

Chapter 170: Queen of the Sea.

Viv made a note of where the beast was before allowing herself to fall. Rushing through the cloud sent moisture on her eyelashes while the fluffy clouds masked the sight. Electricity puffed her hair even as the wind pushed it away from her face, and her eyes searched for the fleeting shadow of Arthur diving at a distance, then the world of gray opened to show the deep blue expanse of the ocean with its foamy carpet upon which Emeric's Girl was little more than a toy. Viv aimed for it while Arthur twirled and sped around her. She was clearly showing off.

Flying is fun!

"I told you I don't know how to grow wings!"

Try harder!

Maybe if you eat more powerful things.

Maybe you are just starving without realizing it!

"Daughter, I don't even need to eat anymore."

That is what you believe.

Viv fell the rest of the way at high speed, exhilaration filling her chest. It was like jumping with a parachute except she no longer needed one. She could do this anywhere and have fun. Perhaps a new harness was in order. A pang of regret marked the end of the descent, but that lasted only until she remembered there was an angry goddess's avatar bearing straight on her.

"I saw the Beast!" she screamed.

Sidjin swore and cleaned up his work table. The control circle shone when he activated it.

"Where? When?" Captain Sil asked.

"In this direction. I'd say it will be here in half a period."

The Viziman frowned.

"An Old Empire period, a Viziman period, or a Mornyr period?"

What a strange time to figure out Vizimans used a different time measurement system.

"Shit. Hmmm. We have some time to get into position but not much else."

“RING THE ALARM. ALL HANDS AT THEIR POSTS!”

Viv winced at the deafening scream. Panic spread throughout the deck. Sailors raced, fear urging them on and eyes searching the horizon for that one dot that would be their inevitable doom. Viv felt their terror very keenly against her soul. She longed to cover her with her leadership but they were not her people, and she wasn't sure it would even work.

Octas hadn't even arrived yet.

“The temple warriors are on their way up,” Captain Sil told Viv as she approached the charging station. It was a grand name for basically two cables with absorbing runes she'd have to grip like a mad scientist.

“We have temple guards? Oh yeah, I remember seeing them during our meals.”

Sil looked at Viv like she was a total idiot and the witch took exception.

“We were extremely busy repairing your ship?”

“Forgive me, the situation left you with few opportunities for meetings. They should help, although we had a full contingent when we last left the island and...”

The captain didn't finish her sentence. There was no need.

“How about the harpoon team?”

“They will be ready. My... second, he was in charge of them.”

She touched the scar running down her face.

“I hope they will be ready. We missed our first few shots last time. The Beast... it plays with your mind. Once you see it, you can barely see anything else.”

“Hey.”

Sil shook her head. From lost, her expression regained its focus until she blushed in embarrassment.

“You have us and a magical ship this time.”

“Right on. I shall take command from the helm.”

Viv watched the captain turn around with a confident step. Several of her men watched her go with trepidation as her own leadership aura spread its protective embrace over the crew. It wasn't too impressive, sadly. Viv wondered if the trauma and scars left by the first assault bit deeper than she had thought and the lingering fear would hamper them.

A part of her wanted to take over Sil. Let her know it was wrong for her to assume command. After all, hadn't Viv repaired the ship alongside Sidjin? Provided the enchantments on the harpoons? But no. That was just draconic intimidation playing tricks on her. Leave the sea command to the sea commanders.

"My love?" Sidjin said.

"Yes."

"Could you come for a second please."

"Sure."

Sidjin was lost in a sea of symbols linked by thin threads of magical energies, all but invisible to non-casters. He pointed through the shimmering curtain.

"Recharging the enchantments is well and all but we have the opportunity for a surprise strike and I think we should take it. I propose that you stick to the railing until the Beast arrives and attack once while its guard is down. If you hide your presence..."

"I could get a devastating first hit in. Provided she doesn't know we boarded the ship. Hmmm. I'll try."

Viv approached the railing, making sure to cover her hair with her billowing black cloak and feeling super cool about the whole thing. Tumultuous waves slapped against the ship's mighty flanks while at the horizon, the sea merged with storm clouds in layers of dark blue. Octas would come from the left flank so that's where Viv stood, fingers gripping the varnished wood until it creaked. Any time now. The sea roiled, indifferent. A quick look behind her showed clenched fists and hundreds of bloodshot eyes scanning the foamy surface for something, anything. She idly noticed men and women in armor. The temple guard. Not that they would matter.

"The Beast! Port side!"

"STEADY!" the captain bellowed.

Emeric's Girl turned slightly left towards the approaching danger. Viv used a lens spell to zoom on the distant form of the sea monster. The waves made it difficult to spot the shape for more than a few moments, but it was enough to see massive limbs propelling the creature forward. Such was its speed that a mantle of water covered its surface until all that could be seen was a bump in the ocean, an approaching night blue spot surrounded by nightmarish flesh. Or perhaps it was a spell. The smooth surface of the face shield was so dark that it stood out among the gloom of the sea. It was growing larger, larger. Soon, a sound like deep white noise covered that of the surf lapping at the hull. On the deck, the silence was absolute.

The ship finished turning. It looked like the Beast would hit her at a sharp angle, near the prow where the harpoon gun waited. Viv made her way up the railing under the scrutiny of

the crew. If the avatar remembered the sting of the previous battle, it would go for the ship's only weapon soon into the fight. Viv stood by the enormous contraption and leaned in to watch the avatar approach. The propelling limbs were octopus arms waving powerfully against the waves, while the water shield could not be seen through. Now that the Beast was close enough, she noticed the tremendous blue power seeped in black mana with some life sprinkled in as well. This was going to be good.

"It didn't do that last time," a grizzled man said with a tight voice.

He was the commander of the harpoon gun this time. Viv remembered him drilling his men mercilessly on how to pivot the metal frame on its base. He would do a fine job.

"You didn't have me either."

"You think your harpoons will go through?"

"Oh," Viv replied, watching the thin membrane hiding the beast. "Oh yes."

The creature had to be huge, Viv realized. Merging with the waves made it even more imposing. Where did the ocean start and where did the beast stop? Octas might be a piece of shit but when it came to absorbing monsters into her, she certainly knew her stuff.

"Aim!"

As soon as the harpoon gun adjusted its aim, the Beast started to swerve. It moved from side to side in erratic patterns.

"Loose!"

The harpoon screamed its way through the air — and missed. The travel time was too long and its path too unpredictable, Viv realized. Now that it was no longer traveling in a straight line, Viv got a better look at it. The body of an enormous crustacean followed the head of a cephalopod upon which were attached eight powerful limbs, barbed suckers beating the water. The armored body up to the tail moved powerfully, helping the monster forward at a speed that would rival modern warships. It was a powerful combination. The colossal monster finished its course after dodging a second harpoon. Viv braced. The impact was imminent.

At the last moment, Sil turned the rudder.

Mana flared in the sail. The change was so abrupt Viv almost lost her footing. Tilting to the side, Emeric's Daughter faced the incoming charge head on. The ship split the waves while its sail flared with gray lines. The Beast seemed to waver for an instant, then it jumped.

Viv heard a splash, saw the underbelly of the creature in all its abyssal glory, shell thick and powerful protecting numerous small feet ending in sharp claws, their surface crusted with bony protrusion. It was gigantic. Water droplets hit her in a briny shower. It was time. Viv slowed her temporal perception as much as she could as she pulled deep within her

reserves. Her aura flared. Mana surged through her conduits, bleeding through her presence in thick black rivulets to caress the planks at her feet and the air she breathed. As the Beast fell, its head became apparent. There was half a woman jutting from where the eyes may have been.

The avatar looked like what a knight might be if scales could grow from the skin. It was a dash of red, purple and white among a sea of duller colors, possibly a statement. A chitin-encased face turned to Viv and the witch saw surprise, then immeasurable hatred in those deep red orbs.

“YOU!”

“Me. Hyperbeam.”

The avatar covered her face with a massive claw and, impossibly, veered away. Her tail whipped the prow with such violence that the wood splintered, sending shrapnel flying through the air.

Viv’s spell carved through the thick shell and the flesh beneath. Blood flew, mixing with the ocean water.

Viv’s beam followed the retreating form into the stormy waves. For a creature that massive, it was fucking fast.

Well, one claw down.

“I’m so sorry,” the harpoon crew chief said.

“It’s fine, shoot when it’s not moving.”

“Understood!”

Now where had the bitch gone? Viv raced back along the deck.

“Jibe!” a voice said.

Sailors ran and... dove across the deck? Viv’s danger sense and ominous groan warned her. She hit the ground and not a second too soon. With a massive woosh of displaced air, the sails cleaved the air above Viv’s head as they pivoted with the wind. She was up and running before they were set. Octas wasn’t gone. Even now, Viv could hear her scratch against the hull, making her way up and to the side. Sidjin pointed where she would surface.

Around her, temple guards in loose squads took position. Viv should have coordinated with them. She’d been so focused on the ship she’d forgotten to talk with her allies. A mistake.

The avatar hoisted itself to the deck in all its chimeric glory. Below the screaming fused human body, the octopus beak opened to release green acid. A nefarious cloud spread over the railing. It swallowed two sailors before they could run away. They died screaming. Three

massive tentacles landed around, flailing around and finding exposed legs. Those caught were left holding bleeding wrecks. Viv kept throwing spell after spell while warriors attacked what they could see with heavy axes. In an instant, the deck was a scene of pure carnage. The avatar yelled once a harpoon punctured its shell. Black cracks quickly expanded from the corrupted wound.

“YOU WILL DIE HERE, OUTLANDER! I WILL REND THE—”

A wave of air centered on Sidjin blew outward. All traces of moisture was expelled at once, blood, water and... acid. The avatar was covered in its own spit in an instant. It screamed mournfully before dropping from its perch, Viv managing to Excalibur an entire tentacle.

“Self-drying control,” Sidjin commented. “Oh, was I interrupting something?”

“She was just about to leave.”

“Good now please, the charging array.”

“Right.”

The protective runes were already weakening in her mana sight. Viv rushed to the cables and poured energy into it. The hull enchantment gulped it greedily.

Meanwhile, the Beast submerged itself in water but once again, Sidjin just pointed towards where it was at all time. His perception was better than Viv’s to feel that blue mana in the middle of water. Captain Sil followed his direction, angling the Girl so the Beast could not hit them sideways. The next ramming attempt ended with a dull thud. Viv’s reserves took only a moderate hit and she was glad for the hours she’d spent making sure the protections would hold. A cry and a harpoon whistled through the air before landing on the retreating form of the avatar’s tail. It shivered from the damage though it didn’t seem too hampered. Viv could guess why though, especially with all the life mana the Beast was packing. It could regenerate.

The witch focused on keeping the hull fed with power. Again, Octas rammed her borrowed body against the unrelenting hull and again, Viv held on. The harpoon crew now landed every hit by waiting until the avatar hit to fire with confidence on the unmoving and slightly dazed target. Strident screams and expletives reached Viv’s shoulder through the bellowed orders of the sailors. The ship shook but it held on. From her position near the center of the deck, Viv couldn’t see the attacks but she saw the tip of great waves crashing against unyielding wood, sending plumes of water as high as the sails. Sil remained at the helm, maneuvering Emeric’s Girl tightly. The ship seemed alive now, with monstrous amounts of mana coursing through its systems. It was a contest between sea monsters, both built to champion a vision. The witch refilled the hull’s enchantment again.

Her vision would prevail.

“Starboard!” Sidjin screamed.

Once more, the ship lurched and the sails swept the deck as they crossed the winds. Sailors climbed the rigging to adjust or tense sails while roving bands of guards still patrolled the deck, waiting for the avatar's inevitable return. The harpoon fired again and something screamed out of sight. She could see it in the manic grins of the men and women now: they finally believed they had a chance.

"Faster!"

"BRACE!"

Viv gripped the charging port tightly while the sailors compensated for the next impact. Only a few guards stumbled. This time, however, the Beast didn't leave. Soon, a grating sound traveled through the hull, a bit like a saw. The hull enchantments flickered. They were not designed to resist a sustained attack.

"Can't get a shot, ma'am," the harpoon crew yelled.

"Viv?" Sidjin said.

The witch raced to her paramour who was busy casting something, something large. All the blue mana he had went into the construct.

"I need to stay near the charger or the hull will fail."

"It will be breached. Trying to outlast the Beast is a losing strategy. We need to get to it."

"My spells won't work through that much water."

"I know. I'll open the way, but we need to be fast because I can't contest the control of water with the Beast if she's aware I'm trying. At least, she doesn't seem very observant."

"If we have a small window, I can use the aspect of the destroyer."

"You must."

The problem was that the aspect of the destroyer required her to be unmoving relative to the earth and the ship was currently sailing at several knots, which meant that even activating the skill would make her fall off. The window would be short.

"We levitate to the side, you activate the skill, I cast the spell and you give that thing the death it deserves. Ready?"

"After you."

Viv and Sidjin levitated to the side where the Beast was at work. Below, cries of a hull breach reminded her she was working on a schedule. The pair of casters noticed the writhing shape of Octas' avatar clinging to the side, then moved forward to get the right timing.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Sidjin said.

Viv adjusted her position. The ship was below and behind her. This would have to do. With a thought, she relaxed and let her anchor activate.

The false wings on her back extended and dug down into the fabric of the world. Her motion stopped abruptly, giving her a small whiplash but she’d been expecting it. Powerful mana flooded her body until she felt ready to burst.

[Aspect of the Destroyer]

Below, the Beast tensed. It was too late.

“Parting the sea,” Sidjin said, his brow covered in sweat.

The ship raced by them while below, the ocean opened. White, foamy water rose in twin walls like an opening curtain, revealing for the briefest of instants the thick dark shell and colorful body of the avatar. A muffled scream of outrage pierced through the stifling waves. Sidjin’s surprise attack met with the chimera’s absolute control and lost, but the opening was there and in that instant between instants, Viv took it.

[Sequence: Astra, Astra, Hyperbeam]

Viv carpet bombed every visible part of the avatar. A torrent of spells annihilated what was left of the water and the flesh underneath. Cataclysmic energies crashed through the surprised avatar’s defenses, opening great gashes along its body, revealing flesh squirming underneath. Blood and viscera flew up as the avatar lost its grip and plunged deeper to escape its death. Viv cut the skill as soon as the last of her barrage was off and half-collapsed into Sidjin’s waiting arms. It was still a difficult thing to control.

“I.. I just need a moment.”

“I know.”

The archmage dragged her up with speed, and faster. Both of them were feeling it.

Below them, a maelstrom of energies churned the waters. The boiling vortex intensified until there was enough energy to start a tidal wave. A low, rumbling warned them of the imminent danger. Viv’s danger sense screamed at her to dodge. She pointed towards a safe direction for Sidjin to carry her.

The sea exploded. Large geysers shot all over the place. Vi managed to reactivate her levitation and the pair dodged left and right. Cold sweat and stress gripped Viv’s heart. The sprays were so intense she was completely drenched. Saturated mana and the mist obscured her vision until all she could do was cling to Sidjin and rely on their instincts. Her shields would be useless here. Even if they survived, the pressure alone would send them careening across the sky.

“Shit.”

Something huge was coming. Viv accelerated even more. At this height, she could finally see the ship in the distance and the geysers, their efforts exhausted.

The Beast took off from the sea with the largest column of water yet at its back. The nightmarish form surged towards them on a torrent of water, a shield already forming... and then the water dispersed.

Viv watched the avatar's face switch from triumphant rage to confusion. Someone was contesting her control over water and *winning*.

“SKRAAAAAA!”

Water sprayed in every direction when Arthur raked the Beast with a torrent of fire. Its skin cracked and bubbled on an entire flank. The young dragoness latched on a side and raked it with violence, deepening ghastly wounds with every claw swipe. The Beasts shuddered. A green cloud puffed out of its strange shape.

“No, ARTHUR, GET OUT!”

But it was too late. The dragoness cried in pain as she let go. Her left wing beat strangely. Expanding circle in the delicate membrane spoke of dire damage. Viv dived. She put all of her power into the descent. Arthur was struggling to stay afloat using gray mana. She latched on Viv as the witch passed her by. A sharp pain told the witch where the nervous claws had latched on. Ok. She was fine. She was going to be fine. It was okay.

