you than scratching your back with your curved sword, you would know. Where was I? Ah yes. If we have the... meat used to rebuild the limb, I suppose, and change-aspected black mana, what else would we need?”

“Are there healing spells? Not just applying life mana to heal but actual spells.”

"I don't use one because Neriad guides me, but... perhaps? Glyphs could do it."

"I need to extract information from cells but I have no idea how to do it."

Denerim considers that for a moment.

"I have no idea why you would need to break someone out of jail," Orkan said, "but if you want to rebuild a leg, why don't you take the other leg and mirror it?"

Viv thought that ... it was not too bad an idea, actually.

"We wouldn't be able to heal double amputees though."

"Healing some is better than healing none. Besides, once you have the hang of it, maybe you will figure out how to do it? And with that you only need a diagnostics spell. We had those in Halluria."

"You did?" Denerim asked, surprised.

"Yes. We warborn were hurt a lot. Every day."

His good mood melted like snow under a flamethrower.

"When we were kids, half of the cohort was seriously wounded between every meal. To save mana, the healers had this construct to detect where the wound was and focus their mana there instead of healing every bruise. I couldn't recreate it but I remember that there were only four glyphs so it can't be too hard."

Viv considered the question. Find, flesh, wound, show? No, it wouldn't work for them because she was trying to copy a limb, not heal it. Find, limb, copy, mirror, show? She would have to experiment. At least, this spell would be harmless.

"Alright so, to summarize, I need a spell to extract the image of the limb and reverse it to prevent people from ending with two left arms, then I need another spell to change the flesh goop into said limb, and then we need Denerim's healing spell to combine with the change spell to heal and reattach the limb. It sounds... complicated and messy."

"We have to start somewhere. It is a grand endeavor."

"I wish I could just toss the entire project at some experienced healers," she lamented.

"And those experienced healers would laugh at you. At this stage, no one believes that limbs can be safely regrown. You would be dismissed and ridiculed. I fear that we must at least prove that the possibility exists or be dismissed."

“Healers would not even consider us?” Viv exclaimed.

Denerim put his hands together and took a deep breath.

“I am willing to bet that you have the same in your home world. Let me try to do it. Ahem. Greetings, ladies and gentlemen healers who have been saving lives for over twenty years. We, an obscure witch and a sword wielder, have totally figured out how to do something that the healing profession has failed to achieve for the past millennium because we are that smart. And you have never heard about us or our work because we were too busy being geniuses.”

“Alright alright. I got it. We would look like charlatans. I mean, would we? Are you not a priest of Neriad?”

“Being honest does not mean that we can’t be fooled. Or that we can’t be morons.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“She does look a bit manipulative,” Orkan considered as he inspected Viv up and down.

“Oj!”

“It’s the eyes, they’re a weird color. People will assume that you’re using cosmetics to catch the eye.”

Viv grumbled, but relented. No use shooting the messenger.

“Fine. I guess I have my work cut out for me.”

Viv settled into yet another routine. She would practice fine-tuning the change meaning on a bunch of innocent trees most of the day, with late afternoon reserved for administrative questions. In reality, there wasn’t much to do for her most of the time. She had delegated a lot of the mayor prerogatives to experts she trusted and only checked their reports. The role was now more about big decisions and projects than handling day-to-day affairs. She also set up a night school with the aid of Brenna, who thought that it was a good idea to teach people how to read. Some of the more determined laborers joined. They had to use clay tablets and styluses because they didn’t have enough paper.

Meanwhile, the harvest was going well. Viv cleared new land and created timber to warm the entire city. The silverite focus helped her by channeling the power held in her nascent necrarch core with almost no efficiency loss. When the power ran out, she would just head to

a ward stone to recharge it. She was starting to stall on the change word, however, and that depressed her a bit.

One morning, Solfis interrupted her regimen to drag her to the deadlands, more specifically to one of the many ridges dotting the valley. Viv blinked as she approached and realized that the many stones were entirely covered with small, tiny script. She read the closest one.

“Joram approached the older fighter, sword at the ready. Barok barely held on his feet after so many fights, yet despair needled him forward. Joram saw the determination in his bloodshot eyes, despite the sweat covering his taut muscles and the blood dripping down a powerful leg. They were evenly matched during spars. This was no spar, and both men knew it.”

