

Viv stood her ground while the rest of the fighters scattered, and the camp attendants scrambled back to the cover of the forest. Her defiance triggered something in the diving dragon. His attention zeroed on her.

It was so... feral.

She felt it like a physical weight pushing her down, attempting to crush her before she could even fight. Her leadership and intimidation rose in response. They spoke of her soul, and said she would not fall so easily.

But she still, for one brief moment, let that fear overwhelm her. She allowed it to take hold of her, forcing a gasping breath from her lungs, flooding her veins with cold terror. She stared at the dragon like one stared at the sun. It was... the stuff of legend. As large as a plane. He had scales for water, fire in his belly, four solid legs for earth, and wings for the air. He was the wrath of the world itself, and it twisted to answer his call. Her breath ran short. The dust rose, ready to betray her, to slip under her soles, revealing the rocks underneath. She would be crushed, molten, burnt, and asphyxiated. This was the end of many stories. This was the kingdom destroyer. The prime antagonist of so many tales. Sometimes, evil incarnate. Viv allowed this terror to fill her and savored it.

And then, she crushed it.

“Deadland domain.”

Pure black mana expanded around her in a sphere, cutting off the dragon's access. Now, the space around her was hers. It existed under her dominion. ‘Always a chance’ picked up to bolster her attacks. Her magic flared angrily to answer the call of the elemental war caster.

The dragon slowed down. Viv felt his surprise from the way he moved. She expected him to circle her instead but he kept diving, certain of his victory and uncaring about her status. He really meant to kill her. Mana gathered in an undirected wave to attack her but she blocked it with aegis, none of the hexagonal pieces even breaking. The unfocused mana scattered around her in an undirected assault, melting, burning, breaking, killing vegetation outside of the blighted circle by saturating it with mana. There was so much of it. Viv didn't have time to think about the others. She had to be ready for the next attempt aaaand here it was.

The dragon opened his mouth and spat fire.

An orange sphere expanded in Viv's eye, spreading to smother her from every direction. It was all above her like an umbrella and it was so. Damn. Bright. Like a second dawn. The orange blaze grew in intensity as it fell and she answered, even as the temperature rose.

“Nuée.”

A thick black ball rose to meet the attack with a thud and then it exploded. A thick cloud of black mana expanded upward, a black breath to answer the fiery one. Even as the two collided, sweat already covered Viv's brow. It was so far and yet so damn hot.

Around her, embers fell, igniting all that was left of the field. What it touched turned to glass while cries echoed behind her. The forest was catching on fire but Viv was too busy to do anything about it.

She felt her spell collide with the fire and knew it wouldn't be enough. It was like stopping a flood with a flimsy door. Her advanced stats allowed her to supercharge the spell and so she desperately flooded it with power until her conduits hurt. The cloud darkened, thickened. It was a plume of darkness swallowing fire up like a voracious tongue. Black and red fought for annihilation under the summer sky. Viv's core pulsed once. The energy increased.

She had defeated two gods and saved another one. She would not fall that easily. Viv was the Light that Never Dimmed.

Nuée became an all encompassing cloud. It devoured everything, even the heat around her. The flames finally petered out.

The dragon veered off with a roar of outrage, which Viv could only see from the mad inferno thanks to her improved eyes. All around her was soot, saturated mana. An apocalyptic vista of maddened colors, but the dragons could not use that to hide from her eyes. He carelessly exposed his flank, so she took the invitation it offered.

"Hyperbeam."

Concentrated annihilation mana raked the dragon's flank, doing fuck all she could see but that was fine. The hiss of pain confirmed she had done something. The dragon dodged the end of the beam by rolling on itself but it had given her time to prepare for the next step. Except, again, it wasn't what she expected. Rather than a single massive assault, the dragon pelted her with a flurry of weak, disorganized effects. The air between them became a torrent of fire and water and rocks, a shimmering hell that would undo lesser casters, but to her, this was nothing. They smashed into her shield. She felt all this aggression press against her defenses and fail. It was... inefficient. Blunt. She countered immediately.