Viv veered off towards the ship. That was where they had the advantage. Sidjin came after her, throwing large transparent spells in the path of water attacks.

Mother!

It hurtsssssss.

“Clean it with water. DON'T TOUCH IT!”

It itches!

“Do not fucking touch it. Sidjin?”

“Covering you, let's go.”

The dragoness was fucking heavy but Viv didn't care. Fear propelled her forward towards safety while behind them, the screeching form of the avatar cleaved through the waves after them. Speed made her clothes flap in the wind and for the first time since turning part elemental, Viv was cold.

“I WILL KILL YOU!”

The two caster and the wounded dragoness landed on the deck a moment later. Arthur's wing was now encased in a bubble of water suffused with life mana. The dragoness complained and hissed but Viv was just happy she was doing fine. They were all alive. For now. She'd never been so happy to have planks under her feet.

"INCOMING!"

Sil's yells reminded Viv of what was at stake. Sidjin surged towards the ship's controls but Arthur blocked Viv with a clawed hand and a grumble.

I cannot fly properly like this.

And you have only black mana.

I will power the boat so it does not sink and we can make fire and eat the avatar.

You go kill it first.

"Are you sure?"

Don't let the tail fall in the water!

It's the best part!

"Okay."

Viv raced to the railings and leaned on. Emeric's Girl was listing to the side. For a moment, she worried the avatar might finish the hull off but it was without counting on Octas' absolutely unhinged nature. The Beast was crashing through the waves towards them in a flurry of bleeding limbs. Some embers still clung to its reddening, cracked shell. Thing was resilient.

"Damn," Viv whispered.

Might have to use her training earlier than planned but that was alright. She grabbed her forged shield from her back and approached the edge of the deck, feeling only mildly confident. She'd practiced with Solar. It would have to do.

"Everyone, hold on to something!" The captain yelled.

With surprising speed given her tilt, Emeric's Girl turned to face the incoming threat.

"Full sails!"

One moment, Viv was standing on her feet. The next, the sails flared with power, a mighty wind roared through its white canvas, tensing it with a sound like the crack of a whip. Viv slammed against the ground, rolling as Emeric's Girl surged forward like a speeder. Around

her, the sailors held on but the idiots who'd not heeded Sil's words were sent sprawling across the deck. Viv recovered almost immediately and sprinted towards the front of the ship.

There was a crunch when the prow hit the avatar head on. Its screams turned into incoherent yells of horror and fury, and Viv's hope it would be enough faltered when bleeding tentacles latched on the deck, pulping an unfortunate sailor. The tendrils latched with a strength that made the wood groan and crack. The nightmarish face of the avatar soon followed. The fallen human was made even more monstrous by the wounds it had suffered, the black-infected gashes on its surface and the deep wounds, the burns, none of it slowed her down. Squads of temple guards attacked the tentacles where they landed, blocking the thrashing with kite shields. Viv closed in just as the avatar's human half cleared the railing. She got a real good look at the way its chest inflated as it breathed it. The effect would have been comical if it wasn't so horrifying, any semblance of humanity turned grotesque and bulging, like a drowned dead. The mouth opened disproportionately.

The ship's self-drying activated but what came out wasn't a cloud this time, but a highly concentrated stream of transparent liquid.

Viv couldn't let that hit the deck or it might burn through everything on the way down.

"Aegis."

Viv stepped in the path of the spray, intercepting it with a layer of devouring void. Something hissed, though Viv wasn't sure what it was. There was a lot of blue mana in that thing and she struggled to cancel it all. She couldn't open gates here, or use most of her spells for fear of thrashing the ship. Good practice indeed.

A warning screamed in her soul. Viv levitated up, above a sweep from a tentacle.

"Excalibur."

She allowed the tentacle to slice itself on the blade. Solar was right. She had no need to sweep because the blade's destructiveness did not rely on momentum. Red blood sprayed in her face, on her clothes. The metallic stench joined that of voided bowels and the tang of acid to add to the chaos. Viv shadow stepped forward to avoid another strike and cut another tentacle at the base. The avatar gave up on killing her to hoist itself on the deck with one supreme effort. Its massive bulk pushed the temple guards away. She managed to grab a few to fling overboard in the confusion despite Viv's best efforts, then another limb grabbed the central mast before snapping it. It crashed down on the combatants behind Viv which added to the general chaos of battle. Meanwhile, Viv didn't relent. Her mind burned with the efforts of casting spells after spells in a flurry of attacks. It would have shredded a cavalry charge but the avatar was divine and it was incredibly resilient. She used her remaining claw to block those that did not rake its flank.

Viv grit her teeth. Any time now.

With one last Astra, the claw finally fell off. Her opponent bellowed in agony.

“YOU. PESKY. MORON! YOU COULD HAVE HAD IT ALL! YOU WERE A PERFECT VESSEL BUT NO, YOU HAD TO SERVE THE SHINY WEAKLING.”

“I only serve ideas. People tend to disappoint.”

“MORE QUIPS. MORE TONGUE-FLAPPING.”

Viv stepped through the shadows to avoid another hit. The creature’s three free tentacles focused on her but it was an awkward battle. They were not meant to be used this way and the avatar was forced to use two more to stabilize its massive body, now a liability. Sailors and warriors attacked its flanks with axes now that it had sacrificed its mobility.

Nevertheless, it was still an avatar. Even bleeding and dying, it was all Viv could do to stay ahead and dodge the multiple strikes coming her ways. The creatures’ suckers were small but each was adorned by an inward-turned hook, a white boney thing that promised great pain. Viv retaliated with Excaliburs and nets thrown at minimal range. The creature was just too fast for her to do much more. Float up, travel through the shadows, strike, dive, block with her physical shield until the metal groaned. Rinse and repeat. The humans by her side were doing her best to assist but the Beast’s generation made the task difficult.

“Make way,” a calm voice suddenly said.

Viv didn’t need to be told twice. She moved backward then pushed a squad aside. The avatar turned to her in triumph. It opened its mouth wide again.

It faltered.

Sidjin’s blender spell screeched through the air. The avatar stopped what it was doing to call on water but the blue mana slid uselessly against the dense construct. Feeling the danger itself, she formed a water shield and pulled all its remaining limbs in the way.

The blender traveled through them with a ghastly sound like a chainsaw meeting rotten bark. The entire front castle was showered in gore, the screams of the dying avatar eclipsed by the continuous carnage. It was the opening Viv had been waiting for. She stepped in front of the bleeding form of the human torso. It was missing an arm, its scaly skin shredded and bleeding profusely.

“I will see you... on the island.”

“Guillotine.”

A cage of black mana blades opened on the Beast’s ‘head’.

It closed with a sound of seared flesh.

For a moment, the avatar kept glaring, then the head of the beast fell as large cubes on the stained deck with a meaty splat.

Danger Sense: Intermediate 7

Shield Mastery: Intermediate 6

Acuity-based reflexes: Intermediate 9

Acuity +1 (45)

Ascender: 2 / 5

You have made a habit of meeting avatars in battle and living to tell the tale. You are now well-known among the gods, and they are observing your progress.

Nothing like facing a goddamn incarnated deity to propel you to new heights, Viv thought as she breathed in relief. It was done. For now. Octas had made it clear they would meet again soon and this time, there would definitely be spiders.

Your Huntress title has evolved into 'Vive la Révolution' thanks to repeated beheading attempts on dangerous targets.

Your spells will be more effective when attacking the weak points of very powerful enemies.

Enemies that are nominally stronger than you can experience terror.

"Wait a minute. How do you know what the French revolution is?"

Maradoc shared the content of your 'hard drive' with me.

"Stop spying on my stuff! Ugh."

Perhaps the Vandal title should apply to Emeric-given appliances.

"I am grateful for the chance to spread the ideals of democracy."

I thought so. Good luck, Outlander.

Viv sighed, then she sat on part of the destroyed mast. Sidjin joined her a moment later with a satisfied expression. The two watched the result of their work in content silence while, around them, temple guards and sailors cried and cheered, hugging each other for having accomplished the impossible. A couple of minutes later, a flushed Captain Sil walked to them, her back straight and radiating confidence.

“You did manage it. I dared not hope but you managed it. You killed a gods-cursed avatar. I can scarcely believe my eyes.”

“Not our first time,” Viv said, though she wasn’t feeling as confident as she was projecting.

“It was... talking to you. It remembered you!”

“As I said, not the first time I faced an avatar of the dark gods in battle, though it was probably the most dangerous one. Octas doesn’t like civilization very much and my goal of returning the deadlands to human control runs against everything she stands for. It shouldn’t be a surprise that we butt heads.”

“Butt heads? You... you are being far too casual. Almost blasphemous.”

Viv dropped to her feet and took out her dagger. It was time to work.

“What, errr, what are you doing?” the captain asked.

By her side, Sidjin prepared a levitation spell, probably for easier access to the tail. There were damaged parts contaminated with black mana they would sadly have to excise.

Viv approached the severed torso of the avatar and, with one swift Excalibur, cut off the head.

“Oh just collecting a gift for a friend. Got to find a bag. Then it’s time to process the monster parts.”

“What? But... this is... this is the body of a dark god!”

“No, that part is the body of a human turned into an avatar, which we won’t touch. That’s an abyssal octopus—”

“A juvenile,” Sidjin elaborated.

“Yes, and that is some sort of giant lobster.”

“A Perdition Gulf rock crusher. Adult. Female.”

Viv waited for Sidjin to add twenty years old and gravid or something but he thankfully didn’t.

“You two are... no wait! YOU INTEND TO EAT IT?”

“Sure,” Viv said.

“You are MAD! This carcass must be purified then burnt!”

The captain was livid. Around them a few sailors and guards approached with worried glances.

“You can purify and burn the human part and I’ll sanctify the lobster tail with my stomach,” Viv said.

“I know this sounds mad, however I assure you that the monster parts are untainted. There are precedents. Giant spiders animated by divine mana have proven perfectly edible after the death of the avatar. It is a matter of public record,” Sidjin explained with a calm voice while picking large chunks of tentacles. “It would be criminal to let that mana-rich flesh go to waste, especially in the circumstances.”

“I will not allow my ship to turn into an avatar barbecue.”

Viv and Sidjin exchange a glance, but it was a different voice that broke the status quo.

You would refuse us, your saviors?

All the attention turned to Arthur lounging lazily over the broken mast, one wing still looking a little raw.

It would be a shame if I had to... provide the fires myself.

The captain had one good look at the small fires still clinging to parts of the dead body despite having spent minutes fully immersed in blue mana. She gulped.

On such a joyous occasion.

Oh, and I was wounded while defending you.

Her malevolent red eyes focused on Captain Sil with laser-like intensity.

Are you insured?

“I will have the braziers brought out for you. And have the cooks join you... but my people will stay away from this meat!”

The captain turned around, but the dragon wasn’t done.

And a crate of Helockian sweet fish sauce.

Sil froze in her tracks.

I know you have it.

I smelled it in the front of the boat.

Second layer from the top.

Mother needs more food to grow wings.

Do not stall me further, borgling.

"I, errr, this was ordered by the quartermaster on Sardanal's Cradle. It is not mine to share!"

The quartermaster is not here.

I am.

"I'll say it was lost in the battle," Sil replied, dejectedly. "Is that all?"

The reply was clearly meant to be sarcastic.

"White wine," Sidjin added.

"And butter," Viv added to honor her French ancestry. "Oh, and any citrusy fruit you might have."

"I'm going, I'm going!"

Second phase ramming attempts Viv back bursts of speed harpoon counter.

High speed avoidance. Arthur roasts the surface. Wounded wing. Viv manages to rescue her.

Third part acid at the bottom. Double team Sidjin/Viv. Sidjin parts the seas and Viv trounces.

Fourth part Octas jumps on them and attempts to crush them. Destroy one mast but clan decapitation. Captain furious but Viv ecstatic they get the head trophy the squid part and the lobster tail all together.

Chapter 171: Sardanal's Cradle.

There were no cheers when Sardanal's Cradle came into view. The crew gathered on the deck, watching the island approach with consternated expressions as the cold wind dispersed the last of the good mood. Viv herself had to consult with Sidjin, her faith in her own memory failing.

"Wasn't this supposed to be... green?"

"The jungle north of Glastia were green as well. And they stayed green... for a while."

The island was supposed to be a beacon of hope, a green jewel standing in the middle of the ocean to welcome ships for a day or two as they crossed the ocean. Now only blackened land latched to the highest point like a rotten foot to a surviving heel, the city at its top barely surviving. Plumes of dark smoke rose from ashes to meet the low clouds above. They seem particularly ominous above the island though there was no rain.

Viv had known the war had been ferocious but she didn't expect... this. The low lands, most of the island except for the easternmost tip, were completely overrun. From the beaches to the crags to the scorched forests, nothing remained of the erstwhile emerald jewel. She was forced to use a lens spell to confirm the city was still standing or, well, at least it wasn't currently on fire and the walls were not obviously breached.

"By all the light gods," Captain Sil said by her side.

"It wasn't that bad last time?"

"The temples were still holding the promontory! Now it looks like everything but the city has fallen. Neriad's bollocks, I don't think they're even holding the docks. How are we going to unload our supplies?"

"If the docks are in the black section of the island..." Viv began.

"They are. They were. The island has several 'ports' where one may moor, or at least used to have. Now though, we need to reach the unloading dock at the bottom of the cliff protecting the city. A narrow path leads up. I don't think the pulley system is still intact. By all the gods, what a nightmare."

"We'll make it work," Viv said. "Worst case scenario, we can strike the shore from Emeric's Girl. I doubt they can match the three of us with what they can shove on that narrow strip."

“Yes, most likely,” Sil said, though it was clear she wasn’t listening.

A moment later, the captain left to order her men around. Emeric’s Girl turned eastward towards the city’s promontory and the pier that was still hopefully in its shadow. It was already afternoon and it was going to get darker fast so Viv hurriedly inspected what she could of the island. It wasn’t good.

The plains were mostly black and devoid of life but on the west side, the scorched forests hid strange pink trees, large swaths of silk nests and other strange shapes she didn’t recognize. Quite a few ships were moored here and there in the ruins of the island, civilian transports, most of them. A couple didn’t look like they had business in the high seas but, Viv supposed, they didn’t have much to fear from monsters. That was a worrisome development. Octas obviously never used logistics so those belonged to either Efestar or Gomogog and if they dared to reveal those resources to that extent, it meant they were committed.

The sky darkened the closer they got to the hostile shores. Between the black smoke and the low clouds, between the burnt island and gray ocean, the landscape turned into a vista of the apocalypse. Viv stopped the lens spell when she realized the flesh trees in the distance were squirming. She spotted no army moving to bar their way though that didn’t mean they would land unopposed, so she reconvened with the temple guards, this time resolved not to underuse any of her resources.

A part of her wondered if it was already too late. If the churches were reduced to such a tiny pocket... but maybe they just decided to hunker down and wait for food. Viv wasn’t sure what would have happened if the Beast sank the ship but she guessed she would find out soon enough. Half an hour later, they were getting close enough to see that the pier had been the scene of an intense fight.

“Reef the sails!”

The ponderous shape of Emeric’s Girl approached the pier at slow speed. It may have been nice and welcoming once, but the war had shown it no mercy. The mosaics on the stone embankment were defaced, the crates smashed and empty. Nothing was left of the warehouse and dock offices but ruined husks, their stones cracked and blackened by an intense heat. Beams planted vertically bore awful fruits. Viv didn’t want to look but she had no choice, because she was going to have to walk past them. There were bodies attached to them, desiccated corpses held by tight rope with nothing left but bone and torn skin waving in the wind like banners of horror. Many of the skeletons were small. Too small. As Viv watched, a ruby-bodied spider crawled out of an eye socket.

“Shit, be ready for spiders,” Viv said.

“Oh really,” a nearby soldier macked, but he deflated under Viv’s glare.

“How are we to send the supplies up?”