“What the... is this in Old Imperial?”

//Indeed, Your Grace.

//It has come to my attention that you may be stretching your willpower stat.

The strange idiom resonated within her borrowed knowledge.

“I am burning out?”

//The past few months have been harrowing.

//Thankfully, you are not alone.

//Unfortunately, those who surround you cannot quite fulfill the same purpose as the departed mage.

//Imperial training books cover mental health, and yours is vulnerable.

//Since I cannot provide companionship by selecting an appropriate mortal...

“I told you, no kidnapping and no slavery.”

//Then I have decided to provide you with a relaxing hobby.

//One that you mentioned missing before.

//Reading.

“Wait...”

//Those are some of the books that I have in my database, transcribed on a cheap support.

//This side of the cliff contains treaties on magic.

//This side contains fiction and historical recounting.

//I grouped them since everything the meatbags recount is essentially fiction.

//On account of your faulty brains.

“What about that?” she said, pointing at the paragraph she had been reading.

//Gladiators of Harrak.

//You had voiced an interest in homoerotic fiction.

“Oh.”

//I could patrol while you masturbate.

“I would never do such a thing out in the open like some deviant.”

//You fleshy things will put a finger up your nose in public.

//Or in your mouth.

//Yet doing the same to genitalia and anus causes shock.

//I fail to see the logic.

“That’s because you lack all of those and besides only uncouth bastards do that in public. Enough about fingers in bums, thank you very much.”

Viv paused and stared at the cliff. It was the work of hours. Yes, the golem never ran out patience. It was still a thoughtful gift.

“Thank you, Solfis, I appreciate it. Really.”

//You should spend a few hours reading and drinking hot klod.

//We can train tomorrow.

//Those missing fleshy bits are not going anywhere.

Viv decided to spend the evening with Koro to cheer the tall woman up. She was still a bit inconsolable despite Yan taking some time to entertain her. She felt useless. Viv didn’t know what to say, this wasn’t her domain of competence, so she just listened and it felt like doing something valid. Later, as they were going home, Arthur grabbed her attention. The dragonette dragged her to a spot of dust in the street and formed characters.

Bank much gold.

“Oh, you finally got enough for one gold talent! Congratulations, your hard work is paying off!”

Looting enemies agreeable.

Viv was a bit surprised by the apparent change of topic, but that only lasted until the next series of characters.

Make bank enemies.

“We are not doing a heist, nor are we doing a robbery, Arthur!”

“Squeeee.”

“To start with, a good amount of the gold stored there belongs to me. Secondly, this is only one bank of many.”

The dragonette perked up, crimson eyes gaining a greedy, dangerous glint.

“Remember the rathclaw, dear. Do not bite more than you can chew.”

“Squeeeee.”

“Ok, think about it another way. The gold comes from the ground where miners gather ore, then it is smelted and turned into ingots. It’s a long and tiresome process. But humans do it anyway. If you destroy the bank, you will get a lot of talents but the humans will flee. Yes?”

“Squee?”

“Meaning that the source of gold will be gone.”

“Squee.”

“While instead we can use power and money to have humans work for us. Then every year we get gold talents... forever.”

“S... squee?!”

“That’s right.”

Arthur bounced. Then bounced again. She then proceeded to hop in a circle.

Viv sat down and watched the dragonling reboot her brain. Perhaps it was a terrible idea to unleash rabid draconic capitalism on Nyil but the place was a shithole anyway so fuck it. Better the tax services than fantasy napalm. Probably. In the short run anyway.

Another distraction offered itself a few days later, when Orkan knocked on Viv’s door one bright morning as she was finishing her tea. He was alone, for once, and unusually nervous. She offered him a cup.

“You know,” he said, “men don’t really do that in Halluria. Sitting down for tea and plotting is something reserved for the fairer sex.”

“We’re not plotting yet, but if you prefer I can give you booze and you can bump your chest. Just don’t stab a knife in the table to make a point. It’s brand new.”

The Hallurian just leaned down against his seat and chuckled. His red tattoos pulsed gently, and for the first time, Viv thought that she saw him relax. He really had that rocker look, complete with a devilish smile and dark hair that reached below a sharp jaw. His eyes twinkled.

