

Preparations for the expedition took a surprisingly small amount of time, now that Viv knew where to get what she needed. Her past experience as a soldier had served her well. She even managed to find half-dried tree leaves that left a pleasant, refreshing feel on your sphincter when you wiped. Truly, the wonders of magic were without ends. What would they think up next?

With food and water and packaged and ready, Viv visited the newest addition to their town: the alchemist.

The balding man, whose name Viv had not quite caught, was a dour person with an aggravating personality. His demeanor conflicted with his admitted goal, which was to help the frontier and Neriad's work. She purchased a few flesh-knitting potions from him, as well as a vial of general-purpose antidote just in case. He just kept bitching about inferior ingredients the whole damn time. Viv was already used to working with assholes, so she just endured.

Finally, they were ready. On the dawn of the next day, they secured the house, and placed everyone including Solfis on a church-provided carriage. Arthur was still clutching a book borrowed from Farren called "The Desolation of Aristan", a blood-chilling account of the utter destruction of the mighty city by a massive black dragon. Arthur loved it, of course, particularly the cover that showed the monster melting down an entire district.

The convoy was made of only two carriages. Viv and company occupied one with a rented horse, while the other was larger and supported four knights plus Farren. Captain Lorn had not joined, but they were accompanied by the Amazon woman Viv had seen several times but never talked to.

Marruk decided to handle the horse despite her aversion towards the beasts. Like other rented horse, this one was unnaturally docile to Viv's untrained eyes. It was all rather weird.

They left immediately.

Rather than heading straight into the deadlands, the two carriages traveled along the settled plains heading east, towards the mountains. Viv observed that there were already locals working the fields, preparing them for seeding probably. She also small cow-like creatures and the ostrich-like birds that provided the weird blueish eggs they often ate. Viv suddenly missed bacon. And chocolate. Especially chocolate.

//Now is a good time to practice mana control, Your Grace.

Viv sighed and agreed. The trip was super boring anyway. You could only watch fields so much before you got fed up.

The trip was different this time. There was no black mana, no revenants around. Only the fields and pedestrians who saluted the knights as they passed by. The first distraction came in the late afternoon. One of the knights pointed at the back and shouted something.

Viv turned to see a revenant stumbling at the edge of the forest, making a beeline for the deadlands. The nearest farmer spared a glance towards the miserable creature, apparently a woodsman of sorts when it had been human, and returned to his duty. He was too far to be attacked.

The convoy did not even stop.

“Most revenants will pass through the field during the night. They prefer to travel in darkness. This kind of passage happens all the time, all over the edge of the Deadshield Woods” Marruk explained in a small voice.

“At least that’s what the Temple Guards say.”

The deadlands replenished itself. Every man and woman who fell eventually joined it.

“Don’t the monsters in the woods kill the things?”

“Only the deviants,” Marruk explained, “most monsters will not engage something they cannot eat. It’s the same in the steppes.”

Something finally occurred to Viv.

“There are Kark revenants?”

The woman nodded, her large head bobbing up and down.

“We would see more of my kind north of here. The revenants cross the mountain ranges as well if they do not find an obvious gap.”

“I see.”

It started to rain. Viv pulled her cloak around herself and settled Arthur on her lap. The dragonling enjoyed having the thick scales of her chest caressed. She was very warm too.

The trip turned miserable. They stopped at nightfall in a roadside cabin made for traveling soldiers. There were basic beds, and a roof. So it wasn’t all too bad. They all ate together.

Later, Viv stood outside with the Amazon woman, piling the logs she chopped. Viv had been offered the opportunity of opting out on account of being a caster, but that was too dickish, and besides, the entire cabin smelled like wet socks. Like most things in Nyil, they were mostly what

she would have seen on earth with a few significant differences. First, the tall Amazon woman was wearing heavy armor that must have weighed a ton, but looking at her plain, happy face, you could not tell. Second, she was chopping the wood with her bare hands.

That was quite a sight.

“Hah!”

A log split in two under the edge of her hand. Viv kneeled and recovered both parts before they could get wet.

“My name is Koro,” the Amazone finally said. She grinned. She was missing one incise and that gave her a slightly insane look. She also had very long black hair she wore in knit strands. They looked a bit oily.

“Well met. I am Viviane.”

“Viviane!”

“You can say the Vs as well?”

“Yep. I’m from the south, so we speak a different language.”

“I have not heard about the south yet. What kingdoms are there?”

“No kingdoms. The south is wild and untamed, like a good woman. Like me! There are marshes and dry, low mountains. Deep forests! Old things. We are a hardy folk, what with the monsters eating those who aren’t. Like five of my siblings, may Enttiku welcome them in her bountiful bosom.”

“It... sounds like a harsh environment,” Viv replied, a bit at a loss for words.

“Yeah, but that’s not the problem. It’s also very big and empty. I kind of got lost in a hunt. I ended up in south Enoia.”

“You left your land because you got lost?”

“Yeah! You ever have a hunt and that little fucker of an Orfaune keeps running away?”

Viv remembered the Orfaune from the bestiary. It was a massive bear-like creature with a spiked ridge on its back and long limbs it used to dig into burrows and eat its occupants. It was marked as very dangerous and rather durable.

“Can’t say I have.”

“Anyway. Got the fucker but it took me two weeks and by then, it had rained and my trail was erased. So I joined the church. Good fighters! Decent lovers. Not like Yan at the Spotted Feather. You met Yan?”

“Yes, he really helped me the first time I arrived.”