Viv looked. The pier had a single trail leading around the cliff to the mainland. Another snaked up the incline towards the city walls. It was partially hidden from sight.

Arthur landed near Viv. The dragoness' mood was subsumed. Viv could see it in the half-lidded eyes.

"We need to have sailors carry it while Sidjin and I guard the convoy."

Sidjin guards the ship.

I lead the convoy up!

"The temple guards don't know we have a dragon with us."

"It will be fine if she sticks with them," Sidjin said. "And besides, I'm much better on defense than offense."

"Alright. So I'll make landfall and cover a squad of templars. We clear a path up. Arthur covers our back with some other squads while Sidjin provides fire support and guards the ship. Would that work?"

The various temple guards didn't object. Rather, squad leaders discussed who would be where. Captain Sil approached Viv.

"I'm coming with you. I will be in charge of my crew. I need to see the mayor anyway."

"Okay?"

"To get paid."

Viv chuckled though her heart wasn't into it. Slowly, the ship aligned with the quay. Those docks were really small, barely fifty meters across. Emeric's Girl dwarfed it so that people would have to jump down from the deck.

There were still no movements from the shore. Viv checked her armor one last time, strapped her round shield on, coated herself with a layer of mana, then it was time.

"Ok, go."

She dropped down. Her mana sight guaranteed there were no spells hidden nearby but that didn't mean there were no traps waiting for them. The squad of temple guards who'd won the right to go first landed around her, forming a protective ring around her. They moved in.

Viv felt weird having solid ground under her for the first time in weeks. The squad cleared the quay without problem just as more squads jumped down, followed by the first crates and sailors.

“Something underground. Higher concentration of mana,” Viv whispered as they approached the trail leading up. It wasn’t paved like the quay, rather made of packed earth.

“Deep underground?” a templar said by her side.

“No. Surface. It’s probably...”

One of the men took a step too far and the earth writhed. A carpet of spiders crawled from the sand like crabs, bodies shining with ardent colors and nevermind those were not even supposed to fucking burrow to begin with. The squad leader pulled his man back just as Viv deployed the ultimate solution in pest eradication.

“Nuée.”

Using the least power possible Viv cast her blanket spell, letting it disperse at point blank range in a tiny, roiling cloud that spread over the packed earth with the sizzling of flash disintegration. All that remained behind was blighted earth as devoid of life as the deadlands themselves. Viv guided the spell to glut on the land up towards the path and down along the shore until she was absolutely certain the path was clear.

“Well, this solves that,” Captain Sil said.

Viv resisted the urge to chastise her. Couldn’t do that in public and besides, she was a civilian. Instead, she moved forward with the squad now firmly committed to protecting her from the way they were looking around.

“Wait, over there!” One of the said.

Viv raised an aegis before she could spot the threat, reinforcing it with some mana and that probably saved her life. Her danger sense screamed at her at the very last instant. She overloaded the spell and shifted her posture ever so slightly. It was all she could do until she heard a ping.

She looked down.

Sneaking its way between two of her bodyguards, piercing through her aegis AND her coating and coming to rest against her roundshield was a black spear, no, actually a spike, an organic, yellow-tipped stinger as ornate as the finest sculpture. It radiated in her sight with black and divine mana to the extent she didn’t dare touch it. Battle instinct made her look up towards the threat. She cast an artillery spell towards a fleeing, eight-legged form but it teleported to the side.

“What the f—”

An instant later, the entire area disappeared in a grinder of fire and colorless mana coming from the ship. Sidjin’s magically enhanced voice rang through the dock.

“Walls. Block their line of sight.”

“Eldritch wall!”

Should have done it from the start, maybe. Viv sprayed the entire path with the meaning of change, turning the earth and stones into towering waves of reaching limbs. Maybe she was feeling panicked but it was notably spikier than usual.

Also wait.

Their lines of sight? Their, plural?

Viv turned, looking behind her towards a strange gurgling sound. Captain Sil was behind her. She had a stinger stuck in her heart. Black veins snaked up her scarred cheeks. Her eyes were bulging. Her arms contracted and she fell, slowly, like a toppling tree. She was dead before she hit the ground.

“Fuck.”

The sailors panicked. Viv opened her soul and flooded them with leadership and intimidation in equal measure.

“You will stand your ground if you want to live because those supplies WILL reach the city, with or without you. Pick up the fucking crates.”

She didn’t even hesitate. A distant part of her reminded her forcing civilians to participate in a military operation was technically a war crime but she was long past caring. The group reformed in record time along with a worried Arthur. They gave Sil’s body a wide berth. It made Viv feel guilty.

This is meant to pierce magical defenses.

My scales are not enough.

Viv was about to say something but Arthur shook. Rocks flowed from her feet up her body before hardening into a silvery extra shell that made her look extremely intimidating.

All good now.

Cannot fly.

“What the fuck was that anyway and how do we fight it?”

“Sniper spiders,” one of the templars said. “You can’t really fight them. The only good thing is that they are few and it takes them a long time to create a spear. Or I hope so. I have never heard of any time when there was more than one...”

“They’re officer killers,” another said.

“Their aim is, well, you saw. Octas is fully committed to our doom, it seems. Alright lads. Double rank!”

Viv wanted to complain that she couldn't see shit but the death of Sil had chilled her to her core. One of the templars purified her body to be carried aboard while Viv moved up the path, a casting of nuée almost permanently active in front of her. The path was only broad enough for three people abreast but unfortunately, it was plenty good enough for spiders. They crawled from the rocks to jump at exposed skin, small and slow and yet they couldn't be ignored because they carried a venom cursed by a furious goddess. The guards stomped and splattered the bulbous creations against the metal covering them. That, at least, was still holding.

A woosh came from below and fire came to lick the edge of the formation. Heat made Viv gasp.

“That was... the dragon!” a templar whispered. “Did it turn on us?”

“SHE wouldn't do so and if she wanted you roasted, you would be roasted, tin box. Now cut the chatter,” Viv reproached.

She caught an annoyed look from the squad leader and shrugged. It was his job to discipline his men but Viv was just too distracted. Another bend in the road was the site of another ambush, with Viv reforming an aegis to prevent the multitude of tiny spiders from overwhelming them. That bend was close to the mainland and so she stole a glance towards the apocalyptic vista. Dark earth, squirming with activity. Men and women and monsters. Quite a bit of monsters, in fact. A flying man lorded over a group of armed fighters, their weapons shining the flashy green of the god of scorn. A mage, certainly. Active winds carried the stench of smoke and carrion to her nostrils as she turned around, casting eldritch wall to hide them from view. No more stingers came flying towards them. Either Sidjin's attack had gotten them all, or they were waiting for a better opportunity.

The way up turned into a slog, but Viv was nothing if not disciplined and no spiderling survived her methodical approach. A single mistake would cause deaths. She wouldn't make any if she could help it. As they progressed, however, thick spider silk started to cover the cliff. Viv was faced with a conundrum. She couldn't set them on fire to get rid of them in a systematic manner, but what about swapping with Arthur? The dragoness could clear webs quickly.

As she thought that, the roar of flames came from above, as well as an unmistakable golden light that reminded Viv of earlier days.

“A sortie?” someone asked.

“We'll meet them halfway,” the squad captain said. “There is a platform with benches and a view of the ocean. It should have enough space for everyone.”

He looked towards her for confirmation. She nodded, and the detachment resumed their climbs. There was now an anticipation, especially among the sailors who were never supposed to be in harm's way. Viv kept her spells up to make sure the way was clear.

The resting area would have been very pleasant, were it not for the dead children attached to columns. Just like the victims on the beach, these had been devoured by spiders as they hatched but unlike them, feathered shafts still emerged from their empty torsos. The sight revolted Viv. Those had been placed within sight of the walls as bait. Someone had not just callously sacrificed children. They'd moved them here first on purpose to inflict emotional pain on the defenders, and they'd done so while the children still lived. Viv knew what the arrows meant. Mercy killings. She prayed that she'd never have to make that decision herself.

Anger boiled in Viv's veins. It was one thing to fight against a certain vision of the world like Octas did. It was another to be so purposely cruel. She had forgotten what Octas really stood for. That was fine. Fine. She would remind the spider queen what she was up against.

"Purify the bodies," Viv ordered in the following silence.

"Yes sir."

The squads formed a protective ring around the panicked sailors. The descending soldiers were getting closer but Viv's gaze was drawn to the ocean to the east. A sudden breeze brought the cleaner scent of the sea, washing for a moment the stench of death.

Damn, she was already missing it.

Arthur walked around the circle. The dragoness was puffing fire rather than breathing it, and the purifying spell expanded across the white thread in shimmering bubbles that cleansed the mountain of its shroud. Little motes of light popped when the embers reached tiny spiders. It would have been beautiful in other circumstances, yet despite the urgency of the situation, Viv still enjoyed the sight of her adopted daughter puffing and stomping around. She was feeling a little better when the descending convoy finally met them.

Headed by a fire mage wearing a cowl, the group was made of scruffy inquisitors and templars in dented armor wielding swords, banners and bandages bearing the gold of Neriad and the rusty red of their many wounds. They were gaunt and tired with deep pockets under their eyes and yet there was a spring to their step, a determination that Viv found inspiring. She smiled when she recognized the two people leading the formation.

"Denerim! Orkan!"

The inquisitors she'd met in Kazar smiled when they spotted her. Denerim was still the same bearded wise man exuding confidence, while the ordeal had turned Orkan from rockstar to doomed poet, pale and wan and so very precious every daughter of good families would pine for this stuttering flame. Damn him for being attractive.

“The Black Witch in person! You came! I told everyone you would be coming but they didn’t believe me!” Denerim said, his malnourished face splitting into a large grin.

“Let’s rejoice when we’re back behind the walls,” Orkan added, dark eyes searching the vicinity.

“Right. We bring carts!”

Hand-drawn carts dragged by soldiers, to be precise. It took a minute to organize everything then the sailors walked back down escorted by Viv. Several more convoys pushed crates up at great speed. The local guards were so happy with the delivery they were almost frantic with their emaciated faces exuding a joy Viv didn’t feel. In such a dreadful situation, how could they be so happy? She didn’t get it.

“Is Sil not there?” Denerim asked her during the second journey up.

“I’m sorry. She was killed by a sniper spider on arrival.”

“Curses. She was the only one with the courage to help us. Her sacrifice shall be remembered... and the decisions of the other captains will not soon be forgotten. The situation here is... well, you will see for yourself soon enough. You have the food we requested?”

“All of it and more. I killed the Beast and we ate it. You can have the leftover.”

Denerim looked shocked.

“The monster part only, obviously.”

“You managed to slay the Beast? I assumed Octas would reclaim the avatar’s power or you would fend it off but death... oh, that meat will be a blessing. We need to regain our strength...”

We left you some sauce.

Arthur stood on her hind leg as a statement of power to express exactly how magnanimous she was. Denerim, wise that he was, bowed to express his gratitude. The news and the crates carried up towards the city until there was an uproar and enough light in the late afternoon to turn the ancient town into a beacon of light. Viv was one of the last to reach the city gates, casting one last glance towards the retreating form of Emeric’s Girl, its cargo holds empty but its chest full as reward for the surviving sailors and the families of those who’d fallen.

Colossal white stone marked the border of the Cradle, and colossal white stones formed its walls. Wards competed for space on the surface alongside numerous impacts to form a strange tapestry, one born from constant conflict. Inside, the mood was... strange. Viv was at the very tail of a column receiving the acclamation of a starving population. Already, hymns were filling the air. Soldiers on the walls kept a firm vigil with interspersed mages sitting randomly, perhaps to avoid being picked off. Some of the houses were destroyed. Others

were overflowing with people moving supplies with bony hands. Traces of destruction were everywhere among the crude white houses but so were the marks of a tenacious hope. The enduring green of Sardanal's light clung to small patches of vegetables that shouldn't be growing in this season. Desperate teenagers with bulging eyes stared at the ground with old shoes tightly clasped in their hands, hunting for spiders. Those vermin hunters seemed to be in fixture the deeper Viv walked.

"We're going to the Last Stand," Denerim told her.

"What? But shouldn't you guys recover first?"

"No," Denerim chuckled. "The Last Stand is a place. It's the vault below the main temple. You'll see."

Another detail struck Viv.

"Where are the children?"

"Where we're going."

Viv walked past funeral pyres. Many of the fighters lining the streets were not temple guards, she realized. Her inspection skill returned a lot of 'militiamen' and 'militiawomen' which were not technically paths but desperation picks for civilians forced into a combat role for an extended period of time. Those who survived, anyway. Most people here had dark skin. Denerim and Viv were in the firm minority. Those soldiers that watched her pass did so with a distant stare that no relief could reach. Their weapons were mostly polearms, simple ones made in a rush by harried smiths. They wore mismatched pieces of armor when they wore any. Ratty gambesons were the norm and few of them were intact.

After a short walk, Viv finally reached the central plaza. It was currently occupied by a massive tent from which emerged the sickly smell of infection. An actual ring of teenagers surrounded it, hands glowing with basic light spells.

"Octas got to the wounded five days ago. Hollowed out the corpse overnight before unleashing her venomous minions. Seventeen people died before we could contain them."

"I'm sorry."

"It's been a... a very long time, my friend."

The inquisitor patted her shoulder. He seemed so moved, it almost disturbed Viv. He'd been the one to help her back in the days, first against Gomogog's apostle and second during the siege against Lancer's forces. He had remained this pillar, this force of justice in her mind. The man who seized the guilty by the temples before inflicting upon them the suffering of their victims. Now he was frail and he looked older. Stress did that, she knew.

"I wouldn't miss it. We're on the same side."

"I know. The Black Witch of Harrak!" he grinned. "Now we're probably saved."

"Or at least we'll go down swinging."

"Just as Neriad intended. Ah, we're here."

Great pots had been prepared, filled with water. An army of salivating attendants shoved strings of Beast meat, vegetables, herbs, and butter into them. It already smelled quite nice. Denerim walked past the line of bowl-holding survivors already waiting in line for a chance to be among the first. He guided her down stairs and nodded at powerful guards protecting the way in. Finally, Viv arrived in a large room filled with columns centered around a single array. Groups of children slowly ate soup-soaked bread from cracked bowls under the smiling attention of tired women. Viv heard them make sure the kids chewed and slowed down. The array attracted her gaze. Despite her vast knowledge, it took her a long time to make sense of the divine construct.

It was a suicide array. A kneeling priestess waited in its center, her own lifeforce linked to that of the children. If she died, so would they. If she activated the spell, the same would happen. It would be painless, at least.

"The Last Stand. We would have fought all the way back here if we'd had to. Or at least, that was what we told each other. Hard to fight with no strength left. It may look cruel but... what Octas does to them..."

"You don't have to explain. I saw the dead captives on the resting platform. There are fates worse than death."

"I'm sorry. We failed them. And you."

"I volunteered to be here, Denerim. You don't have to apologize."

"We were supposed to defeat Octas and go home. Now people from the mainland have come and the locals... had to pick up arms or die. We have failed to stop the cultists."

"You helped me when I needed it. Now it's my turn to help you carry the fight against this evil. You're not alone, yeah?"

"Ah, forgive me. I must be rambling in my old age but it bears repeating. You have grown so much."

"Thanks. It means a lot coming from you, inquisitor. Now, where is your command room?"

"Over there."

The leaders of the defenders of the island had gathered in a common room inside of Last Stand, clearly a converted storage space. It still smelled faintly of paint and dust. A stone table held a few maps as well as tiny statues placed at various spots of the island. Viv thought they looked like they'd been put there randomly, and she doubted they would have

scouts out anyway. Several officers stood around quietly chewing ration bars. They watched Viv enter with hooded eyes, then Sidjin. Only Arthur's muzzle got a reaction.

"What is that thing?" someone asked.

You will address me with respect or the spiders will be the least of your worries, borgling.

That calmed them down immediately. They sort of huddled together in a corner despite Denerim's desperate attempt to form a circle. Viv saw mages, administrators, a couple of people who looked like village chiefs, and then warriors and templars. They were an eclectic bunch that only shared a certain air of despair about them.