“See that’s exactly what we never got. Back talk. Hallurian women deflect and disarm, always with a smile. Even in private. Even, you know.”

“Mid-coit?”

“You really don’t take me seriously huh? I meant pillow talk. They never let their guard down, just like we never let our guard down.”

Orkan unconsciously swished the tea in his cup like expensive liquor.

“It’s going to sound weird because Hallurian women mostly obey men, but I found the treatment... demeaning. I could not engage in a meaningful conversation with a girl, it was all a contest of wit to try and dazzle me.”

“There wasn’t one of them you opened to?” Viv asked, surprised. “Come on. Stay together with someone long enough and they’ll let you know what they think of you. Familiarity breeds contempt.”

But Orkan shook his head. He finished his glass and placed it back on the table, whereupon Viv gave him a refill. The gruff warborn was sharing. It felt like a precious moment.

“You’d think that. It probably happens to lower-ranked people, but not for those destined to be warlords. Everything is political. Everything is a game. Everything is a battle. In that sort of environment, you can never let your guard down. Ever.”

“It sounds... suffocating.”

Orkan caressed his throat thoughtfully.

“Yes. That’s a good comparison. Strangely, it didn’t bother me so much at the time. Not sure why.”

“Did you ever travel outside of Halluria?”

“Of course not, we are not welcome anywhere.”

“Then perhaps you just never knew anything different?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. I never knew you could just sit and have tea and talk and just... not try to get something out of the conversation. I spent so much time of my life doing what was expected of me, what I thought I should expect of myself. I never stopped to ask what was really happening and why I was doing all those things. You know?”

“Wait, I understand that you left Halluria and joined the temple, right?”

“Yes.”

“I assumed that you had questioned your society and that’s why you defected.”

“No. Not that only happened later. I didn’t defect because I was fed up with my life. It was something else.”

“A woman?” Viv asked, wiggling her brows. She only realized after that it was probably a sad story, but Orkan laughed.

“Hah! Not even that. But enough about me, even though it is a fascinating topic. I actually came for a proposal. See, Denerim’s busy helping the fort garrisons and writing reports so I was thinking, it’s the perfect opportunity for some retraining. I thought you might want to join.”

Viv’s doubt must have shown her face, because the Hallurian stopped her with a shake of his head.

“Hold on, before you talk about paths and stats and the fact that I can probably kick your ass using two fingers. It’s mobility training.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hallurian is a land of jungle and deserts. You can’t fight on it unless you can move through it. If you do go against that Prince, you need to know how to move through forests without falling on every root. Also, it helps you with running away. Back home, a mage who doesn’t know how to hide and flee is a dead mage. You got to be able to reposition, and finally...”

“Finally?”

“You spend too much time standing around doing your weird forms and mauling trees. Can’t be good for the mind. A good walk among the greeneries will do you good.”

“We have to watch out for the monsters.”

“Oh yeah, maybe we can bag something delicious. With my quick wit and your magical brawn, nothing can stop us!”

Viv considered her options but only for a few seconds. They were a month into the harvest and it would take another two weeks to finish most of the work. She could use a few strolls, not to mention that Orkan was both deadly and tolerable.

“Yeah I’d love that.”

“Would you like to go now? We should get your golem as well.”

“Sure, why not?”

Marruk agreed to stay behind since running through forests was not exactly her jam. Viv had made zero progress in athletics since she had arrived but she was still a trained soldier and she had the magical body to back it up. They walked to the edge of the forest, now separated from the strip of fertile land by an expanse of destroyed plants, and dove under the boughs of older trees. The sun was soon blocked and the true forest gradually submerged them in its curious embrace. The heavy boughs and thick vegetation swallowed sounds in a curious, unnatural way that made Viv want to whisper. As if something was listening. For a moment, she wondered if the forest knew she was basically a one-woman logging company, but dismissed the idea as idiotic. She could sense the rich shades of mana moving around and they didn’t behave like they were guided. She was sure of it. There was still something mysterious and quiet about the endless expanse.