"Astra swarm."

Black, whistling spheres raced in graceful arcs towards the circling dragon. He arrogantly flicked an arm and the first sphere was disrupted, or rather, the colorless containment field around the black payload was disrupted.

The first astra spell exploded, sending concentrated annihilation mana around. The detonation upset the dragon who fled before the rest of the swarm, giving Viv more time to prepare defenses, more time to engrave circles into the earth below her. Out of patience, the dragon climbed then looped down, grabbing the earth with his mind. A tidal wave of soil and stone formed under him in a wave of destruction, uprooting everything in its path. A lone house was instantly obliterated. She turned and attacked him with more beams, scoring glancing blows. Some of the scales darkened.

"Eldritch walls."

The dragon was forced to veer off, but the wave was launched, and it made right for Viv. Blighted earth rose in a cliff of grasping limbs. The attack dissipated against her defenses.

This time, the dragon screeched in anger.

“Scream all you want. You are just too sloppy,” she thought at him in the way Arthur used.

The dragon flinched. It was confused. That confusion only made it angrier.

“Vicious little thing,” Viv hissed.

Right. Time to go on the offensive. She had to get him to get closer if she wanted to hurt him seriously. The dragon roared again, peppering her with spells that achieved nothing. Viv was a fortress.

Fury blinded him. She used the opportunity to infuse a defensive circle around herself. It would last long enough to fit her needs.

[Aspect of the Destroyer.]

Viv rose above the earth on abyssal anchors. Her core pulsed again, then more mana flooded her. She had expected it. The ‘light that never dims’ was making her stronger the longer the fight lasted. There was so much power to play with, her mind could barely handle it all. Again, the temperature plummeted. Around her, fires died out. Even the dragon felt that something was wrong. She was now airborne, a challenge, and yet it didn’t dare approach. That was fine. She would force it.

Two fingers aimed at his distant shape, she aimed.

[Sequence: Astra swarm, hyperbeam, hyperbeam.]

The dragon pulled mana to himself in a disorganized vortex. The swarm of astra spells would have been easy to dodge, but the shield was so large that it caught and detonated them all in a shower of annihilation shrapnel. The hyperbeams burnt the dragon’s side while Viv could maintain them on target, which was rather hard at this distance. She still lacked practice.

It was enough, however. She had caused pain. An angry aura flooded the region, Viv meeting it with her own. The dragon accelerated with gray mana, first rocketing up and away from her spells, and then down. It clad itself in fire. This time, he was going straight for her.

Finally.

Viv didn’t bother attacking him, or even trying to slow him down. She double, triple-checked her spells, and then she waited. The dragon was a meteor roaring towards her, unstoppable. So she wasn’t going to stop it.

When it was too late to change course, Viv simply shadow walked away to a nearby spot.

The dragon landed in a cataclysmic explosion that leveled the nearby forest. The shockwave made the blighted land buck under Viv's feet, but her control leveled it again. The dragon's roar of triumph turned into a hiss of frustration.

Shapes moved inside of the cloud. To Viv's surprise, Marruk smacked the beast in the snout with her huge mace, then retreated behind her massive shield. A tail whip landed it with a firm clank and yet, somehow, the Kark still held. Zero-Five's axe bounced on his flank as it was exposed.

Those two idiots were going to get themselves killed.

"You missed," Viv drawled in the most dismissive tone she could. The dragon's pride, already wounded, sent him into a terrible fury. He charged her. She got a very good view of the knife-sized fangs closing down on her.

[Aspect of the guardian.]

The dragon bit her shield, attempting to crush her like a nut. He failed.

"Shatterstar."

The shield turned as black as the void, then immediately exploded outward. Hexagons bit into the flesh of the dragon at point blank range. Blood seeped from a few cracked scales. The roar turned into a whine.

It was time.

Viv let the aspect of the guardian fall, right hand forming a claw in front of her. Wounds in the fabric of reality formed each finger.

This was going to sting.

"Guillotine."

Massive void blades slashed at his massive form. She didn't try to enclose him — he was too large — she merely willed him to fall.