"So..." the head mage finally said. "When are the reinforcements due? We heard the Beast was dead."

"We're it," Viv replied. "Well, us and a few dozen templars."

Whispers of consternation surged but Viv tapped the table with a gauntleted fist, and the hammering sound brought silence back, as did her expanding wings.

"You do look strong, lady, but we are barely holding up as it is. Maybe the Last Stand will earn its name after all."

"I think there is some sort of misunderstanding here. My name is Viviane, Outlander and current Empress of Harrak."

The whispers turned confused. Most people assumed Harrak was long dead, especially beyond the sea.

"I am Sidjin of Glastia, the Red Mist," Sidjin added.

And I am She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much.

I am a dragon.

"Neriad's bollocks."

"We don't do heroic last stands," Viv stated.

Chapter 172: Methodical.

The light of dawn rose over Sardanal's last refuge and Thunder Lord Sai was furious. The curs had food now, food and weapons. And some reinforcements, if the incoherent screeching from the spider fuckers was any indication. The only thing he could agree on with

his 'peers' was that they had to strike now before the templars put some meat back on their bones. The assembled forces of the Dark Gods made their way up the cliff, whatever troops had answered the call anyway. Some days it was like herding beastlings.

Gomogog's flesh abominations led the way, lumbering titans of writhing meat with pits where their mouths ought to be. Scabs and scars marked where fire and arrows had gnawed at their monstrous forms with little results. So close to him, they stank horribly. There was a rotten smell mixed with delicate flowers that made the mix deeply revolting. Then spiders and hybrids under Octas followed with those nasty little assassins she had tossing spindles at mages. He shivered. They were allied in the cause of showing the deeply flawed nature of society, the hypocrisy and lies it relied on to maintain some people at the top but beyond that... uneasy was their alliance indeed.

Efestar's troops were by far the least numerous, mostly because the God of Scorn preferred to act from the shadows. Veiled archers, quiet assassins, they snuck in the wake of larger threats with poison-tipped arrows.

Sai frowned. There was something weird going on with the dark god. His magic was acting... erratic, but it was not for man to question the divine. Instead, he focused his attention on the mess of a column climbing up the desolate slope towards the hated walls where so many of his minions had perished.

This place used to be lush and green. It was said that Sardanal's Cradle never truly knew winter, that there were always flowers blooming but looking at it now, it was hard to believe it. When Sai had landed, the cultists occupied only the forest. They had later breached the defenses of the servants of the light near the central valley, then devoured their way up. Many of Octas' hybrids were corpses of villagers and soldiers, attached to the bodies of her infamous spiders through dark sorcery. They moved up over the cracked earth, the fallen houses and the burnt orchards like locusts. Not a pleasant sight but when had war ever been? Those scorched fields were all that remained when fat lords rested on their laurels and Sardanal was no different.

A skittering announced the coming of Many-Legs, Octas' champion. Whatever he had started as was long gone. Now all that remained was a patchwork of shells covered in appendages: claws, arms, paws, legs, tendrils, tentacles, stingers, anything and everything that struck its fancy. A mental image formed in Sai's head. Few of Octas' fiercest champions kept the ability to speak.

Moving up.

Now.

Sai shivered again when the message clawed at his mind in all its alien horror. The house-sized abomination scurried forward with deceptive speed. From his position at the back, Sai could see the verdant mana of Sardanal covering the ramparts and the defenders behind, filling them with vitality. It was the only thing that kept them standing and it wouldn't last. The light gods always failed their followers at the most critical moment.

Sai the Thunder Lord was standing there with the fetid wind at his back amid the chittering of advancing hybrids when something strange moved in his mana sight. Threads expanded and contracted to the side. He heard a meaty sound. Something sprayed his war mask. He touched the liquid with a gloved finger. Red. Thick. Familiar. Blood, not his.

To his side, the mass of flesh walkers stumbled. Long gashed dripping putrid ichor and atrophied organs covered their unholy forms. The ones that held the center collapsed and didn't rise again. Space seemed to shiver where they once stood.

“What?”

What just happened? His dark gray robes were soaked, though their enchantments remained intact. The sneak attack surprised him so much he checked himself for wounds but found none. The Cowl of Efestar should still be hiding his presence. Was this the reinforcement he should be concerned with? He turned to Many Legs by force of habit but of course, the brainless abomination was already rushing towards the fortifications with a low hiss of rage tinted with glee. What kind of spell could do this? There had been no warnings, no colors marring the canvas of the world. Colorless mana? Unlikely. Sai watched the assault progress with trepidation. He had to learn, then he could strike.

At first, everything proceeded as planned. The dark mass of the spiders and surviving flesh walkers surged through a cloud of ash. The rare surviving templar archers and his own assassins exchanged the few remaining arrows on the island, then a group of shelled spiders disappeared. This time, Sai saw it happen. The packed formation was racing up, ignoring the few pitiful fire spells cast at them by the rare surviving enemy mages and then it was... gone? Cut to ribbons by... something. A colorless construct that turned flesh to slender ropes. It reminded him of a report he'd read a long time ago. His eidetic memory searched for the exact recollection.

A prince tortured for his crime against a city that had turned its back on him and his friends. A recruit ripe for collection, but he had not been bitter enough, apparently? His name was Prince Sidjin. Could it be the same one? What was he doing here anyway? This was a Viziman battlefield. Even he, as a champion of the Shadow Islands, was but a guest on this ancient battleground.

Sidjin was a... siege defense specialist.

Not. Good.

“Spread out,” he ordered, his pitch lowered by the war mask. “Do not stand next to groups of warriors.”

A few assassins stopped hiding behind packs of spiders. Sai cursed. Many-Legs would not listen to him. He had to take off despite the risk. His shoulder still lanced from a lucky arrow. With a breath, he emptied his mind. Gray mana spooled from his core to extend all around him. His superior mind handled two spells at once, one that would cover his body in a thick layer of gray mana infused with the meaning of avoidance, the other in a powerful construct that would carry him up. He soared into the air in a burst of mana.

The sky was his.

It never got old, feeling all that gray mana around him, even in the bleakest of moments. A grin curved his lips as he watched the town become smaller under him. As before, verdant mana blocked his sight and muddied the mana signatures. He would have to make do with it.

The chittering carpet of creatures kept going on. Strange, transparent constructs of immense complexity bloomed among their most dangerous hybrids to tear them limb from limb. After the fourth such slaughter, even Many-Legs perceived the danger. The insane champion screeched and the assault scattered, but it was already late. What started as a relatively organized attack turned into a rush, the blobs dispersing into a chaotic mess. It was not the end of the magical assaults. Invisible javelins tore through flesh walkers one by one, saturating their large forms until even their regeneration couldn't keep up. They fell.

A part of Sai felt relief at the death of those abominations. The rest of him knew this was a problem, one he had to solve personally.

Suddenly, a figure in a heavy cloak appeared on the battlements, hands clutching a large staff. His head was covered by a cowl. He waved his hands around until a large fireball formed, then he tossed it at the approaching spiders.

It was a rather obvious bait, one his assassins did not take. Unfortunately, the stinger-spitting spiders did. A thick spike clanged on the form's body, revealing the extremely thick armor underneath. Sai recognized Kal the Mountain, a champion of Neriad. It was so obvious! And there was a diagnostic spell and... there was a short-range blast taking out one, then two of the rare and valuable spiders from their hiding place. Sai cursed under his breath. The diagnostic spell came from... there, inside a squad of heavily armored guards. He had to time his assault well. The Cowl of Efestar would only hide him until he attacked. then he would be a very valuable flying gray mage in bow range.

He merely needed some patience.

The assault began. Spiders crawled up the wall. Animalistic ones jumped in the defenders while others spat poisonous blobs and nets, but where the servants of the dark gods had been on the cusp of victory before, now they were struggling. The defenders were haler, their weapons repaired, their arms strong and kept energetic through the green mana constantly renewing them. Colorless mana had dispersed the deadlier groups so that the attackers reached the crenelations piecemeal rather than as a united force and it made a world of difference. The hybrids swung in vain at shield walls before being pierced by spears. It was obvious the assault would fail but perhaps Many-Legs could still salvage some sort of gain. The abomination scaled the wall with ponderous grace, as unstoppable as fate itself. He attacked the troops on the tower with rabid frenzy. His appendages wailed in the defenders with rage. Sai saw a body tossed over the battlements. The shield wall crumbled, then corpses crashed in the courtyard beyond. It stopped as soon as Denerim arrived, that naive fool.

The bearded warrior fought Many Legs conservatively. He cut the legs as they attacked, taking few risks. It was like watching a gardener prune a tenacious plant while his apprentice, the Hallurian defector, hovered at the edge, ready to move in and attack Many-Legs' true body. Another stalemate. Idiots.

The Fallen Prince ought to act soon. Sai knew it. Many-Legs was too tempting a target, and as expected, another transparent spell emerged from the hazy mist of Sardanal's protection. A thread-thin construct. It whistled through the air before embedding itself deeply into Many-Legs' flank.

The damn creature screeched. The Prince must have hit something important.

That also meant he was focused on offense.

Carefully, Sai weaved his personal hex. The sky rumbled above when he infused the air around him with the meaning of potential. Pride filled his chest. He was one of the few casters in history capable of using it.

Potential crystallized in front of him, then he guided the deficit down towards the prince. He would not feel it. How could he? Potential was not mana. It couldn't be felt through normal means, only through the tingle on one's skin and the coppery taste on one's tongue. Sai relished that special moment when he was alone, hidden from view, away from the vicissitudes of the fight against oppression. There was only him, the gray mana leaving his core and the complex array hanging in the air. He was the storm and he could not be touched. Power coursed through him. The power to liberate. The power to be free and to scorn the world itself.

"Storm."

A massive bolt crossed the sky, landing among the soldiers in a cataclysmic first strike. The blinding flash faded to reveal white lines coursing through the cracked pavements over bubbling stone and the shaking form of a couple of guards. Shaking, but not dying. Sai reacted immediately by moving aside but Sidjin did not counter immediately. Sai's opponent stood next to an enchanted metal rod he'd raised from below at the last moment. Even the excess energy had dissipated on a transparent shield with a few templars catching stray energy. Just as Sai dodged, Sidjin had been repairing his defense rather than countering. A patient opponent.

For a second, the two took the measure of each other. Sidjin, a tan Glastian with a scar on his cheek and deep brown eyes looking mournfully up, curly hair hidden under his cloak. Sai the Thunder Lord, face hidden behind a mask, body covered in a protective gray robe. A fallen prince and the apostle of a dark god. Two experienced combatants. Two archmages.

Then the spells flew.

Sidjin opened with a salvo of skewering transparent spears Sai had to dodge without seeing. Only his trained perception and the almost imperceptible trail of the spells gave him any sort of warning, and he used his speed and flexibility to great use to dodge them. Meanwhile,

gray mana spells and a smaller thunderbolt fell on impenetrable defenses, the prince's fortress an array of complex hexes designed to counter Sai specifically. Efestar's champion tried fire and his own colorless attacks to destabilize Sidjin but it was clear the archmage was a defensive master at the top of his art. Sai needed options. He needed the unpredictable.

"Efestar, bless my aim."

The dark green energy of scorn fused in his fist like acid. Scorn clouded Sai's mind. Had to crush. Had to take revenge, but Sai prevailed over the dark god's domain. It was not his first spell.

Once again, the energies stutter, threatening to waste Sai's efforts. He regained control at the last moment then dodged a gray spell cleverly hidden behind a transparent barrier. Sidjin was canny.

A baleful spear surged towards Sidjin. This one wasn't gray mana but hatred made manifest. Sai followed the spell's trajectory with anticipation, but Sardanal's light surged forward and for an instant, it was as if a bejeweled hand swatted the spell aside.

"Dammit."

An arrow flew by. His shield pushed it away but below, the situation was getting worse. The walls held strong despite the forces thrown at them. Spider corpses formed a small moat in front of the walls. Many-Legs was reeling from several wounds. Sai's time was running out.

And then something attracted his attention. It didn't come from the city but from the harbor, the natural one at the western tip of the city. The one where his ship was waiting for him.

"No. No!"

Sai flew away as fast as he could.

The prisoner gave himself two more days of life, maybe less. He licked his parched lips and thanked Emeric for having him be captured during winter, at least. Sometimes, he could suck on snow when the others were not looking. The other prisoners didn't trust him. Wretched things, all of them. Some were surviving villagers from the fallen villages, thin and dying but still occasionally fed. Fodder for some ritual, no doubt. Others had been carried over the sea from the Shadow Lands by slavers eager to sell to those who didn't value gold. The slavers had learned that Octas hated every form of civilization, even the most cruel ones. They were also ritual fodder. Maybe a gaze, maybe something the savage bitch would cook up. The prisoner didn't care. His only hope was to be executed as an example because he was too much of a coward to kill himself by other means.

A woman stared at him from the other cage. She was a lower caste thing from the mainland, also a coward, but one made meek from birth. She was hopeless. When their eyes met, she turned away.

The prisoner was bored. Why was dying so very tedious? He almost wanted the cultists to get to it. Instead, the cowardly idiots were lowering crates from one of the many small ships who'd made the trip from the homeland or Vizim to carry men and supplies for the great work. Turned out that it took a lot of flesh to keep their ravenous allies going. In the bay, a makeshift port had assembled itself to welcome those blasphemous shipments. The prisoner watched a man roll a barrel up the rickety pier towards one of the warehouses. Actually, they were improved fishing shacks but that still made them one of the few remaining intact structures outside of the walls. The spider bitch was thorough.

As for the flesh father...

The prisoner turned to the nearest flesh tree, one of the most active on the island. It was an unholy meat construct capable of producing cursed fruits that sustained the flesh walkers. Towering over the burnt husks of real vegetation, they only took the vague shape of a real trunk, a grotesque parody of life. They smelled weird as well, a strange mix of sourness and floral notes. Eminently disturbing. The prisoner averted his gaze. He didn't want to find another eye looking at him. Again.

"Careful with those, they contain iron bars, you dimwit," the quartermaster screamed at a fumbling cultist.

"Boss, do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

But the prisoner heard, and soon, so did the quartermaster, and then so did everyone. The cultist looked up at the ubiquitous gray sky with incomprehension. It was... a screech?

Light.

Heat.

Sound.

The prisoner jerked back against the cage, feeling it bite against his thin chest. He took a deep breath. His ears popped. Where there was a small ship before him, now there is an expanding ball of fire sending scorched debris falling like rain. The man pushing a barrel had died. The pier was a flaming wreck. On the other ships, men and women panicked. Some jumped into the waters while others pulled on rope. Others still looked up to the sky to find what was attacking them. The prisoner did it as well. He had nothing better to do. There was a sort of liberating feeling to be helpless in the face of death. No need to struggle.

A flash of white scale. A serpentine shape. Gray mana blurring with speed as the creature attacking them made a second pass and another ship was annihilated. Corpses were tossed aside, cloaks burning. They were dead before they hit the water.

“Neriad protect us,” someone whispered in the next cage. “It’s a dragon.”

It was, in fact, a dragon. The prisoner stared uncomprehendingly at the shape of archers and a cultist mage attempting to stop the flying disaster, but their target was a blur of spells. The earth buckled under them without a circle appearing or symbols being used. Only the Thunder Lord could possibly slow that beast down, curse that backstabbing cur. Why was there a damn dragon here, of all places?

And why was there a foreign woman as well?

The prisoner blinked. Next to him, a pale-skinned caster carved circles and symbols in the suddenly flattened ground. She was tall, with a black armored robe and a strange, misshapen shield covered in heraldry. A silver circlet adorned her helmet. He reassessed her as a leader of some sort as well as a caster. Her hair was colored strangely. A Paramese, for sure. Or a savage from the Empire of Dawn. No, she was no thrall. He frowned.

[Foe of Efestar, Ascender, Fourth step of a well-rounded black war caster path. Elemental. LETHAL. Peerless war caster. Born for magic. Empress of New Harrak. Monster Slayer...]

So many... what? He’d never heard of her! Harrak? Wasn’t the place destroyed? And she was an enemy of Efestar? Elemental? What was she doing here all calm and — but wait. That was his chance.