Orkan paid it little mind as he sometimes led her and sometimes followed her through beast trails and thickets of brambles. Viv had her scout armor and skinsuit on because the robes were too cumbersome. She feared no needle, and Orkan deliberately guided her through rough terrain.

“You can’t always choose where you have to go through. If you can walk even the most treacherous paths, then you are much harder to corner.”

His wisdom went against what she had been taught, yet she accepted it anyway. She was on Nyil now. Stats made all the difference.

Besides moving, Orkan also showed her several useful plants, including one that could be used to soothe and clean wounds. Many were edible. She had a try. She remembered that edible and palatable were not the same thing.

During the whole exercise, Solfis remained at the periphery. Every time they took a break, Viv would search the foliage for the golem’s familiar form, and he would lean from some nook and let her spot his yellow glare. The knowledge comforted her. Solfis was the best fairy godmother and guardian angel she could have hoped for.

They stopped at a clearing at noon and ate a bit. Viv decided to prod her companion a bit. He seemed willing, nay, eager to talk. Like someone who had never been heard before. She had to admit that she was curious as well, and not just because Orkan had a sort of roguish charm he didn’t act on.

“Can I ask why you left, or is it too personal?” Viv asked.

Orkan looked down from his inspection. The open ground they stood was a slightly elevated rock with dry golden grass and plenty of places to sit. She didn't perceive anything magical around and Orkan had checked for snakes. She handed him a meat roll.

“Thank you. It's not personal, no.”

“Too many people have asked you the question?”

“There is that. I don't mind telling you though. Those who interrogated me were temple officials. They didn't give a shit about me, only wanted to check if I was lying. You care, though, I mean, I think.”

“Yeah. You don't have that zealot faith of the newly converted. You know, those who reject where they came from with violence.”

“So you're wondering while I left luxury and free sex behind huh? It was weird, to be honest. I was a really, really good duelist for my clan. One fine morning, I went to train a fresh troop of warborns. I did it sometimes to improve morale. They were all standing there with their stupid faces full of worship, expecting me to dispense some grand revelation on how to kill the best. I was a bit tired that day so I had us play a team-based tag game. It's valid training. They had so much fun. They were so young.”

He was staring at the meat roll in his hand, still untouched.

“It occurred to me that those fifteen used to be twenty, that only twelve would graduate and only six would survive their first real battle. On average, you know? I kept looking at them, trying to wonder which six it would be. I couldn't. I kept seeing them in my mind after the training was done. I had them on my mind for days and days. Then I had to participate in a sanctioned duel against some rising star from out in the boonies, near Sahnfor. We went there by caravan. He was just a kid.”

Orkan went back to inspecting the edge of the forest. He showed no regret for the past, only a sort of detached weariness Viv could understand. She had felt the same way back home, after the glamour of power had faded from the parties she went to and all she could see was bellies and trophies and makeup-covered wrinkles.

“I killed him, of course, then I left my room in the middle of the night. Sahnfor stands at the edge of the desert and the sky just seems to go on forever. It's so high. I'm still not sure why I dressed up and picked up my swords. I just know that I walked straight through the desert to Baran, just like that. No fanfare, no desperate battle. It only... wait, did you hear that?”

They both stood up. At first, they saw nothing, then a strange shape crested the plain of green canopies several hundred meters away. Viv blinked and frowned, but the thing was still there. It looked like a horizontal, flat disc of dark material striated with white veins. Four

black legs kept it far above the tallest tree as they went up and down with slow, ponderous motions. Then the thing blurred and she heard an impact from where she was. The creature lifted the carcass of something large and furry and froze. There was a shrill cry. The creature flung the carcass away as if it weighed nothing and resumed its pace.

“What the fuck is that?” Viv muttered.

//That is an aberrant.

//And we are going to kill it.

Chapter 73: Aberrant

From closer, the aberrant was even worse. The striated disc of its upper body was a malevolent, cancerous mass of vile matter covered in bulbous growths and bony spines. It looked tough too.

“Why would we ever attack that thing?”

//First, the aberrant is on a course to the edge of the fertile strip.

//Should it arrive there, it will kill villagers until we can stop it.

//Second, this is good practice for you.

“I can think of better ways to practice.”

//None so efficient as real world experience.