The blades bit deep. Flesh parted, and blood sprayed the savaged soil in a splurt of crimson liquid. The skin of his left wing broke. He screamed. Mana wailed with his agony.

The scent and sight of blood made Viv blink for a second. It felt so surreal. The dragon was bleeding.

Arthur's brother yelped in fear. He took to the sky, gray mana propping his wounded wing. He flew away. Viv let him. She didn't have a way to corner him and finish the job anyway.

She stood there, watching the dragon turn into a small dot at surprising speed. The last pieces of flaming rock fell around her like rain. Silence returned to the ravaged field. The colors returned to a normal state, but the land didn't. Nothing would grow here for seasons.

Viv shook her shoulders, remembering a quote from earth that she had really enjoyed. Tales and stories were more than true, not because they told that dragons existed, but because they taught dragons could be beaten. She had believed in her own legend, and she had beaten a dragon.

Funny thing was, Arthur was much harder to stop. For one, she was impossible to pin down.

Marruk and the Kark ran to her, clearly amazed. Even the Hadals watched the skies with naked disbelief.

"Wow," Marruk said. "You've done it. You've beaten a damn dragon."

"Yeah. By the gods, he was fucking stupid, wasn't he?"

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It took some time to mop up, not because there was anyone to defeat but because of the fires. Viv was forced to manually walk from one to the other, smothering them with black mana so they would stop burning. At least, most of the trees on fire had been flattened by the shockwave of the dragon's landing so the blaze hadn't spread too far.

Mercifully, no one had died on account of having fled as fast as the possibly could before the more calamitous spells had started flying. Thank the gods for people with brains, Viv thought. Except for Marruk and Zero-Five, bless their hearts. The only difficulty came from the animal handlers. The horses and cornudons were spooked. It took most of the morning to find and calm them all down. While Viv busied herself with dozing fires, she checked her latest notifications.

Mana Mastery: Intermediate 9

Getting very close here. This was a powerful archmage tool, a fused skill. It had to lead to insane upgrades.

You have covered your troops and fought alone rather than sacrificing them as distractions. They are inspired by your example. Leadership, expert 1.

Leading from the front certainly had its perks.

You may choose an additional effect.

"Don't I get something for defeating a dragon?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

Did you slay the dragon, or did you merely chase it away? There is no dragonslayer title for those who let their quarry escape. Defeat the dragon fair and square, and the world will recognize you for the achievement. You may be strong but you have not pushed yourself to your limits on this fight.

Viv grumbled to herself. She was strong because she'd practiced and fought hard. At the same time, Nous was right. This contest was not done.

Curious, how feral that dragon was. He certainly had a mean streak. She wondered if he could even be reasoned with. It certainly beat killing him, though Judgment would probably not intervene considering the little twerp had struck the first blow.

"Alright, let me see those Leadership options."

Imperial authority: your will is carried out by edict and decrees. All the laws and orders you send carry a fragment of your power, making those who listen much more willing to obey.

That was... extremely powerful for an empress, indeed. And it would be amazing if she led a nation of millions, except that she didn't and this was mostly useless now. It was very likely a path power, one bound to her decision to be Empress. It was a shame to let it go, but she had no use for something that would only become impactful decades from now if everything went well. She wasn't the edict kind of person either. She was the 'teleport there and scream in faces' kind of person. There would be no 'this could have been an email' under her mighty rule.

Inspiring leadership: you have proven you cared for your people. Upon visiting a place or people, they will enjoy lingering benefits for several days, including a higher motivation, scaling with your understanding of the skill. Your leadership has a calming effect.

That was pretty good. She was usually hands-off with things so she could just rotate around New Harrak and keep everyone in good spirits even during a crisis. It would also serve in battle. Maybe that would be enough? She checked her third option.

Aura of the Champion: you lead from the front. In the thick of battles or at the head of complex projects, your leadership inspires those around you while you are actively participating. They perform at peak performance. The effect is less on strongly minded individuals unless they fully acknowledge you as their leader.