“Lady? Lady? The gate? Please?”

His voice revived the spark of hope in the chest of the other wretches. They crammed themselves against their cage with emaciated limbs grasping at her, filthy nails clawing the air for the salvation she represented, but she didn’t budge. With methodical speed, the witch kept drawing an increasingly complex array on the ground. The prisoner knew enough about rituals to realize this one was excessively complex despite the... rather artistic arrangement. She was also drawing several at once. It was something only the best casters could do. The prisoner didn’t know what an elemental archmage was but it was clearly one of the light gods’ champions. Fresh off the boat then? Maybe he still had a chance.

“Lady, we can be of help.”

She didn’t reply. The array completed, then she fed power into the construct.

There was so much mana here the prisoner could feel it press against his skin. The air shimmered, then the world inexplicably split open, smoothly, like a window, and beyond that was a courtyard covered in flowers with mossy, damaged walls, and warriors in heavy armor. Quite a bit of them.

“Go. Go!”

The fighters actually crossed the space. They were here now, soldiers of the light. From the city to the pier in an instant.

A portal? This was a portal? It was! The prisoner thought only Oleander’s team was capable of such a feat! The soldiers immediately opened the cages around him while the witch created another circle. Behind him, the bay’s last boat went up in flames yet the witch wasn’t worried. The dragon was on her side? How?

Then he was facing a furious man.

“This one is a cultist. He’s one of them.”

Uh oh.

The templar attempted to break the cage, only to realize the lock was enchanted. The prisoner gave him an apologetic shrug which only enraged him even more.

“Sorry, Neriad’s dog. I wouldn’t need you for a normal lock.”

The elemental one approached in turn, and the prisoner had a first good look at her. She was... exotic. Very strange, and beautiful if you liked that kind of thing. The eyes were the catch. They were pure black with emerald rings where the iris should be. What was she doing serving the light ones? She looked at him with her alien eyes and there was an assessment here he didn’t like.

The woman approached and a blade of pure void erupted from her extended hand. She casually flicked it through the lock. Part of the metal and all the enchantments were... just gone with a hiss.

The templar opened the gate. Well, at least they would make it fast.

“Let him go,” the woman said.

The templar twisted around, outrage plain on his face.

“Milady, this is a servant of a dark god.”

“I know. Stand aside.”

The templar grew defiant but something hit him. With his advanced soul sense, the prisoner could feel it as well, though it was focused on someone else. Intimidation. Powerful. Perhaps even specialized. It felt like standing in front of a scaled oven with a cold patience behind. It was pointless to fight her off. She would get her way and quickly.

“NOW!”

The templar obeyed, though reluctantly. The prisoner didn't wait until they could change their minds. He was out and away in a rush. He raced past burning buildings, charred corpses and panicked cultists rushing here and there. Exhaustion made every step a chore. Had to work on his endurance a bit, after this was done. Hunger gnawed at him but that one was an old companion and it didn't stop him. Suddenly, thunder roared behind him.

The free man slowed down then. Behind him, down the slope, the bay was a scene of utter devastation. The carcasses of ships still smoldered so that it looked like the ocean itself was on fire. An inferno devoured every husk of structures where a makeshift port used to stand. Smoke and screams clogged the atmosphere, and while he could see the templars freeing the other prisoners and killing the surviving cultists, behind the island was but a hazy landscape of red and gray behind black smoke and flying embers. The dragon shrieked again and the top of a distant hill burst into flames. But all was not over for Efestar's servant. Sai was here.

The free man still resented Sai's ascension to dominance over Efestar's scattered servants. He resented the archmage's cocky confidence, but there was little he could do because Efestar's blessings affected him in... another way. The Thunder Lord floated over the scene clad in a halo of clean air, his presence a purifying presence. Just then, the sun found a small dip in the cloud. Light backlit the flying figure to give him a colorful aura. Here was the flying champion coming to the rescue while below, the black witch carved away at the ground, abyss-lined jade looking up with cold disdain.

"You have courage, I will grant you that," the Thunder Lord rumbled.

The witch didn't bother to answer. A black shield surrounded her. Electricity still crackled on its surface. The Thunder Lord's spells lingered and rock didn't stop them but it appeared black mana had. She had never stopped casting.

The Thunder Lord must have felt something because he attacked with insistence. Air blades met strange disruptive spells. Fireballs were swallowed effortlessly. Another thundering attack had the same result as before, so Sai apparently decided to target the templars instead as they evacuated the last of the rescues but it was too late. They were already within her protective aura, and she intercepted his attacks with ease.

"Hyperbeam."

A thick black ray speared the clouds. For a moment, the free man expected, no, hoped that Sai had finally perished for his arrogance but the archmage was a survivor, and thanks to his strange understanding of gray mana, he was suddenly... not there. Another spell that made the air unbreathable was immediately countered when the witch saturated Sai's surroundings with black mana, shattering the delicate construct. He flew higher, above the thick air yet below the gloom of the perpetual dark clouds. His form blended in the world of gray.

The free man knew what was coming so he ran faster. The wind picked up, yet before the Thunder Lord could trigger his attack, the witch struck.

“Metamorphosis.”

The leftover mana made him shudder, as if his skin didn't quite fit.

Despite the imminent danger, the free man still turned as he edged the slope. He wanted to see. He needed to see. The leftover of an attack made the clouded air even darker, and it was now clear that the witch's target had never been the Thunder Lord.

The free man realized it had never been a duel. The witch had an objective. The Thunder Lord was merely in the way.

“I swore to myself I would never inflict the aspect of change on a person,” the witch said in Old Imperial, her voice carried by the wind.

“But you're not a person.”

The flesh tree shivered. The free man had seen temple guards hack at it and die, grabbed and absorbed into its flesh. He'd seen a mage attempt to set it on fire and fail. The tree had regrown from the voracious attention of the flesh walkers. Now, for the first time, the free man saw it writhe in pain. Limbs erupted, flailed, and fell off like torn petals. Tumorous growth bubbled over its horrid surface and slowly, it half-melted, half-fell forward. Mouths bloomed and screamed. The din was deafening. When the trunk touched a nearby rock, it broke to spill a vile liquid that hissed against the flames. More gashes opened, wounds that would have killed a titan. Still more limbs popped haphazardly over the collapsing mass as its regeneration fought against the spell and lost. It was being devoured by the very thing that had brought it life. Suddenly, the tree stopped struggling.

The free man watched with rapt attention, an attention he regretted immediately when a single, perfect eye opened on the last intact piece of skin. The eye turned towards the witch.

Terror froze the man's breath. This was... this was... Gomogog. The hungry god spotted the witch. The torrent of ichor turned into a wave that aimed for her.

“No you don't. Deadland domain.”

The witch walked to the portal. She was the only one left behind, and behind her, a sphere of gray expanded. The fires sputtered and died. The grass died. Even the waves lost their color. The cage where he'd been kept turned brittle and the dark god's attack fizzled.

The free man finally got it now. Not an elemental caster. Not a caster of elements. A caster that is an elemental. A black elemental.

When had Neriad found such a champion?

The flesh tree finally collapsed, but the Thunder Lord's attack came as well. Wind blew, lifting planks, then entire stones as a hurricane formed on the witch's location, but she merely raised walls around herself with a gesture. The portal was still active. What was she

waiting for? The free man was still a spectator, despite the dangers. His chances of survival were bleak anyway. He might as well learn what he can. Perhaps bargain his knowledge.

Just as the twister started, it evaporated. The free man heard Sai scream when the archmage plummeted head first into the ocean. One of his legs was on fire.

It was a glorious sight.

“What took you so long?” the witch asked the dragon landing by her side. It was a young one, relatively speaking, and white as snow.

Steal spell first.

“Fair enough. Let’s go.”

The pair crossed the portal, which closed soon after.

The free man ran. He ran for a long time. He climbed into the burnt forest with burning lungs and aching legs. After twenty minutes of walking, a spider skittered in view but he merely flashed Efestar’s mana and the creature reluctantly let him go. He finally reached the promontory where he had hidden emergency supplies. An upturned stone surrendered a backpack with some food he devoured, and clothes he changed into. As he turned, the lowlands came into full view. It was, inexplicably, burning again.

A portal flashed open by another flesh tree. Cries and spells surged into the sky, then after five minutes, the tree burst in a geyser of red ichor and a scream like an angry kettle. He looked at the three remaining trees. Perhaps the dark servants could protect one or two, but they would have to assign much of their remaining forces to guard duty. If they didn’t, Gomogog’s servants would starve and they never truly starved so long as there was someone edible around... The man knew where this was all going.

It was the dark god’s turn to be left without choices.

It was bright here. Summer light warmed Viv’s skin while a light breeze spread waves across the green grass. She raised an arm to see her burn scar covered by a summer dress. An earth summer dress.

“Nice touch,” she said.

Someone with her soul sense knew when she’d been dragged into the in-between, though it had been done with a considerably lighter touch this time. She wasn’t currently in the City of the Gods either. It was... a different place. Just as she thought the light would burn her skin, a wide-brimmed hat came to rest on her brow.

“I thought you might appreciate a break,” a warm voice said.

A man walked by her. He was a northerner with unusually dark skin, and tall, not Efestar tall, more like tall-human tall with very thin limbs. A turban covered his scalp while a loose, simple white garb covered most of the rest of him. Jewels adorned his delicate fingers in shades of gold with the occasional precious stone glinting pleasantly. Without a word, the two sat on the slope and watched the plain in front of them and the mountains in the distance. The weather was perfect.

"I have never been a fighter," Sardanal said.

Viv gave him her attention. He was measuring her response, somehow. It didn't seem like she was being judged.

"I have always abhorred violence. Even at the end despite everything the old gods threw at us. I was always in favor of mending bridges. There are some who could not be redeemed, like Gorok and some of his most ardent followers, but I believed until the end that Enttiku and Octas could absolutely be. We turned the goddess of death to our cause and, as a result, we lost a friend. This battle is a penance for me as well."

"You might be proven right in the end."

"Perhaps. I lament the cost, especially since it will be paid by others."

Sardanal touched the rings on his hands, thoughtful.

"You have come to defend my cause and so I shall tell you, thank you for standing for what is right. I must apologize in advance because... there is only one way this can end. Octas has invested too much in this battle to back up now. Not that she ever learned how to do that."

"I know what she will do. She's been very consistent so far."

"It will be worse this time. If she is proven wrong here, it will hurt her essence. She will be broken and cast into the shadows for decades, maybe longer. I am telling you this because I... will not incarnate."

Viv waited for more to come. It didn't. Sardanal merely looked forward.

"Due to a lack of suitable candidate or..."

"My incarnations are always brief and gentle. Sometimes, I appear in the grandest festival, or during famines or plagues when I am needed, so candidates are numerous, but as I said, I am not a fighter. If I manifest here, I will only be a target and when that form is killed, I will become unable to support you anymore. Worse, my host might be made an example of. I apologize for not being here while you fight for me."

"That's... ok."

Sardanal seemed surprised.

“Truly?”

“You will still support us with your magic, right?”

“Of course.”

“The view of soldiers is different from yours, in my culture. You don’t have to be the one to shed blood to serve the cause. We need doctors, cooks, quartermasters, smiths, drivers, all of those as much as we need warriors. You don’t need to stand in the shield wall to be instrumental in our victory.”

“I agree. Many do not. Are you prepared enough for the battle to come?”

“The dark ones only have one option left but it’s a strong one. I think we’ve done the best we could. The rest depends on us... and Efestar, I suppose.”

“I wish you success. Remember that I will always be at your back, and if you do save my island, I will make sure Harrak receives its fair share of our victory.”

Chapter 173: Arcachnomachia

It was impossible, looking at Many-Legs, to assume that he had once been human. Some champions embraced the teachings of their masters but Many-Legs had gone a step beyond. He had not accepted the necessity of change. He had craved it, embraced it. He had forfeited his shape. He had forfeited his name. Eventually, he had gone so far as to forfeit speech and all the things that made him a person. All that was left behind was power, violence, and ambition.

The path to supremacy did not rely on others, or on concepts or methods, to Many-Legs. It only relied on the triumph of the fittest, and on such a world as Nyil, the fittest ought to be a true monster. Even his soul was now a twisted and piteous thing, so when he felt the touch of his goddess, he whimpered with pleasure.

It was time. Time to embrace his destiny. The forest of limbs on his thorax shivered when he accepted her caress, her blessing. He let her in, her perfect vessel, and together, they roared.

Hunger.

All that was left was hunger.

It could be directed. With some effort, it could be contained for a while, but it always returned and when it did, a frenzy overtook the Ravener, one that only flesh could satiate until it returned, stronger than ever.

Hunger.

One day, the Ravener had feared disease, an infection that crawled over her flank in a wave of constant, exhausting agony. The wound was open and fetid and bleeding pus, and it dug ever deeper. Fear of the inevitable had led her to a solution. It had been easy. The god had lent her enough strength to fetch the child of a neighbor — nasty little bully. He died quickly. She feasted on his meat for some time, made soup with his bones, but the meat ran out and the hunger came. The neighbor lost his wife but by then he was suspicious. A crowd ran her from her home. She walked the roads, hungry and questing for the next meal. She wasn't sure when she had stopped looking like a person. Each feat had brought more strength, more resilience, more power but that power could only be put in service to the next meal, so strong was the need. It gnawed at her day and night now.

It was almost a relief when the change took over. She let Gomogog seep into her flesh and allowed her psyche to dissolve into his warm embrace. An end, finally.

The large flesh walker leaned back from its stopped posture. Meat bubbled, defining bulbous muscles. Maws opened on the surface of its body. They wailed in unison.

It burnt.

Just like the day the Wandering Lord had burnt his family. He'd survived because the ropes tying him had been too loose. His leg was just a chunk of pain where the dragon had torched him almost casually, in passing, as he was already defeated. The winter sea wasn't enough to kill those flames. They burnt with a will of their own and Sai's poor understanding of blue mana meant he was nearly defenseless.

It was always the same, always the damn same. The powerful destroyed casually, demolished everything in their path and they did it because they didn't care. They knew with absolute certainty that they would get away with it. Who would stop them? Not Sai, with his year of gruesome, lonely training without resources, his years of effort to take vengeance against the Wandering Lord and his lackeys. Not Sai who'd fought every hour of his life against the tyranny of the uncaring. And now he was here again on a lonely rock surrounded by idiots and sycophants just for standing for what he knew was right.

A burst of agony made him delirious. The flesh-mending potion wasn't working properly. Scarred, bruised flesh regrew in uneven patches where it regrew at all because he hadn't cut away the burnt meat, and how could he? The pain. The atrocious pain.

It never changed.

No matter how hard he fought, the world didn't change. It was always the same. It always followed the same rules. A fresh pang of agony tore at his mind. It was never going to change unless he did something drastic, something to even up the board. It didn't matter that Octas won so long as the powers that be lost because it could not just... keep... happening.

He had to make a mark in history, remind rulers that they were not safe at the top. Every atrocity would be paid in blood if one had the will to sacrifice everything to make it happen.

And Sai was ready. Black, ichor-like liquid covered his limbs and silenced the pain. It flowed to form a mighty plate armor.

They were ready.

But... something felt wrong.

"I really thought we would have more time. Until tomorrow, maybe," Viv said.

They would have to fight at sunset. Definitely not ideal. At least, Sardanal's blessing kept everyone at peak condition, physically. It wasn't just a boost that would be paid for later. She was genuinely feeling well-rested. Only the mental toll affected the others. Nevertheless, the sun was about to set and the thought of fighting incarnate dark gods during the night was... less than enchanting. And it was going to happen. She had seen Many-Legs turn into Octas' incarnate. Everyone had seen it. There were not enough tall trees left on all of the island to mask that sort of transformation.

Even then, soldiers and militia members rushed to the walls, ate their bit of provisions, or sharpened their weapons one last time before the inevitable showdown. Women carried barrels of arrows and water to the crenelations while others tirelessly worked to craft more from the tips Emeric's Girl had brought, and fresh wood grown by Sardanal. Viv watched the last preparations with some measure of detachment. This would be a fight of gods this time, but a few more arrows could not hurt. People needed to act, feel useful in a time of crisis.