//Additionally, the aberrants are particularly resistant to mana intrusion.

//It will be good practice for you.

“I’m not sure about that.”

//Please create a workable plan to take it down.

Viv stared and saw the creature suddenly lurch forward and pin something on the ground. A second later, it lifted the carcass of a tree and Viv thought she saw a sort of maw on the thing’s underside. She also realized that the captured tree hovered at a maximum height, away from the disc.

“That’s fucked up. I think it can’t reach its own mouth.”

//Accurate.

//In addition, the flesh is too compact for the aberration to possess a digestive system.

“Wait, do you mean that..”

//It will starve endlessly until it is put down.

//Aberrations have a lot of mana, hence why they are so dangerous.

//Now, can you think of a way to kill it?

Viv looked around and saw only trees as far as the eye could see. Actually, that was not quite correct. Some of the tallest specimens were taller than the aberrants.

“You could —”

//I do not need your help to kill a newly born aberrant, Your Grace.

//You must find a way to kill it yourself.

“Well, hmmm, can you at least carry me around?”

Viv was definitely on the dangerous scale of things. She was also fragile and slow. No amount of trudging through the forest would let her keep pace with that monster, or at least not within the next decade.

//I will agree to transport you.

//However, I will not attack the aberrant.

“Alright. So if the thing can’t bring food to its mouth, it certainly can’t touch the top of its head.”

The articulations looked messed up on the tall, spindly things the creature used as legs. They were black and smooth towards the tip, but the farther up one went and the more organic and sickly they became.

“If we can lure it to any tall tree, Solfis can jump on top of it and dig in. With this, the creature should be unable to dislodge me while I use short-range high-powered spells to slay it.”

Solfis and Orkan stared at her.

“I will act as a lure. It’s very strong but not too fast,” the inquisitor offered.

//How can you fleshy beings always come up with plans that appear as both stupid and likely to succeed?

“If it’s stupid but it works, it ain’t stupid.”

//Is that the wisdom of your old world, Your Grace?

“Yep.”

//New sensation redefined as disappointment.

//We are ready to proceed.

“Wait, what was your plan then?”

//I did not have one, Your Grace.

//The optimal path would be for me to kill it.

//However, several training manuals agree that letting young war mages face true enemies under careful supervision provides the best results.

//We will follow your plan and hopefully not suffer casualties.

With his, the golem moved away and Viv reluctantly packed her unfinished lunch. What kind of barbarian interrupted lunch for physical activity? Someone without a digestive system, that's who. Nevertheless, she followed Orkan on his way to the aberrant.

They moved for only a few minutes, then gave the creature a wide berth. Viv selected a tall lonely tree close to its path and gave one last series of instructions to Orkan.

“This is just practice so don't take any risk, alright?”

“I'm not playing hero. If I get hurt or overwhelmed, I will retreat.”

“Good.”

Viv climbed on Solfis' back while he crawled smoothly up the rugged trunk. She noticed that he did not disturb any branches with his passage, nor did any bark creak or fall. Only sight or the terrifying weight of his gaze could betray his presence. They were soon in position, waiting for Orkan to engage, and he did.

Viv heard the clang of metal, then the aberrant let out another pitched scream and rushed forward towards them. She caught sight of Orkan running backwards. He was focused on the leg trying to skewer him, both blades maintained before him. The aberrant stabbed blindly in front of itself and left deep furrows in the ground. It was definitely fast, but not fast enough to catch up to the wily and cautious inquisitor.

“Almost there, get... what was that?”

Viv's attempt aborted as soon as she heard a confusing yet familiar sound.

“SqueeeeEEEEEEEEeeee.”

There was a white blur, a sound in the middle between cough and barf, and then the top of the aberration caught on fire.

It roared an ear-splitting shriek of rage and pain.

“Motherfucker.”

//That is unexpected.

The creature stopped and shook itself, sending burning embers around, but the fire would not let out so easily and Viv felt a hint of phantom pain from the scar on her arm. Arthur’s fire was *hot*. Flamethrower hot.

Orkan had wisely decided to leg it, a salutary idea when the creature squatted as close to the ground as it could.

Then, it jumped.