This was a more concentrated effect, to an extent, and if she had to be honest, it was perfect for her. She often worked more with small groups of elites, preferring to leave the general management to people who were just good at it like Lady Azar or General Jaratalassi. She hesitated for a moment before picking that option.

“Why don’t I get draconic leadership, if I may ask?”

She offered a ton of mana to Nous to nudge him. It was a polite way to get his attention. She felt it drain away, receiving an annoyed ‘hmph’ in return.

First, dragons are not leaders. They are an extremely individualistic species that only gathers for the mating season, rare celebrations, and extremely rare wars. Second, while your intimidating tactics have been incredible, your leadership was only above average. You are more an expert than a commander and your leadership skill options reflect that. You are good at it, just not the best.

It... hurt a little bit but he was right. She was a capable leader. She simply wasn’t the best one around, and that was fine. That skill was still amazing. It would make a great difference.

And it probably fused with intimidation at higher levels.

“Alright. Now what?”

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A part of Viv wanted to follow after the dragon, but it wouldn’t just be a distraction from her current goal. It would also be a complete waste of her time. She had absolutely no way of tracking a fast-moving flying target. As such, she moved with her escort towards the still burning ruins of the devastated village, finding something she never expected.

Survivors.

Pale and grieving, in clumps or alone, laborers emerged from behind the odd rock or the few standing stone cabins at the edge of growing fields. They watched her come with reverence. A few made religious symbols with their hands as she passed them by. Stooped. Desperate. Deep red marks under their eyes. They were otherwise well-fed and clothed in carefully-made fabric, so not destitute, but they shared the same tragic fatalism she had seen in so many enclaves she had come across. Those were people lacking the elites New Harrak had aplenty, the paths dedicated to killing. They knew they were at the mercy of fate, and fate had come for them with great wings and fire to melt the very stone. Viv stopped in front of one of them who didn’t avert his eyes quick enough.

“Do you still have a leader alive?” she asked in Old Imperial.

He replied in Harrakan but... weird.

“You! You glazy the dragon, weh! I cannot believe.”

Ah.

Three hundred years of isolation.

A likely contact with southern tribes.

They were going to develop a sort of creole, of course. That made perfect sense. It was just going to be a huge pain in her ass.

“You’re almost making me miss quebécois.”

“Kessou?”

“Your leader. Mayor? Alderman? Elder?”

“Oooh, yes. You want clap lips with the Elder!”

That better just meant talking.

“I will show you.”

Viv followed the man inside of the useless palisade that had served only to keep people in so they would die from asphyxiation faster. A woman by the gate was holding the hand of a dead child, his arm the only thing left unburnt. A surge of anger filled Viv’s heart. Maybe she had been... a bit too lax with her nephew. Maybe she should have tried to kill him. Pluck his wings and let him remember how to hunt properly...

Oh yes, they were not done.

There was a reason Judgment didn’t intervene with overly aggressive whelps.

Viv’s entrance left the locals absolutely terrified, not least because was a war caster with an escort clearly composed of elites in black, high-quality gear. It was nice to see her evil overlady brand was finally paying off. The local Elder proved to be a bereaved man standing next to the smoking husk of his house, holding a younger crying man. The stench of burning meat told Viv all she had to know about the situation. She gave him some time to recover and ordered her escort to help where they could, authorizing them to use their flesh-mending potions. Even though those things were damn expensive. The mood in the village shifted.

Eventually, the Elder approached her. His clothes were dyed blue, and he wore a few jewels, the only sign of affluence she had seen so far. His long gray beard was charred at the tip.

“Milady, thank you so much for saving us,” he said in perfect imperial.

“Oh, you speak the language fluently. Excellent. After hearing the others...”

“We are good, simple people, milady. My father sent me to the capital for my education, so I could read and express myself in full imperial. We are defenseless, milady. Your help is most generous.”

A bead of sweat dripped down his temples. It was warm here, yet Viv suspected his stress was part of the issue.

He looked terrified. Her intimidation aura was carefully tucked in her soul and she had even pulled her wings in, so that wasn't it. To be fair, she hadn't said she wasn't here to kill everyone yet.