The walls were packed with warriors now. Viv had turned a ring around the city into a piece of deadlands so Octas' harassing spiders could not get through. The effect would last until the battle started. Sardanal's Cradle and its defenders had gotten the breath they desperately needed before the last big push, and that was what mattered.

Denerim and Orkan joined her on the battlements. The old inquisitor had brought her a cup of piping hot klod. Viv took a grateful sip and let the cereal taste distract her.

"I tested it for poison, by the way," Denerim told her with a smile.

The inquisitor looked better than when she'd first arrived, though many of the defenders remained too thin. Orkan followed in subdued silence.

“Oh, I have this,” Viv said, pointing at a jewel hanging by her neck. “It’s a poison detector and canceller.”

“It looks expensive.”

“Gifted by Enttiku’s clergy, if you will believe it. I’ve made several weird friends in the past couple of years.”

“Do we qualify?” Orkan drawled.

“Let me think about it. Does the Hallurian deserter turned follower of the God of Righteous War standing on a wall in the middle of the ocean counts? Hmmm.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t befit a ruler,” the man deadpanned.

“I’m a ruler so anything I do befits me. What are you gonna do?”

Orkan faked shock before turning to his mentor.

“Teacher, what was the lesson you said about nobility and sass.”

Denerim gave a long-suffering sigh though a smile creeped at the corner of his lips.

“My dear apprentice, you are unlikely to meet many Elemental archwitch empresses with sass during your life, and I simply urge you to follow advice number seven?”

“Always adapt to the circumstances...” Orkan grumbled.

“When not dealing with exceptions, you will find that my lessons will serve you well, my dedicated apprentice.”

“Technically I’m already a full-fledged Inquisitor,” Orkan informed Viv.

“Whatever my dedicated apprentice says.”

Viv chuckled. The warriors around her were relaxing, dispelling some of the dread hanging over the city.

“By the way, nice armor you have there,” Denerim added with some appreciation.

“Thank you! It has pockets and nice comfy boots. I insisted. The circlet is a standoff until I can get a huge crown instead.”

“Really love the dread lord city-destroyer aesthetics you have going on,” Orkan added.

“What is the ninth rule, my apprentice?”

“Deception is as powerful as a blade,” Orkan groaned again.

“Now Viv can confuse the servants of the dark gods by wielding destruction more effectively than they can. Devious.”

“I have been called devious on occasion,” Viv conceded. “And yes I picked a dress to impress. This is a battlefield!”

“Indeed,” Orkan agreed. “And in Halluria, there is a tradition, sometimes. Ah. I think it’s a good one.”

His hesitation stopped when he saw there were no hostile reactions. Hallurians culture was looked down upon on most of the continent but she was beyond that.

“As you know, we don’t travel much. Only a few privileged people get to travel and it’s always a risky endeavor, because distant cities don’t always respect agreements. On the eve of a... a difficult battle, the weathered travelers would sometimes share tales of places people wouldn’t get to see. I know this because one of the old gladiators, well...”

“I would love to hear about Earth,” Denerim said.

“Hmmm.”

It was a good point. She’d shared stuff with Sidjin and Solfis but never with the others. She also realized Denerim was speaking in the northern tongue. She’d assumed it was out of courtesy as most of their side understood that tongue, but perhaps there was more to it. Many of the soldiers surrounding them were moving more slowly now, and the hushed conversations had stopped. People were studiously not looking at her.

She considered talking about cities but it would require dazzling people with descriptions of technology and... perhaps it wasn’t the best choice here and now. Instead, she considered another option. A warmer one.

“There is a place far to the north called the Island of Ice. There, the burning heart of the planet was close to the surface, and many volcanoes made this place their home.”

“Volcano?” some asked.

“A fire mountain,” someone else whispered. “Shhh!”

“We decided to visit there with my family. My father, mother, little brother and I traveled there, then we moved around with a marvelous piece of technology that moves without horses. Like a mana-powered carriage!”

“Ooooh.”

“The Island of Ice was a wonderful and unique place, with great waterfalls and beaches of black sand decorated with blue ice. The people were warm and welcoming. I remember once we went alone through a black landscape at the feet of a dormant volcano. The

mountain pierced the air with strangely shaped stones while black dust clung to our wheels. It was an alien landscape under a gray sky unlike anything I had ever experienced, and for the first time I accepted that there might be other worlds out there and that perhaps, some of us may walk it - though I never imagined it would be me!"

A few people chuckled.

"We were mercifully alone which made the experience that much more surreal. I remember my tracks in the dust, but then I turned around and saw my family all gathered here pointing at many things. My brother was grumpy, of course, as he was thirteen at the time and angry at the entire world."

"Seems humans are the same everywhere!"

"And while watching that strange place, I noticed small, green spots all around. We were visiting in early spring and life was already returning to this inhospitable place. The air was crisp and cool. Wind blew and sent all those little tufts of grass aflutter and reminded me of the life that would soon bloom again. We had a great time and then we left to visit hot springs. Those are like naturally warm baths in open air."

"I could use a bath right now," Orkan said.

"We all could. Thanks for the story."

Around them, people were smiling.

"Actually..."

Viv used a few illusion spell to show a few of her memories. Iceland. Her family. People took turns watching things about Earth and commenting on windows making places too indefensible against errant beastlings. The islanders were particularly interested in catamarans. Viv intentionally walked around to show the images until people were distracted enough to relax. She eventually made her way back to Denerim as he was finishing a wrap.

"I think I distracted everyone enough."

The inquisitor took a few blissful seconds to savor the last of the meal, which Viv was ok with.

"Thank you. Now I think..."

Far in the distance, at the base of the slope, something was coming. The avatar of Octas was not there yet but the spiders that she controlled were already crawling up the slope.

"How can there be so many?"

"Her divine power can turn even a tiny spider into a horse-sized horror given enough time. What you are seeing is the overflow. In any case, it is my turn to speak as the senior

inquisitor here. I hope my command of the northerner tongue will suffice. I am not much of a linguist.”

“Yet you talk that much,” Orkan grumbled from the side.

“Thank you, apprentice. Now, it’s time.”

Denerim casually stood on the crenellation. An otherworldly wind made his hair flutter, and his beard took on a golden tint. When he spoke, his voice was not loud and yet it could be heard across the entire city.

“People of the cradle, fellow inquisitors, templars, temple guards, soldiers, mages and mercenaries, friends, hear me. You all know who I am, so I will tell you this now. It is as you imagined. The final battle is upon us, and Octas walks the world again.”

Mutters of fear rose from the battlements. People knew, of course, but they still wanted to believe it would not be so, that slaying the Beast would have inflicted a setback on the Weaver Queen and that they would only face a rather large spider.

“That is not all. You are not going to like what I say next, so steel your hearts and grab your weapons tight, for it is an ill omen I shall now share with you. The Eight-Legged one does not come alone. The Eater stands with her and so will the Cruel Avenger.”

This time, the cries were louder.

“I know you are afraid. I am afraid too,” Denerim said, and the admission shocked the younger fighters.

“But I am here with my sword in my hand, on this wall, undaunted. Do you think that this is because I trust in Neriad, the God of Righteous War?”

“Yea,” a few people said.

“NO!” Denerim replied, surprising them again.

“No. Neriad does not embrace suicidal last stands when they achieve no results, and yet here I remain. I remain here because I trust in you, all of you.”

Denerim let that sink in for a few seconds.

“For the last year, the dark gods have mercilessly besieged us. They have razed our homes, torched our fields, blighted our forests. They have sent their legions against us. They have tortured and threatened. They have sent their spiders to harry us and sank our ships. They have starved us and made a mockery of human dignity, and yet despite all of this, more champions have flocked to our banner. Despite a year of suffering, blood, and tears.... the Cradle still stands... AND WE ARE STILL FIGHTING!”

The crowd roared. Hundreds of weapons rose to the sky and the last rays of the sun dipping beneath the cloud caught them, turning them a deep red like a promise. And Denerim was not done.

“We have endured the onslaught as one - not because we are united by race, or city, or even by religion. We are united because we believe the same thing, that there is a better future and that it must be achieved through our own success rather than the destruction of others. We are here because we are builders and healers and believers, and because we all know those are ideas worth fighting for. Worth dying for. Look around you and you will see many strangers, but see where they stand and you will know they are brothers and sisters. I am proud to stand among you today and I want all of you to remember that the Light Gods are on our side, and that we are here for each other. What we have, the dark gods can never achieve. Trust that we have a plan. Follow your orders. Look after each other. Trust that you are fighting for the noblest of causes. And kick some spider asses!”

The army of light roared again. An emerald light surged across the fortification to remind everyone that although Sardanal was no warrior, he would still be by their side to the end. Viv felt revitalized and energetic, her mind clear and at the top of her form. She made her way to the right of the battlefield where she was placed and prepared to cast.

The tide of spiders appeared immediately after like a squirming carpet. Very few were hybrids this time. Sadly it didn't mean that their numbers were depleted, only that they were drowned in a mass of quickly growing spiderlings. The tide crawled with a low hiss. The city was ready for them.

“Loose!”

Battle-hardened archers let out volleys of arrows now freshly made with wood blessed by Sardanal and steel blessed by Neriad. They picked off monster after monster without pause, not sparing their reserves now that they'd been replenished. Mages let out streams of fire and other spells to rain on the attackers. The field in front of the city became a slaughterhouse. Viv didn't wait. She rushed to the right side where the militia and original inhabitants of the island defended the least vulnerable section of the wall. Viziman mages torched the ground near the center, while Sidjin held the left and the city's only path to the sea. Blender spells already shredded waves of attackers but Viv had something special planned.

She stood in the center of the circle she'd drawn at the center of a tower. It was something special she'd come up with Sidjin's help. The inspiration came from what she'd seen other witches do, particularly the one that had used bones a long time ago. If witches could play with the laws of physics, surely she could as well, she'd asked herself.

Sadly no.

But her attempt at creating a stable annihilation ball had born strange fruit. The sigil of multitude joined the sigil for endurance and stability in an unholy reunion. The spell array turned black and energy sizzled along its lines. Around her, the gambeson-wearing militias cast fearful glances towards the potent construct while a small team of elite templars

watched her back for any surprises. She allowed her elemental nature to take over with confidence. Black mana flooded her conduit. There was so much of it now, an incomparable amount compared to the beginning. The spell array hummed while she pushed more and more power in it, enough to blow up a palace. Enough to kill ten fields for a decade. The spell crackled as the first spiders reached the walls and the militiamen and women pushed them back with rudimentary polearms. The screech of salivating creatures joined the cries of the wounded. Those were people fighting for their homes and they had seen hell and crawled out the other way. Viv wouldn't let them down. With one last sigh, she allowed the spell to trigger. Colorless mana joined the construct to complete the delivery. A black pillar surged towards the sky. It absorbed the light where it went and for an instant, the battlefield looked in her direction.

“Storm of Zamhareer.”

A tiny portal appeared in the air and from there, a flow of dark particles blew like snow pushed by a blizzard. The motes were small, barely larger than an actual flake, but they were innumerable. They spread across the darkening sky like fragments of the void until they covered Viv's entire section of the wall and then some up to the destroyed forest at the base of the slope. It suddenly became even colder, and the breaths of the soldiers on the walls formed little puffs of condensation. The abyssal snowstorm drank the light as it fell very, very slowly, motes shifting under an unseen wind.

At first concerned, the spiders and hybrids soon resumed their assault. Viv could only assume they did not perceive the thick layer of black mana sustaining the spell or they would have run for their lives. She returned to the fray, clearing the walls as fast as she could and helping where the militia was hard-pressed by surging spiders. The first dead and wounded were carried down, the spiders frenzied to a murderous mania. It was all Viv could do to carve great swaths in their ranks before the press of their bodies alone would push the humans aside.

And then, the first flakes reached the field. A hesitant spider lifted an arm to collect one, perhaps sensing the mana in it. Its barbed leg extended and with a very light pop, it disappeared.

A piece of claw fell while ichor bled from the stump. The spider shrieked, alerting its allies. The flakes fell slowly, slowly, but the field was vast and it was entirely covered. Viv wasn't sure even Solar would have escaped at this point. The flakes might be slow.

They were also everywhere.

Pop. Pop. Popopopo—

The battlefield in front of Viv turned into a sea of exposed flesh and tiny explosions. The creatures crawled over each other, some tried to hide, some used the corpses of their brethren as shields. It didn't matter. There were too many flakes, they moved too erratically and they were just that destructive. In a couple of seconds, their section of the wall went from contested to completely in human hands. She stole a glance towards Sidjin's section

where a moving twister of a spell was corralling spiders into a mass of archers. The center was a sea of flames.

They were holding for now. Even as the more dangerous flesh walkers and hybrids trickled on the battlefields, the templars and allied mages called together great constructs, pouring everything they had into the struggle. Columns of purifying light engulfed the regenerating flesh and turned it to charred glass. Sidjin's precise blows took out sniper spiders as they showed up or after they spat a single dart. Viv herself ravaged the field from side to side with large 'nuée' spells so that devouring clouds cleansed the field of the living and the dead. The forces of the dark ones died again and again, breaking on the city's unyielding defenses. For a while, green and gold dominated the darkness and stood defiantly against the wave but this time, it was not a champion they were facing.

First, the trees parted before a titan of poorly formed flesh. Hungering mouths covered its form and where it walked, screeching spiders, hybrids, and even the odd archer were pulled as if by a strong current. The gnashing orifices crushed bones and gulped whole gobbets from still screaming carcasses. Arrows rained and spells flew but the flesh was unyielding. Every wound disappeared in seconds. Even fire fizzled on its bubbling meat and the scars that covered it could no longer be lit. Sidjin unleashed a vast construct of brown mana to open the ground beneath it and it seemed to work, until the colossus leisurely pulled itself out by melting and reforming its body.

Then she came.

Perhaps it was because the battle was so intense or perhaps the black mana surrounding her was simply too strong, but even Viv failed to see Octas before her titanic form entered the field. She was now a spider, not a hybrid or a chimera but a spider of unknown species, barbed and sharp and wicked with eight malicious eyes reflecting the fire the defenders were attempting to use. When the first massive leg fell with a thump like a crashing tree, the entire battle stopped.

A presence filled the island. Viv didn't know how else to qualify it. Her soul sense represented it as being inside of the goddess' influence. Only the support of two other gods still let the failing defenders fight but even then the divine mana supporting them flickered. The titanic avatar chuckled and it was a guttural sound like a rockfall. It carried no meaning beyond amused contempt. The spider opened its maw. A small dark pearl grew below its dripping fangs. Viv felt the dark mana inside.

Now THAT was annihilation.

"Ok, off the wall. Now. NOW! JUMP!"

"Jump off!" Denerim bellowed and the order spread across the wall.

It was fortunate that stats and experience had turned the defenders into a quickly reacting group. Or, more likely, the slow ones had already died. The militiamen and women hit the ground around Viv as she rushed to the street below with her templar escort. Like a wave,

the defenders retreated to the devastated city, taking position among the ruins. And not a second too soon.

The earth shook. Viv's ears rang from a sound like a semi crossing the valley at the speed of the average of a race car, if the semi was the size of a manor. The wall was obliterated. Even the defense glyphs failed to hold for more than an instant. The laser beam crossed over Viv through a hole in the wall and for an instant she could see what her hyper beam spell ought to be, what a real death ray was like.

In front of the defenders, the wall was now nothing but a pile of rubble and whoever had failed to jump off on time was now dead. The defenders stood frozen. Only the first spiders cresting the ruin woke them up from their shock. There was nothing left to stop them coming in now.

Viv almost reengaged, but her danger sense screamed and she turned, her templar escort jumping in horror when they realized they were no longer alone.

In the broken remains of a barn's door stood a giant in obsidian armor, with pale skin, and eyes of pure shadow. He didn't move. It gave Viv enough time to see the multiple cracks covering his body. A normal statue would have collapsed by now.

He winked.

"Hello, Efestar," Viv politely greeted.