Viv looked up to a nightmarish, four-legged flying saucer of fuckery until the thing landed and planted itself into the ground. The tree shook. The aberrant was still on fire.

“Can you get us on the side of the disc?”

//Yes.

The creature jumped again, going after Orkan’s fleeing form. The inquisitor changed direction mid-race as the creature almost overtook it. Solfis jumped just as the creature landed.

Viv resisted the urge to scream when they approached the disgusting disc. It was even nastier from up close. The aberrant had no biology, it was just a revolting amalgam of flesh.

They landed. Solfis smoothly clamped all limbs on the creature’s side. It barely shifted under the attack.

Viv fought the urge to retch. The aberrant was not just malodorous, its mana felt horrid and sickly. Her improved senses worked against her as she did her best to fight the influence of a nauseous vortex of corruption. The dyes were still there. They were just moving in a... wrong way. Unnatural. Toxic. The will of the world swirled in a vortex centered around the middle of the disc, and Viv knew that her purge spell would barely peel off a layer of pointless flesh. The aberration was not magic-resistant. It was magic-absorbent.

The thing lurched and shook, but Solfis offset the movements with lazy grace. It gave Viv the window of opportunity she needed. She focused and drew as much power as she could in a single sphere above her right shoulder. The spell was simple, a powerful version of her basic

purge overcharged to as much as she could contain. Even though the black mana was hers, even if it liked her, she still felt a tug as the aberration pulled greedily at it.

“Purge.”

A thick beam smashed into the creature’s center. It sent bubbling blood and pieces of foamy bone to the side as her attack mercilessly dug into its flesh and then... stopped. The attack had smashed through the creature’s resistance to reveal a pulsating blob of flesh. Unfortunately, the pain sent the aberration into a frenzy and it stumbled around, stabbing madly with its legs.

“Need more focused power.”

Viv decided to try a spell she had designated as ‘stupid’ before. She took out her silverite dagger and drew a massive amount of power which she focused on the enchanted blade. A dark coating soon engulfed the powerful metal. She even drew power from the core to hasten the casting. The aberration had finally realized that something was clinging to it and shook like a wet dog. Viv supposed that being set on fire had distracted it. Until now.

She did her best to cling to Solfis to prevent her neck from snapping with the haphazard movements. A sword-like blade as dark as the void now extended from her focus. It was charged with destruction. It hissed in the air, eager.

The aberration toppled on the ground, perhaps hoping to smush them.

Solfis jumped.

Viv slowed down her perception. She roared and used her increased strength to slash upward. A massive surge sliced cleanly through the pulsating flesh and the edge of the creature, almost cleaving it in two. It died then. Viv felt the hungry vortex collapse.

The massive aberrant shook the earth with its mass while Solfis landed by its side with the grace of a gymnast. Viv watched the creature in its death throes. The legs were thankfully angled away, because the havoc they wreaked on the nearby trees was a sight to behold. They had already formed a clearing of shredded trunks.

Viv took a step back when the coming of a draconic dive-bomber graced her ears.

“SqueeeeEEEEEE**COUGH**Eeeeeee.”

A few goutts of tenacious flames landed on the open, pus-filled sore that was the main body. Its legs finally contracted in one last dreadful grip.

Arthur made a U-turn, flapped once to slow down and finally landed majestically in front of the carcass. She stood on her rear legs and spread her wings as far as they would go.

“Squee!”

Viv could, of course, not resist such a heroic display. She trotted forward and patted the victorious dragonette on her warm chest.

“Oh yes you mighty hunter you, how good that was. Good good good. You came like the wind and burnt it to a crisp!”

Viv congratulated the extremely proud dragonling for a while. To be honest, she would have preferred to include the smart being into the briefing but she was not even sure if Arthur was following. She was free to do her own thing, mostly hunting by herself. Arthur saw Viv in battle and joined. It was Viv’s fault for not being vigilant enough.

When she turned around after much adoration, it was to Solfis blase expression. She wasn’t sure how someone who had no facial features could look so tired with life but Solfis managed it.

//It would appear that, due to the aberrant’s limitations, Arthur could have killed it alone.

//I must reevaluate the juvenile dragon’s battle potential to account for flight.