"I apologize for the poor welcome," he continued, eager to fill the silence. "My name is Osso. May I ask who you might be? You come from the east... on foot? We thought everyone had died over there!"

"Am I the first to come this way?"

Osso wiped his brow. His replies were quick and eager, his voice halting and a little shaky.

"Well, there were the folks from Plima when the town was abandoned. Too exposed you see? To the monsters and the raiding tribes. Haha. But no, not from... farther, as you seem to be, milady. Ah, and you speak our language as well! How fortuitous!"

"Look, I'm not here to pillage and loot if that's what you're worried about. You can relax."

"Aha, of course milady, thank you very much. We depend on your mercy, though, may I ask who you might be?"

"Oh, yes, I have not introduced myself yet. I am Viviane, empress of New Harrak."

If Viv hoped this would make the Elder relax, she was solely mistaken.

"N... new Harrak? Empress? Oh, Maranor... I, uh, I am sure that Emperor Marus will be delighted to... to know that more of us survived, haha. You, ah, you will tell him?"

Emperor Marus?

Oh, this was going to go to shit in a handbasket. She could already feel it coming. A body needed only one head. Ooooooh yeah that was going to be a big problem.

"So, you are the empire?"

"What? Oh, we are what remains of the disaster, of course, as I was taught in the hallowed halls of the Imperial Academy at Frostway. The, ah, capital. It's near the sea."

Viv considered her options. She didn't have many, really. She needed to meet that Emperor Marus, sniff each other, and decide if they killed each other, if he would submit, or if the two nations were simply impossible to merge. Because she was going to absorb them if she could.

"I know you are in the midst of great tragedy, however I require help meeting with your Emperor. We have much to discuss, including the dragon."

The Elder was positively shaking in his boots by now.

“I assure you, we are normally better protected from wandering beasts. The dragon is newly come, but I assure you that the Emperor can protect you while you visit our lands.”

Viv frowned. What was he leading on?

“Indeed, we have followed protocols to call upon the Hunters. They will surely arrive soon to chase off the beast for good.”

He gave her a pointed look, the kind that said that there was a hidden message. He was clearly utterly loyal to his nation, but he was... ah, that was it. He was warning Viv that soldiers were coming.

Now, she wasn't completely familiar with the power scale on Param, but she doubted any of the hunters had the ability to pick a dragon off the sky. She would be fine, even if they were hostile.

It would probably be best to wait for them. Her role was that of a diplomat, for now.

“Very well. And when can we expect those hunters to arrive?”

“Two to four days, milady. The, ah, the finest hunters will come if a dragon is present.”

“Is this dragon a constant danger then?”

Elder Osso carefully checked if anyone was listening before replying. As far as Viv could tell, the villagers were more concerned with the slaughter of relatives and friends and the destruction of their lives than with spying on them.

“I have heard rumors. Several villages wiped out over the previous two years, milady. It is.. difficult to ascertain the truth, as we are not to speak of evil without proof. For the common good, of course.”

The specific choice of words sent several alarms blaring in Viv's mind. She was pretty sure you wanted your people to know about asshole evil flying flamethrowers so people kept a look up, if anything else. This didn't bode well.

“And those hunters could escort us to the capital? Frostway? I remember that Frostway was an important harbor before the disaster.”

“Yes! All of the supplies to the southern outposts passed through here. Ships would travel south from the Bitter Sea port all the way down here, purchase food and supplies, then travel to the relevant island, then return loaded with precious metals, or fish, or whatever was profitable at the time. Of course, with the death of... but you are back now, meaning that... oh, what an incredible development. I would be elated to be a witness of history, if only...”

He waved around, at the death, at the destruction. In the distance, wails continued.

“Speaking of, milady, I apologize but... I must look after my people if you will allow it.”

“I will come and assist.”

“Oh, milady, it is obvious that you are a mighty caster. To lower yourself...”

“Helping people isn’t lowering oneself. Lead the way.”