The shattered god gave her a lopsided grin. To her surprise, it looked genuine. A piece of his face cracked and fell off.

"What, no Fefe?"

"Figured I shouldn't tease you in these circumstances."

The avatar and the archwitch faced each other in silence while around them, men and women braced for the renewed assault. Viv remained patient. She didn't need her soul sense to tell her it was a pivotal moment in the history of Nyil.

"I have been talking with Neriad, in the in-between. Enttiku too. She is a great listener. I... I think I am ready."

Viv didn't know what to say. She just took a step forward and placed a comforting hand on Efestar's shoulder. He might be one of the most terrible monsters in the history of the planet but... she had to believe in second chances. She had to believe the world would be better off without following the Talion law. A part of her recognized she was hypocritical as she had done an eye for an eye often enough but... adhering to a principle and always following it were two different things. She, too, had to get a better hold of her emotions. It was ok to admit she could always improve.

Efestar looked at the hand. He didn't move, just sighed.

From outside, a terrible presence made itself known. The being known as Many-Legs had forfeited language so Octas merely communicated in feeling or impressions. They assaulted Viv's mind with the intensity of them. Her guards recoiled. Some fell to their knees.

Honor agreement made.

Destroy.

Make our cause true.

Kill everyone.

The nauseating message came with a chittering, manic fury that raked across Viv's mind. She kept a grip on herself and her hand to Efester. She glanced into the abyss-colored eyes. There was a star in them now, a tiny dot white where his pupils ought to be.

Viv took a step back.

Efestar sighed. It was brief, yet carried a powerful meaning, like a heavy cloak falling from someone's shoulders. Freedom.

"NO," the God of Scorn replied.

No?

NO?

Then.

Die with the weak!

The assault on Viv's mind was almost blinding and she wasn't even the recipient. Octas' hatred ran deep, and her glee manifested in the way the chittering spider jumped. Beyond the walls, she heard human screams.

You were always frail.

Your followers will be meat for mine.

Failure.

Efestar opened his mouth to reply, but the answer died when his chest cracked. The titan stumbled and fell backward with a terrible sound like broken glass. Viv kneeled by his side and grabbed his hand even as he searched for her. He was in terrible pain. Shards of his being fell to dust, revealing fury-like muscles underneath. A moment later, Octas crashed through the city gates.

They didn't offer much resistance. Whatever was still standing erupted in a shower of debris, pelting the beleaguered defenders. She was so massive Viv saw her come even above the walls as she towered over all but the temple here. Her horrific form hurt the eye and where she came, no one stopped her. The humans fled and fell with spiders on their heels. The emerald glint of the walls was extinguished. Night fell.

The avatar's massive head turned to where Viv was kneeling, slowly. A barb jutted from its mouth between squirming chelicera. Viv recognized it as a sniper stinger. It was meant for her. And she would have tried to stop it, but Octas was here, not a weak avatar this time but a true incarnate carrying much of her essence onto Nyil, and no matter how powerful she'd grown and how much she'd achieved, Octas had achieved more. Fate tethered the projectile to her heart in a way she felt inside of her soul.

Octas shrieked in triumph as she spat. A shadow came upon Viv, blocking her view. She heard a thud, and then her mind was hers again.

Denerim collapsed on his side with the stinger in his heart.

Chapter 174: Theomachia.

Viv rushed to Denerim's side, unheeding of Octas lazily striding forward across the devastated wall. Her bodyguards were holding back spiders while far in the distance, islets of resistance remained around Orkan, Sidjin, and a few other elites. The others were running.

She couldn't blame them.

To her surprise, Denerim turned to her when she approached.

He... was still alive?

"Denerim!"

"All... all necessary. Had to have her commit with intent or... she tends to hide."

"You..."

The old inquisitor's voice was calm and his eyes remarkably clear considering the divine weapon lodged in his chest. His breath was measured. It was a little surreal.

"It was only ever going to end one way, Viviane the Outlander. Now, listen, because this is the most important thing I'll ever tell you."

He grabbed her shoulder with remarkable strength. The pressure could be felt even through her thin armor, and the sensation grounded her.

“You plan and prepare a lot and that’s good, but sometimes? Sometimes you gotta have a little faith.”

His eyes glowed golden, not the normal gold of divine casting but something deeper, more intense. Something fundamentally *other*.

“Now, you might want to stand back.”

A shockwave sent her tumbling before she could really react. Her bodyguards lost their footing as well but it was nothing compared to the spiders and other lackeys who were propelled away, smacked contemptuously aside by divine power. The golden aura around Denerim grew more and more intense until she could no longer look at it and far in the distance, Octas hissed. A moment later, the spine in his chest fell to dust.

Then Denerim roared.

It was not an expression of pain as she expected but one of outrage, of anger, and of hope. The roar went on and went past the point even the most dedicated opera singer could sustain. It was primal and visceral and yet very human. The golden aura spread across the city, along the ruined walls and over the desperate defenders. Defenses were reignited, spirits were lifted. Warriors Viv thought dead stood up, their flesh knitting from even the most grievous of wounds, and still Denerim was roaring.

The witch had to step back when Denerim... grew. His battered armor flowed to form preciously engraved scales, his round targe melted into a kite shield. He grew younger as well, graying beard turning a lush gold. Where a man had kneeled, a titan now stood in a sea of power. The intensity of the mana was stronger than in the heart of Harrak. It overflowed and saturated the air with the smell of metal and hot sand. Denerim lifted his sword to the sky. The clouds parted, the night retreated, and a massive bolt landed on the weapon with a crack. When Viv could look again, the colossus was wielding solid sunlight shaped for purification.

Neriad, God of Righteous War, had joined the battle.

The incarnate was the most powerful one Viv had ever met.

“BROTHERS AND SISTERS, HEAR ME.

I, NERIAD, HAVE COME TO HOLD OUR ANCIENT COVENANT

THAT NO WARRIOR OF THE LIGHT SHALL EVER STAND ALONE

AS YOU HAVE FOUGHT FOR IN THE DEFENSE OF THE INNOCENT.

SO TOO SHALL I FIGHT IN YOUR NAMES.

FOLLOW ME, BROTHERS AND SISTERS

WE SHALL MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

ONE BLOW AT A TIME.”

The God of Righteous War’s aura spread across the battlefield until every hero and heroine basked in his golden halo. They screamed with shared fury as their eyes gained a golden glow of their own. Viv watched them reform lines with barely contained energy as Octas took a few steps back. The energy didn’t reach her but it was close.

Neriad took a step in her direction. He was surprisingly graceful and quiet for something that size and covered in metal. He kneeled by the broken form of Efestar’s avatar. The dying god’s abyssal gaze found the light god’s gaze. He smiled, though it was brittle.

“BROTHER,” Neriad said with clear love.

“Glad to... be back.”

“VIVIANE.

I AM COUNTING ON YOU.”

“Got it.”

“AND NOW, FOR SOMETHING I HAVE BEEN CRAVING FOR A VERY, VERY LONG TIME.

OCTAS YOU HAIRY, DOG-FACED BITCH!

I’LL KICK YOUR ASS SO HARD YOU’LL PISS SILK!

HAVE AT THEM FRIENDS

CHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGE!”

The ensuing warcry was completely deafening. The assembled forces of light practically flew over the collapsed wall, jumping great distances at once. Viv had only seen elites move like that before. That aura had to be something strong, wow.

“Alright. No time to lose.”

She reached for her belt and removed the various pieces of a small altar, which she assembled by Efestar’s side. The fallen god was fading quickly. She hoped there would be enough time.

“It was good to see him one last time,” Efestar whispered.

“Fefe, if you think I’m just going to let you quit while you’re ahead, you clearly don’t know me. You got a lot of life to see yet and you also got a lot to answer for. So hold tight.”

“What... do you mean?”

“I keep telling everyone. I don't do tragic last stands.”

The altar was ready. It was a communication altar used by many clergies, especially the one that belonged to Maranor.

“Ahem. Oh, Neriad, hear thy servant's-”

“I AM RIGHT HERE JUST ACTIVATE THE DAMN THING.”

“Oh right.”

It took a lot of mana but the connection was made, and soon she was facing New Harrak's Bishop of Neriad. The man's hooked nose positively shivered with anticipation.

“Your Majesty! All our preparations are complete! For the record, the priests of Sardanal are still a little hesitant.”

“The time has come. Begin the ritual!” Viv said, feeling very much like an evil overlady ordering a war crime.

“As you command!”

Then Viv settled to wait over Efestar's ruined body, hoping she'd made the right decision.

On the plain's before Sinur's Gate, the assembled people of Harrak waited in a festive mass around tents, fires, grills and tables. Almost fifty priests of various churches stood at the center of the gathering, praying and saying hymns. The green of Sardanal, the gold of Neriad, the Black of Enttiku led by that strange man Abenezigel, and even a few rare blue of Maradoc mixed in a harmonious whole. Only Maranor was truly missing, for second chances were not her thing. As the Bishop of Neriad exited the tent, he joined the group with a hasty pace, a smile plastered to his ecstatic face.

“My children! My people! The time has come to change this world forever! Let us pray, everyone, let us pray and bring forth a new age! For the light gods!”

“For the light gods,” the priests answered in unison.

With commendable haste, the ten thousand Harrakans gathered around the colossal statue standing proudly in the middle of the valley, and at the feet of which the priests were now busying themselves. It was a strange statue as tall as twenty men, and it represented a cloaked man wielding two hooked swords. His face was a little too angular to be called handsome and his gaze carried a terrible weight, but it was still him, carefully carved over the past few months to Neriad's specifications. The Righteous God had sent visions to his

sculptors so that they may recreate the face of his friend as it was before he fell. The statue evoked great pain and exhaustion, yet the subject still stood proud against adversity, despite it all.

“Oh, Efestar, the Redeemer, the Justicar, you who returned to the light.

We greet thee and welcome thee home.

Help up those who have fallen and seek solace.

Grant salvation to those the law has scorned.

Guide us to a path of betterment.

Give us the will to go on when all is dark.

Oh, Efestar, the Redeemer, the Justicar.

We grant you thine salvation.

So that you may grant us ours in return.

Come back, Efestar. We beseech you.

Come back and take your place.

We greet thee and call thee home.”

The chant repeated, carried by tens of thousands of voice in Harrak and in other temples across the continent, but it was there, at the foot of the fallen god’s true representation, that mana was at its thickest.

The Bishop of Neriad ignored the tear falling down his cheek. Now this was worship, now this was a good cause. He happily joined his voice to the choir. It was not everyday one could save a god.

His eyes found the statue again, Efestar’s determined face. The giant stone construct gave him hope.

He just prayed Her Majesty Viv would stop calling it ‘El Efestaro Redentor’, whatever that meant.

Efestar turned to dust. At first, Viv panicked and thought she’d been too late, or that she’d fucked up, but the shell of the Dark God of Scorn fell off like a mask. The porcelaine of his perfect face broke like an egg to reveal scarred, rugged skin underneath. The armor cracked and fell off a ratty cloak, a leather chestplate decorated with metal studs. Greaves and

gauntlets gave way to cloth bands wrapped around wiry muscles. Efestar, the man, stood from the ruins of his glorious self like a lost child, blinking away power with brown eyes shining with a dull purple light. Thin and long fingers brushed off the last scraps of scorn away from his new form and he stood up on shaky legs with Viv's help. The strange thing was, he looked so human, lost and all, but Viv's soul sense could not be mistaken. This was a god, with that strange domain around him. A newly remade god, a weakened god, a lost god, but a god nonetheless.

"You're going to be ok there, Fefe?"

"Yes. I... this is so strange, mortal girl. I haven't felt this weak in centuries and yet... I feel so free. So full of potential again."

He reached for the air and two twin hooked blades appeared in his hands. Sunlight slowly faded from around the old weapons, and Viv felt a hint of hot sand and flowers on the wind. Efestar chuckled.

"Heh. He kept them. Of course he would."

"Soooo are you good enough to fight?"

The city was empty now except for those protecting the Last Stand. Beyond the broken wall, the battle raged in a great din.

"Yes. I cannot let that cheerful idiot get all the glory. And... he's alone. Maranor should be standing with him."

"I think... they're kind of having a bit of a tiff?"

"That is good... bad news. That is bad news."

He chuckled.

"I am going to need some time. To adjust. But this battle is about redemption and absolution. I should be able to use my new aspect to its full extent."

"It's important?"

"Yes, very much so, mortal girl. You have seen Octas. This fight is entirely hers, what she stands for and Neriad... it's also absolutely him. You will understand when his aura touches yours. Try not to resist too much. You are already walking your own path, after all."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"There will be time for that later."

Viv quickly crested the remains of the Cradle's walls and into a vision of cataclysm. Night had fallen now but looking forward, she couldn't tell. Dark clouds hung low over the burnt

forests, their dark blue mixing with the rising soot of the battle field. Octas sat on the line like a black monument to savagery. She struck with spells, quick jabs of her razor-sharp legs and spat stingers. Silky tendrils reflected the light while by her side, Gomogog's titan turned flesh to mush with every step. A veritable sea of squirming creatures crawled behind her until the entire ground writhed and slithered. If there was a representation of Ragnarok, that would be it. Well, maybe with more wolves or whatever. The most remarkable thing was... they were not winning.

A thin line of warriors and mages, cloaked in golden and viridian light of such intensity that it was as if the sun had fallen to earth, held back the tide. They sang hymns and crushed creatures twice their sizes with a fury and a fervor they absolutely shouldn't be able to display. Sidjin launched twisters of shards and grinds that tore through the horde in devastating attacks. As she watched, mesmerized, a farmer plunged a fork into a giant's spider cerebellum and the creature's entire head erupted in flames. Wounds closed almost as fast as they were opened, and their weapons reformed with every blow, shining ever brighter. The divine mana covering the battlefield gave her vertigo. Meanwhile, Neriad was a flash of speed holding back two avatars at once.

A part of her regarded Neriad as kind of a himbo. Well-meaning, strong, a good man but not necessarily a genius. Perhaps it was his own admission that he didn't know what a good cause absolutely was, or maybe she was just biased. But looking at him now, she realized she'd made a mistake. Obviously, no one who had followed Emeric to the end could be normal, and Neriad was certainly not the weakest. It was watching Solar fight, if Solar had yet reached the summit of his art. perfect positioning, perfect moves, every strike pushing, deflecting, endangering, every step meaningful, he was a whirlwind of directed violence. His shield was not just an invincible barrier, he also used it to bash and push. By himself, he held two incarnates at bay.

A second after Efestar reached Viv's side, Neriad planted his shield in the ground. A golden barrier surrounded the forces of light who took a step back to catch their breath while the dark squirming ocean rabidly scratched at the divine protection. Neriad appeared right in front of his lost brother with such speed that Viv had to take a step back.

"BROTHER."

"Neriad. I suppose you were right in the end. I am here now, and I'm not leaving."

"I NEVER DARED HOPE THIS DAY WOULD COME."

"I am sorry I won't be of much help. I am weak, so weak. Pathetic, for a god."

He chuckled again though it was bitter and filled with regret.

"YOU ARE NOT PATHETIC.

YOU HAVE WON ONE OF THE HARDEST BATTLES THERE CAN BE.

QUESTIONING YOURSELF AND ACCEPTING YOUR MISTAKES.

BROTHER, YOU ARE NOT PATHETIC AT ALL.

YOU ARE THE MOST MAGNIFICENT SIGHT I EVER BEHELD.”

“I’m sorry to be interrupting your broment of pure bromance but... the big fucking spider?”

Both gods glared and Viv suddenly felt very small indeed, but that didn’t last. Neriad sighed.

“THE PESKY ASCENDER IS RIGHT.

THERE IS MUCH TO BE DONE AFORE THE SUN RISES.

ARE YOU READY?”

“I may be weak but I believe the world has forgotten what we could do together. Let’s remind everyone here... who brought the old gods to their knees.”

Neriad grinned. For the first time, Viv saw a hint of bloodlust there and she remembered that perhaps the God of Righteous War admitted he had limits because maybe, just maybe, he’d reached them before.

“JOIN US, ASCENDER.”