Viv realized too late that her words could be interpreted in a different way. Koro nodded happily.

“Yes. First time I came to town he helped me as well, I had gone a week without orgasming!”

“Errr, dreadful.”

“I knooooow. He is so good with his tongue, and he knows how to move those hips. When I am ready to settle down, I will ask him to be my husband!”

“Wow, congratulations! I hope it works out,” Viv added, not really eager to explore the subject, “so, would you mind telling me about the south? I’ve never been there.”

Koro was successfully distracted from her thoughts and Viv learned a lot about Param’s more remote lands. The south was sparsely populated and those who endured had turned into insane trappers and hunters, as far as Viv understood. Koro was clearly remembering her homeland through rose-tinted glasses, because from what Viv gathered it was a merciless world where only the strong survived, with some tribes even preying on newcomers. She added it to the list of “don’t go there” along with Manchester and North Korea.

When they had enough wood, the pair headed back in and Viv settled on the bed closest to an open window. Arthur had the right idea by placing her nest inside and her snout outside. The place stank to high heaven.

The next day began like the previous one, except that it was raining. Viv climbed onto the carriage and complained in her mind about the lack of distractions. Training was all well and good, but she could not cast because it made her companions nervous, and there was only so much rehashing you could do before growing bored. Arthur quickly started to fly through the air, apparently unbothered by the droplets of water rolling down her white scales.

Out of ideas, Viv crossed her legs and meditated, trying to sense mana. The constant noise and moving wagons made focusing difficult. She took a break mid-morning when they paused for everyone to ‘attend to natural needs’ as her mom would have said. She ended up striking another conversation with Koro, whose main sources of interest were hunting and shapely ballsacks. Viv learned more about scrotum in ten minutes than she had during her entire sex ed

classes. The laugh she got kept her going until early afternoon, when a horrible shriek distracted her from counting the clouds.

“SQUEEE!”

Viv was out of the carriage and sprinting before her brain registered it. Marruk stomped by her side a moment later.

Arthur surged from behind a small valley, flapping her wings as fast as she could. A creature like a large puma was galloping after her. They were about a hundred paces away.

The caster was about to scream at the stupid dragon to fly up when the puma-thing jumped and Arthur veered away. She was hanging out from the skin of her fangs. Viv’s vision turned red.

Power answered.

As eager as ever, black mana flooded her conduits and burned in her palms. It twisted into a ball as time slowed down and Viv’s Power ability allowed her to overcharge a purge spell. The ball grew, and grew. It rose above her right shoulder like a thundercloud.

“PURGE!”

Black mana was mostly silent, and that made the hiss in the air that much more terrifying when a spear as thick as an arm shot forward. Viv had aimed slightly too high. It did not matter. Black mana moved for her, and the spell angled down by her will to carve into the puma-thing like a nail through a piece of balsa. The monster’s leap was interrupted when it died, falling into a hollowed-out carcass. A few intact organs spilt on the ground in a steamy, bloody mess.

Arthur finished her trajectory in Viv’s arms. The weight almost threw her to the ground.

“You’re fine. It’s fine. It’s over.”

“Squeeeeeeeee.”

Arthur fixed her gaze on the dead creature as the temple guards approached it. They were not too worried.

“A rathclaw. Good spell. Good range. I wish I had my bow,” Koro said by Farren. She had not left the Voice of Neriad’s side during the commotion.

“It’s a mountain and forest medium predator. Normally, they avoid humans,” Farren added.

That was medium? She would hate to see good-sized ones. Or she had, with that giant tortoise. Anyway. Arthur was safe.

Viv was a bit curious so she moved closer, with Arthur hanging around her shoulders and Marruk by her side. One of the temple guards was kneeling by the body and removing the skin with a knife.

“Rathclaw meat is decently rich in mana, so we should not let it go to waste,” he said.

“I can cook it in clay tonight, at the camp,” Koro said with a smile. A little drool foamed on her lips.

“But what pushed it to engage?” Farren asked, a bit worried.

The first temple guard pointed at the creature’s back. The fur there was intact, save for a small space matted with blood. The wound really matched a certain flying creature’s jaw.

“Seriously?” Viv asked.

“Squeeee...”

“It’s at least fifty times your weight! Glutton!”

“Squee.”

“You can’t just run around attacking everything you see! What if I’m not there? Isn’t there something above squirrel that you can try first?”

The rest of the group watched mesmerized as the caster headed back to the wagon, bemoaning her creature’s appetite and apparent lack of common sense. What they saw as a marsh drake hung its head dejectedly in a disturbingly human fashion. It was, to them, inexplicable.

“She’s talking to it like it’s a person,” one of the guards said.

“How long has she spent in the deadlands again? Mana poisoning is a dangerous thing,” another added.

Marruk vocally and deliberately cleared her throat, then turned the carcass. It squelched. There was perhaps half of the original body mass left. The rest had been vaporized by a spell that had also cut earth to its very bone, leaving behind a deep furrow of glistening grey rock.

It certainly put things into perspective.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with, you know, being eccentric,” the first guard finished in a timid voice.

It was all well and good to be a highly trained fighter with some fancy path. Most of the people present knew they could take a Rathclaw alone and win. They could not trounce the thing in half a second and only leave a butcher shop accessory behind, however.

“Less talking more cutting,” Marruk finished. They obeyed, with Koro being the most efficient. They managed to salvage most of the meat in a reasonable time frame. Eventually, the ex-hunter led the loaded group back, chewing on a piece of raw liver.

They reached the foothills shortly after.

Dinner that night was delicious.