Although Viv couldn’t heal anyone, she could still help by using Telekinesis to, for example, remove half-burnt beams from people. The dragon attack had utterly devastated the village. His assault had been indiscriminate. Barns and houses went up in flames without rhyme or reason. Villagers confirmed that the dragons had carried off all of the cattle he hadn’t simply vaporized over the course of several hours. Thankfully, the fields had been mostly left unburnt so the village wouldn’t starve on top of everything else.

It helped that... there were less mouths to feed now.

The New Harrakans set up camp at the edge of the seeded fields, with the Kark being watched with a mix of fear and curiosity. Viv had brought them on purpose. With all the weirdness New Harrak had gathered, it would be useful to know if her potential recruits were as racist as the Pure League. Fortunately, it didn’t appear to be the case.

As for the Hadals, they kept themselves out of sight, as usual.

Viv considered sharing the knowledge of portals with her guests but decided otherwise in the end, even if it meant that more people suffered because their healers were out of mana. It was a strategic advantage she was unwilling to disclose before knowing exactly where she stood with ‘Emperor Marus’.

A part of her wondered what Solfis would have to say about that.

In the meanwhile, she would keep her cards close to her chest.

As promised, the hunters arrived two days later, ready for war. The appearance of armed men with large bows spread in a loose formation immediately gave Viv a positive opinion of them. They could have delayed until they were sure the dragon was gone. Instead, the group did not just hurry, they came ready for a fight. Against a dragon. They were courageous.

Viv stood near the gutted gate next to Elder Osso, the Kark arrayed in formation and the camp people waiting behind with their gear. To meet her first official, well, first one barring the bereaved mayor, she had chosen to get out of her armored robe and into a more official travel dress. She still wore her circlet as a symbol of sovereignty, though a rather understated one. She also stood on a horse because it helped her look down on people even more. So far, she had been on foot to stay with the Kark but sometimes, one had to play up to expectations. Queens and empresses rode. That was just the way it was here.

The hunters closed formation as soon as it was clear there were no dangers present. Or at least, no feral ones. They wore mismatched armor of metal and leather that looked well-traveled in. Their bows were wood, polished to a sheen and decorated with trinkets she couldn't identify. They looked like an important part of their path.

She felt them identify her, and returned the favor.

[Guardian Hunters, not dangerous, a path dedicated to the elimination of monsters and dangerous foes. Decent melee combatants, expert marksmen.]

Not dangerous to her. The hunter leader was a tall man with deep brown eyes, the light green skin tone of the Imperials and a thick beard. He didn't show fear but he was certainly concerned. She felt him twitch, and two hunters detached themselves from the back of the formation, disappearing in shadows thanks to the help of a black mana skill. It was absolutely pointless against her, of course. Only the best Hadals managed to fool her.

"Zero-Five, it appears some of our visitors are leaving the fray. Do make sure they return," she whispered.

"As you command," the wind replied.

The hunter finally stopped a few paces away from her, his men following him in double ranks and making no secret that they were ogling. The leader's mouth opened and shut, and now Viv realized she held the advantage.

This was not a diplomat. In fact, the southern lands probably had a dearth of those, having been isolated for so long.

She decided to seize the moment.

"Greetings. I am Viviane, Empress of New Harrak to the northeast. I have come to meet those who would be the heirs of the old empire. Who might you be?"

The hunter's hesitation turned to shame. He straightened up before saluting in the imperial way, one fist over his heart.

"I am Cerus, commander of the Guardian Hunters of Harrak. I, you said New Harrak?" he asked, composure breaking just as quickly.

"Yes. We have traveled south since hearing that there might have been survivors from the disaster six hundred years ago."

"But... we thought... most of the continent was dead? That we were the last, barring some southern... Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am quite sure that the continent survived. I have been there myself."

“Of course, of course. What a..... his majesty must be informed. This is...”

High above my paygrade, Viv finished in her head.

“I am eager to meet this Emperor Marus you mentioned. Since it is morning and we are ready to depart, would you consider guiding us to Frostway? Unless you need rest, naturally.”