//I must also reevaluate the mortal’s use of cheap tricks to achieve victory.

“It’s called tactics.”

//I have much data on tactics.

//Piggy-backing golems was not mentioned.

“That’s because the best tactics are situational. Like how the aberrant could not strike up. Know the enemy and yourself and you will win a thousand battles.

//This is... surprisingly insightful.

Viv nodded and omitted to mention that she was merely quoting Sun Tzu. Let Solfis believe that she was smart and resourceful.

“So, hmm, do we need to burn it down?” Orkan interrupted, eyeing the carcass.

They moved around the body to inspect it. The aberrant had a large toothy opening under the disc, but it had no way to close and didn’t lead anywhere. A saliva-like liquid coated the underside. Arthur’s fire stubbornly gained in intensity and the humans had to back up a bit to avoid inhaling fumes.

//Standard protocol is to burn aberrants to dust in order to avoid unexpected regenerative or toxic effects.

//In this specific case, I can confirm core destruction.

//Total incineration is not required.

//I would normally advise it.

//Some aberrants are very tenacious.

//All of them are dangerous.

//Unfortunately, I failed to carry my point across since we disposed of it too easily.

“It’s ok Solfis, you don’t have to tell me to take the five-Vivs-high unnatural quadrupedal saucer of doom seriously. I could tell that it was dangerous. What with stabbing things and moving faster than a galloping horse. Is there anything to loot on this?”

“All aberrant body parts are vile. They cannot be used,” Orkan explained. Viv had not known. Those really were shitty creatures then. At least monsters were delicious.

//We should check for the creature’s point of origin.

“What do you mean?” Viv asked.

//This aberrant was newly made.

//It would be good to track down its point of origin.

//And determine whether or not we should expect more.

“Huh.”

It was early afternoon now and Viv didn’t look forward to spending the night in the forest, but the golem had the right to it. It was common knowledge here that aberrants often happened in places of misery. Better check what this was all about. They moved quickly through the forest, following the tracks the creature had made. It was pretty easy.

It took them two hours at a brisk pace to reach the main road out of the Deadshield Woods. The tracks ran parallel for a while. It didn’t take long for Viv to realize that Solfis had poorly prepared this time.

“We only had enough food for lunch and a light snack. If we keep going, we’ll have to sleep on the loam and break our fast on soft bark,” she remarked.

//How very lyrical, Your Grace.

//Fortunately, my sensors indicate that it will not be necessary.

Viv did not have to ask what the golem meant. Orkan pointed silently forward and she soon heard it too, heavy footsteps. It wasn’t long before a group of soldiers appeared from behind a bend.

Viv felt a sense of urgency for a brief moment, only to remember that troop passage was common. There were still soldiers going to and from the deadlands to keep their centennial vigil, despite the recent troubles. These wore the white colors of Baran, with the officer showing a horse on his tabard. They were dirty, dusty, and exhausted. More so than usual.

The head officer was younger than Cernit had been and lacked his rough edge. He spotted them immediately and stopped the convoy with a raised fist. He made sure that his sword was free in his scabbard — which Viv found adorable — before moving forward to meet them. His eyes went from Orkan's inquisitor uniform to Solfis' threatening figure.

"Hail and well met! I am Lieutenant Solani of the Baranese Corps of Volunteers! At your service! May I inquire who you might be?"

The three introduced each other in turn.

"We were trying to find the origin of an aberrant we met earlier."

"Yes, a mighty one and of good size! We must hurry and warn Kazar!"

"That won't be necessary," Viv said with gleeful haughtiness, "we already took it down."

The officer was shocked. He waited to see if they were perhaps joking then bowed smartly, on fist over his heart.

"Neriad and Enttiku smile upon us today. Well done, mighty warriors."

Far above them, something squealed. Solani frowned then dismissed the strange occurrence.

"As for how it was created, you need no longer trouble yourself. The answer is right behind us."

He turned and waved. There were thirty soldiers in a vanguard with wagons that should still have some food but quite obviously stood empty. Behind, the first of the civilians crossed in an exhausted shuffle.

