

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 might be difficult. Charcoal and sulfur were most likely doable, but she didn’t have any idea on how to find any nitrate, much less potassium nitrate. Even if she did, they would probably have to resort to simple designs. She didn’t have the mind or training of an engineer.

It was unlikely that she could come up with armor-piercing bullets within one year.

“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 resurgence of new destructive technology will lead to a similar result.**

“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!”

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

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.