“Oh no that is fine. Still, a living nation...”

Suspicion twisted his features. He was quite easy to read, and Viv could imagine what went through his mind right now. Perhaps she was lying and just attempting to pull a fast one as a member of the southern tribes the Elder had mentioned. Then, his gaze rolled over her gear, her, her escort, and he shook his head. Viv was displaying enough wealth to buy five villages in horses and clothes only.

“Yes, the Emperor will want to meet you and learn of the world beyond the mountains. Perhaps... this could change everything!”

His eyes shone with excitement. Pity filled Viv’s heart.

Emperor Marus already knew about the world beyond the mountains, or at least the true leaders did.

Solfis had mentioned trade. The southern empire sold pieces of armor to distant cities. They could not ignore the state of the continent. Meanwhile, the leader of their monster hunters traveled in old gear, ignorant of the wide world beyond.

This wasn’t looking too good.

“Yes, come with us. We should speak to the emperor. I am sure he will demand to hear everything you have to say! Come on, follow me.”

The hunter guardian turned but Viv’s cold, amused voice stopped him.

“Ah, two more things, before we depart.”

The temperature cooled down. Next to Viv, the Elder retreated slowly to the illusory safety of the gates.

“First, no one, and I mean absolutely no one, demands things of me.”

Draconic intimidation slowly seeped over the field, not the violent declaration of spread wings but the slow, uncoiling of power to subtly remind everyone of where they stood.

Viv snapped her fingers. Zero-Five and another Hadal rose from the grass around Cerus’ men even though there wasn’t room there to hide even a child. They pushed the hunters who had concealed themselves forward, blades brushing exposed backs.

“Second, and though I appreciate your position, I will guarantee my own safety and you will be enjoying my hospitality. Until we reach the safety of the capital, of course.”

The hunter didn't look pleased at all. He nodded anyway.

For now, Viv had the advantage.

The convoy departed almost immediately with the hunters in front. Viv was eager to speak to Cerus, but she noticed Marruk hastening her pace to come to her side.

“I got a bad feeling about this, Viv.”

“I know. Too many signs of tight control. And we're coming to flip the table.”

“You are very good at talking. I am sure you will manage to find a way.”

Marruk nodded to herself, fully confident in Viv's ability to resolve this without a crisis.

It was adorable how delightfully naive she was.

“Marruk?”

“Yeah?”

“I may be here to flip the table.”

“Oh.”

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With the road open and the land green, and mercifully devoid of dragons, Viv made good time. This was a nice place though it was rather cold. She could still see the white flanks of Harrak's circular mountain chain to the north. There ought to be more people. Curiously, they came across plenty of villages but those remained scattered and the people, wary and poor. Even the frugal Mountain People had better clothes than those poor wretches. There were cereals growing in the fields, though, so she didn't know what was wrong. A question to the camp helpers remedied that.

“It's the tools,” Derin said.

She was an old woman, her face tanned and wizened like an old prune. Her eyes were quick and ready, and she had the best grasp on logistics and supply of anybody present.

“Tools?”

“Watch the people work. They pull stones with their bare hands, those still seeding the place. They have spades and hoes made of wood. Bound together with twine. Shit stuff, easy to break. There’s not enough metal.”

Viv frowned. Maybe they lacked... but no, there was a famous iron mine on a nearby island. Surely, if they had ships, they should be able to... people missing metal would not sell armor. This was getting more and more curious.

“No iron, no tips for the spears or the arrows. Makes defending villages impossible.”

Derin shrugged. She drew on her pipe, the scent of smoke clinging to her like a cloak.

“Scattered because of that. Can’t defend, so make many small settlements. Families spread around. When a village gets destroyed, others will pick up the survivors. If a village is too successful, people will leave. It’s like that in western Enoria, close to the Deadshield woods. ‘cept we had weapons there. Just not enough people who knew how to use ‘em.

“I see. Thanks.”

Derin grunted, then Viv decided it was time to interrogate the good Cerus. His shoulders tensed when she rode to his side and didn’t dismount. This was an interrogation. She was going to be a prick.