Viv had not seen such a sorry lot since she had left Afghanistan behind. They were filthy, sick, and malnourished. The men were too old or too young to fight and the women's eyes were made deep-set by misery and starvation. The children were silent and clung to skirts with hounded looks. The civilians slowed when they saw the trio, and a few started to cry at the sight of Solfis.

Viv could hardly blame them.

"Those are Kazaran elites, not necromancers! Everyone please calm down!"

More and more people joined including maimed soldiers walking on crutches. There were, all in all, a good fifty refugees.

"You are fools to travel so," Orkan said with more amazement than anger.

“Not fools. Desperate,” Solani retorted. “We picked them up as we went. Better than to leave them to add to the ranks of revenants, don’t you think? Even then, we missed many. The aberrant was one of theirs. He or she starved to death. We found...”

His voice lowered to a whisper.

“We found a fire. Children’s bones. They committed a heinous act and died anyway.”

“Cannibalism?” Viv asked calmly. She wasn’t too surprised.

The lieutenant nodded.

“Normally, we are forbidden from interfering in local affairs. I just could not push myself to...”

He waved at the refugees.

“I understand,” Viv said, and she did. “We’ll just have to find room for them, I guess.”

It was lucky that they had a surplus of food right now. If their situation had been critical, Viv and the Kazarans would have been forced to take a terrible decision. She was lucky that it would hopefully not come to that.

She really hoped it didn’t. There were few things worse than sacrificing an innocent for your own survival. With her around, new areas could be easily freed and it’s not like they would run out of building material anytime soon.

“Thank you,” Solani said with palpable relief.

“What’s with all those refugees anyway?” Viv asked, “isn’t it a bit early in the war to see them?”

“Oh, the main battle is on its way, or that’s what my reports say. It hasn’t stopped raiders from getting a little preemptive action. Lots of Enorians in Baran right now. People wouldn’t go to Kazar either before, but apparently...”

And his expression turned a bit hesitant.

“The city is in open rebellion.”

Orkan and Solfis both studiously ignored Viv.

“That it is,” she confirmed. “So all these good people decided to brave the woods because of that? It feels... extreme.”

“Only those with no extended families have come. So far. That civil war is looking to be a real bleeder, I think. The mutual hatred between both sides could summon Efestar the dark

god of scorn, if they didn't aim it at each other. Neither side will back down until the other is dead, and both parties have been building up for thirty years. Expect a tide of revenants over the next few months."

Viv felt a bit sorry for the poor bastards, but on the other hand, maybe the prince would just up and die and wouldn't that be acceptable? She wouldn't count on it though.

With that, they decided to escort the refugees back home. Solfis took to the woods once more and Arthur caused another panic when she landed in front of Viv. It didn't take long before she started a dragon cult among the children and it seemed to make the adults relax.

Viv thought they were naive. Arthur was just selecting the best specimens for her future gold-mining empire. Anyway. She asked another question to Orkan.

"So, they are fools to travel in large numbers?"

"No, but they are fools to travel in large numbers without cornudon-drawn armored carriages. Single travelers probably have the best chances of crossing the woods uninterrupted. Larger groups are noisier and slower. If those guys had come across a beastling tide, even one a quarter as small as the one you guys defeated, they would have been slaughtered. Same for any sort of powerful beast. They can just get in, grab a kid, then get out. Those soldiers could have done nothing."

//The Harrakan throne decreed that tunnel be dug through the mountain range.

//Because it was easier to bore through a hundred and fifty leagues of rock than to secure the Deadshield Woods.

//At least for larger convoys.

//They dug several such tunnels.

Viv thought that perhaps her perception of monsters was skewed. She had to remember that the average local couldn't cut houses in half. The poor sods.

The trio, plus Arthur, escorted the group back without issue. They still had to sleep outside but were brought camping supplies by an amused Two-Six. The Hadal woman had spotted the convoy but since it wasn't deemed a threat, it was left to arrive on its own. They reached Kazar early the next morning and Viv lost another day handling the resettlement of the refugees. Not only would she have to clear another section of the deadlands, but the refugees themselves were so exhausted and malnourished that even stats could not help them. They needed rest first.

The outing remained a pleasant diversion and Viv felt that she made faster progress with the 'change' meaning afterward. She agreed to do it again. Hopefully, the monster would be edible next time.