To his credit, his men shifted to form a protective half-circle in front of him, closing rank in an innocent yet meaningful manner. The message was clear. They would jump to his help in a second. That wouldn’t do shit to help him, of course, but Viv’s esteem for the man went up.

“So, since we are traveling, I have a few questions for you if you do not mind. I wish to learn about your empire.”

“I would be happy to satisfy your curiosity,” Cerus lied.

“I understand that you have been cut off from the rest of the continent for a very long time. How have you fared?”

“The empire has endured, weh! We boast many villages, much food. We have kept the technologies of the empire alive. Frostway holds the Imperial Smelting and Smithing Workshop, which provides tools and weapons for our workers and our strong military!”

He sounded quite proud.

“A strong military?”

“Indeed! Thousands of militiamen, ready to lay their lives for the nation. Dozens of well-trained mages. And the legion. At least eight hundred men are ready at any time.”

“Well-trained mages?”

“By the Imperial School in Frostway, a beacon of knowledge in a ruined world. They are capable of incredible feats of magic.”

It was almost too easy. He was just spilling everything. Viv would have more problems getting a financial statement out of Arthur’s minions and some were half of his age.

“Sounds like you’re really proud of your nation. How many cities survived?”

“Three great cities stood tall after the cataclysm,” Cerus recited. “Over the years, we have spread and we are now... a great many. ”

“Is that so?” Viv replied.

He didn’t know how to count. For sure. That was fine. There was more to learn.

“May I ask you something in return?” Cerus hazarded, and he suddenly sounded quite sheepish.

“Of course,” Viv replied with a smile.

This would help her establish a rapport.

“Your eyes, they are quite strange... I mean no disrespect but are you human?”

Viv smiled to show she wasn’t offended.

“When a caster like myself reaches a high level of attunement, they must become part elemental. That is what I am. No longer fully human.”

It was abundantly clear he had no idea what she was talking about.

“I see. And that makes you stronger?”

“I am significantly stronger in combat than other mages or witches, yes.”

“Is that how you were able to fend off the dragon?”

“Indeed.”

Cerus considered his words. He tended to chew on nothing when he was thinking, she realized. He had absolutely no poker face.

“I am grateful. You protected our people when you didn’t have to. I would have been too late to save them.”

“I cannot accept your praise because the dragon attacked me, however I was happy to help the villagers after the dust settled. I wish we could have saved more. Sadly, a dragon’s fires burn hot.”

“Yes, a powerful opponent, weh! But you stopped it.”

“Have you pursued the dragon long?” Viv asked.

“Yes. That is to say, we have been running after it, only finding devastation...”

“Tell me, you mentioned mighty mages, yes?”

“I did.”

“Have they found a way to handle the creature?” she asked as innocently as she could manage.

He squirmed a little.

“Their duty is to guarantee the safety of Frostway. If we lose it, the empire will suffer greatly.”

He didn't sound like he was believing his own words.

“I am sure they will come up with something, and the great forges of the capital will soon produce weapons to take down the beast.”

“I see.”

It took another week for them to reach their destination. During that time, Viv carefully squeezed a clueless Cerus for information. He was so glad for the attention that he became downright friendly, even speaking about his childhood.

As far as Viv was concerned, it was traumatic and sucked hard.

Life outside of the capital seemed completely worthless. Even the two other cities didn't have it much better. In anticipation for an inevitable shitshow, Viv would leave the common encampment at night to set up the teleporter network in secret. She made a few visits back just to make sure everything was ready. The One Hundred gathered, but she decided to ask Solfis to hold back despite his eagerness. He had a... peculiar relationship with the Harrakan past that might lead to brash decisions. Hard-coded directives or not, he might decide that Emperor Marus was an impostor and string him up by his intestines to 'protect' her and there was fuckall she could do to stop him. Absolute overrides were awfully convenient, sometimes.

After weeks of travel, they were in sight of Frostway.

“Yeah, let's make sure Solfis doesn't see this,” she whispered to Marruk who nodded hastily.