Viv’s vision turned gold, or rather, the night was banished and there was only light and darkness. Her soul sense shivered from an overload of sensation she was paradoxically more vulnerable to than the average swordsman. Thankfully, Neriad’s touch was light enough and she managed to accept the invasion. Energy poured through her veins like lava. She gasped from the absurd pressure.

There was a pressing request, as Efestar had warned. She allowed Neriad’s faith to take over her. A part of her wanted to resist it because it was altered by Neriad’s own mind, his belief. She would be embraced in his existence rather than living her own. It was inherently abhorrent, and yet a part of her wanted to know, to experience what it was to have faith. She didn’t see Neriad as a supreme existence. She didn’t really want to, but perhaps, for the duration of a single battle, it would be fine.

She breathed out and let it take her, and it was magnificent.

White light illuminating the darkness.

Power like lava coursing through her vein and her conduits. She breathed in the heat and the anger, deeply, until her lungs were full. Relief washed over her spine, her mind, cleansing all fear and all doubts. No thoughts of the future remained, or of the past for that matter. There was no need to plan. There was no need to reconsider either. Only two things existed on this evanescent plane of existence.

Us, the good guys.

Them, the assholes.

The world was perfect clarity and the belief that she was right, absolutely right, overloaded everything else. It was true. It was so true. Octas was unambiguously an asshole. She'd sieged that village, killed its people. She had tried to make Viv fail during her transition to elemental archmage. She was now trying to sink an entire island. Octas needed to have her ass kicked to oblivion and Viv was going to do the kicking. This blind faith felt better than good. It felt transcendental.

Tonight, Viv was righteous.

She would follow the incarnated God into glorious battle and triumph against the forces of evil.

It could be no other way.

She was so transported that the notifications barely registered.

You are now under Neriad's Mantle. The God of Righteous War's mantle is at full power.

Due to your own soul, the effect will be limited.

You are invested with an aura of righteous anger. Your stats have been temporarily improved

- Power +12
- Finesse +6
- Endurance +7
- Focus +3
- Acuity +3
- Willpower +10

You have acquired the following temporary skills:

- Divine weapon mastery.
- Divine battlefield awareness
- War God reflexes
- Dauntless.

Sardanal's aura of renewal will extend the effects to the end of the battle with no ill effects.

Viv's awareness expanded to include the entire battle line. Orkan took the center in a hurricane of blades, fighting dangerously close to the avatars. Other champions anchored the line while mages thinned the horde with every spell, their mana rushing back in thanks to Sardanal's blessing. Sidjin was the heaviest hitter. Every last spell he cast shredded through dozens upon dozens of spiders in a ceaseless wave of colorless grinders, but it was at the center of the formation that the true battle was happening. Facing them, Octas remained a

monolith of savage rage while the lesser form of Gomogog endured monstrous punishment, but now she could see why Neriad and Efestar would have been so close. They complemented each other perfectly.

Neriad was the showy knight in shining armor as well as a peerless duelist. His presence could not be ignored as he controlled the flow of battle with precise strikes. Meanwhile, Efestar appeared and vanished in his wake with every opening. The Redeemer God struck fast and where the others didn't expect him to devastating effect before vanishing again under the cover of his brother's assault. Neriad was the torrent and Efestar was the sharp rock. They worked together so seamlessly, they might have been two bodies under one mind.

Viv's mind settled in its new state and she knew what she had to do.

There was a horde; it was evil.

She was the dedicated horde solver.

[Aspect of the Destroyer]

Her wings anchored Viv over the line, slightly to the side. Octas noticed her and made to attack but Neriad instantly carved a leg up for it, making full use of the opening. Octas simply didn't have the time to do anything.

[Sequence: Triple Storm of Zamhareer]

Even to her, the spell should have been difficult to cast on the fly. She had to hold the array with her mind instead of writing it on the ground, and she didn't have matching metal symbols ready yet, but none of this mattered. She was righteous. Her cause was just. Divine weapon mastery stretched to help her focus, discipline helping her maintain the array. There was no need for her to doubt or think about anything distracting like tactical positioning or cover or maybe being skewered by a divine arachnid stinger. None of it registered. She had Sidjin already laying defensive arrays around her while another champion pushed the line forward. A tiny part of her registered this fact before no longer paying attention at all. There could be only one outcome to this moment, and it was the one Neriad was showing her. Gold-colored mana flooded her being as it lit the array with tainted gold. The spell triggered once, twice, thrice and the sky under the cloud turned into a beautiful cloud of golden motes expanding all over the battlefield. The delicate embers floated down with ineluctable slowness.

Octas recognized the danger too late. The hex was out; the die was cast, and not even Neriad could stop it now. The spider goddess fought harder to push the light gods back but doing so, exposed her flanks before Gomogog could cover them. Neriad was simply stronger, and with Efestar by his side, the two were unstoppable. Out of options, the Spider Queen lifted her bulbous rear end and sprayed silk up in a large cloud. Viv tsked. That would intercept her spell.

“SKREEEE!”

A distant shape crossed the skies in a dash of white, spraying fire on the ascending shield and burning it in the air before it could manifest. Octas' hiss of frustration made Viv's ears ring and for a moment, she feared for Arthur, but Octas could not afford to go after the dragoness and live. Her flanks already bled thick ichor.

"Arthur!" Viv bellowed.

Am not staying.

Weird human magic!

I am already very righteous!

I don't even eat people!

"Thank you anyway!"

With Octas' last effort defeated, the rain of golden motes fell on her followers.

The battlefield in front of the human line erupted in a colorful display of popping balls. The sound was curiously subdued considering the devastating effect it had on the skittering mass. For a moment, the effect was blinding and the screeches, deafening. Octas spat silk again to protect herself while Gomogog merely absorbed spiders to form a protective layer of bone that thwarted the spell but it didn't matter. The assault continued on Neriad's lines for a few moments and then, it stopped.

The horde had perished to the last flesh eater.

Viv followed her borrowed instincts. Followers formed a half circle around the fighting avatars rather than engaging. Shields and polearms gathered in a staunch line but it was clear they were outclassed.

Viv wasn't though.

[Aspect of the Destroyer]

[Sequence: Hyperbeam, Astra, Astra.]

She almost flinched when a stinger whizzed her way but Neriad intercepted it with his shield. Sidjin struck next with a sharp and barely visible spike. The gods readjusted their tactics on the fly and Viv got the information straight in her mind. They were a whole, united in purpose. It was absolutely glorious fighting side by side with those monsters, like singing next to a star or playing an instrument along with a soloist. She cast golden spells when her instincts pushed her to aim at empty spots and by the time the spell triggered, Gomogog's avatar had been thrown there. The dark gods fought tooth and claw against the inevitable for several minutes with all their tricks and dark powers but somehow, the most horrible were pushed away from the humans as they were within the mantles of the god. Little by little,

they were chipped away. Octas was the first to crumble when Efestar shattered the second leg on one side. Viv was ready for it.

“Guillotine.”

The cage of void blades closed on Octas’ flank and carved deep gashes through the thick shell. It was too much pain for Octas. Her scream of pain hit Viv like a solid wall. They were pushed back.

Neriad was not. While Efestar slashed at Gomogog’s arm, the righteous god lifted his blinding blade above him.

[Execution]

The divine blow carved the dark goddess’ head from top to bottom in one strike. Her body collapsed with a sound like broken glass that set Viv’s teeth on edge. Even outside of her mantle, even as her foe, it was as deeply disturbing as nails on a blackboard.

The ensuing scream sent shivers down her spine. The phantom pain of her soul wound washed through her mind.

Gomogog’s avatar lasted only a little longer. He abandoned the vessel rather than fight to the bitter end. As the abomination’s body turned to sludge, both humans and avatars took a few steps back, and waited.

It was done. It was over. Nothing moved anymore.

A cold wind swept over the silent battlefield as the light of Neriad faded and the warriors clumped together in weary bands, exhausted, traumatized, but alive and victorious. Gold radiance blinked out but a cool verdant one replaced it, calmer. A light of healing and everyday life. It washed over wounds and then over the carpet of corpses, the burnt trees and the desolate fields. The clouds parted to show the twin moons in all their glories. The weather was cold here in the heart of winter but it also carried the crisp scent of the sea.

The first dark green sprout popped up almost between Viv’s feet on a land she’d recently blighted. It was soon followed by a wave of green, soon joined by the red and blue of small winter flowers. Sardanal regained control over the island and the soil breathed for the first time in months. The trees did not bloom again, but offshoots popped from the stumps while deeply buried acorns grew new meadows around spots of wild flowers. Crops grew in the fields, and grass covered the burnt remains of many houses. Cries of wonder erupted from behind when the children left the Last Stand, joined by the remaining civilians and support people. All of the island’s survivors stood on the slope of the Cradle to watch the island come to life. The scars of the war would take a long time to heal but they would get that chance, and that was all the light side could have hoped to achieve.

Sidjin placed a hand over Viv’s shoulder to draw her into a hug. Arthur landed nearby with a grumble about human gods and their weird lack of love for wealth. Meanwhile, Nous thought it was a good timing to bombard her with notifications.

Due to your victory today, your soul has been permanently marked. You have gained the following title:

Always a Chance: You do increased damage to powerful entities, especially those that are stronger than you. They will never be safe.

A light that never dims: the longer a fight lasts, the more powerful you grow.

Your draconic intimidation skill has been enhanced to reflect this new reality.

You have gained a new title: True Ascender.

You are one of two human True Ascenders alive.

That... had implications. She could guess where this was going and she was a bit hesitant. At least, the titles meant she would be able to protect Harrak better against unexpected threats.

Draconic Intimidation: Expert 9

Mana Mastery, Intermediate 8

Focus +1 (46)

All good and she would have to unpack some of these changes with Solfis. In the meanwhile, Efestar's avatar stepped into the shadow of a tree and disappeared. Neriad's own avatar had unfinished business.

The God of Righteous War walked towards Orkan. The light faded from his shape until he returned to more human dimensions. Viv could feel with her soul that the god was staying but also withdrawing most of his essence and from behind his overwhelming mantle, Denerim appeared again. Like Viv, the others stood at a respectful distance. Everyone knew this was a personal moment.

"This is goodbye," Denerim said.

"I'm not ready," Orkan forced out. "It's not fair."

"We're never really ready to let go of people we love, I think."

"Damn. Still with the lessons."

“I love you too, my apprentice. I already said my goodbyes to my wife, and now I say them to you. You have made me very proud. I am amazed by how much you’ve grown while we journeyed together. I leave the place in your capable hands now.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll keep making you proud. You can count on me.”

“I know.”

The eyes flashed gold and the voice belonged to a god now.

“THIS IS AS LONG AS I CAN STAY.

THE TASK OF REBUILDING IS YOURS.

REMEMBER THIS DAY WHEN WE FOUGHT SIDE BY SIDE.

AS WILL I.

BUT REMEMBER TO LIVE AS WELL.

FOR THAT IS WHY WE FIGHT TO BEGIN WITH.

FAREWELL MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS.”

The god dissipated, and so did Denerim. All that was left behind was his armor. Not even dust remained.

Orkan fell to his knees and cried.

Neriad stood at the center of the sand arena, where a hundred weapons were resting. He walked to a corner and caressed Denerim’s sword. He sighed.

“It never ends. Thank you, Denerim.”

The God of Righteous War ceremoniously laid the sword to rest. One more blade stuck into the ground. One more brave joining the ranks of those who’d died fighting for a better tomorrow. There would be more in the future, and he would be there for them.

Neriad unsheathed his own blade to practice his form. Perfection was a fleeting thing. Effort wasn’t. He owed them that much. Once he was done, he felt more centered, though a little tired.

“Heard an eight-legged hag has been sent limping into the in-between,” a voice said from the side.

“We won’t hear from her for a long long time. Welcome, Maradoc. Thanks for the help with Efestar. I think he’ll be ok.”

“Yes, speaking of.”

A cowed figure stepped from behind the blue robed shape of the God of Secrets. Twin hooked blades hung by his side.

“Drinks?” Efestar suggested.

“Absolutely.”

The war didn’t finish with the battle. The survivors of Sardanal’s Cradle were never meant to become warriors, so Viv and the others made sure to help with the grieving and rebuilding. Around half of the population was left to mourn the other. All of the houses needed to be rebuilt. During the time it took for ships to return, everyone worked tirelessly to help them cope with the end of their long nightmare. They’d held for so long with nothing but grim fatalism. Now that it was no longer needed, they fell apart. Viv found herself listening to a lot of sad tales that made her hate Octas even more. For others like Sidjin or Orkan, it was nothing new.

Emeric’s Girl picked her up after another three weeks. She made sure to pack the Beast’s head for Solfis. The trip led them into a storm but thanks to Sidjin, Emeric’s Girl did well. The new captain happened to be Sil’s father and though there was certainly a history there, the man was closed off and taciturn, and Viv never managed to get more than a few words out of him. They made landfall in Zazas during the heart of winter before teleporting back to Harrak in just a couple of days. Viv didn’t enjoy Arthur’s incredible advantage of having wings to fly away from every annoying social situation. She was mercilessly grilled by everyone on how the battle went and what had transpired. As for Harrak, everything was going well including a burgeoning clergy of Efestar. Solfis was particularly eager for their next project as he led her on the training field for Harrak’s newest corps.

//I have recruited them from your worshippers.

//The one you freed from the Nemeti.

“I think I was abundantly clear. No worshippers!”

//Pardon me, I misspoke.

“Riiiiight.”

//I meant to say, devoted fanatics to the cause of Harrak.

The new group trained with enthusiasm. They favored heavy armor but no shields.

“Linebreakers?”

//Yes.

//But that is a secondary concern.

//The season permitting you to be away without much damage, I propose that we carry on with our next project.

“Back to Harrak, then?”

//Yes.

//Where it all began.

Chapter 175: Back to Harrak.

North did the Harrakan Empress travel, day after day, under a sunless sky. Boiling clouds extended above while the dead earth trailed under her as she flew towards the decrepit heart of a dead nation. By night, she opened portals to sweet-smelling Sinur with its sonorous fountains and the hubbub of its citizens, to clean sheets and companions but by day there was nothing distracting her from the soulless husk of the land. Not even combat broke the monotony of the journey, because lesser undead perceived her as a necrarch, and even the most aggressive of turned beasts left her well enough alone. There was nothing but gray hills as far as she could see. The air had this dry, slightly spicy quality she'd come to associate with black mana saturation.

Her body drank deep of the ambient power and strength flooded her conduits no matter how much she poured into the harness. Harmless by now. Since she was no longer actively dying, the lack of fear carried her sight far. She finally noticed the dulled edges of the earth and the distant whorls of mana dancing up from the tainted place like heat from a desert. This lethal breath and the shuffling gaits of dead things were the only traces of movements for leagues. A conundrum rose on the first day. She was set out to destroy a place that was designed to empower her. Was there a paradox here? No, there wasn't. Black mana had always been a means to an end. Black mana was change, even if it was also entropy, for change never came without a cost. It was a tool in her arsenal, not an end in itself. In truth, the deadlands were the anathema to what she saw as the essence of black mana. It was unmoving while the black hungered. It conserved when the black was change. It was constant gloom while black mana was the darkness to an ephemeral light. She wasn't fighting her own self-interest. She was liberating the place.

That problem solved, the Harrakan Empress was left mulling dark thoughts.

“Why,” she finally asked one night, “Why a fucking blue honey drug cartel?”

//I am as baffled as you are, Your Majesty.

Viv looked up from her half-chewed pastry to dispense a condescending glare to the golem.

“This was a rhetorical question. I’m just annoyed.”

//Are you implying that you know the perpetrator of this audacious conspiracy?

“Of course I do.”

//Yet you have neither arrested nor killed them?

“And deprive myself of my chief weapon developer?”

The golem didn’t even mark a pause.

//Are you implying that Lak-Tak created the drug cartel?

“None other.”

The golem contemplated her words for only a few moments.

//My algorithm cannot make sense of this situation.

“That is because you have preset parameters for yries and Lak-Tak is, according to their standards, a raging psychopath.”

//An anomaly.

//This makes sense.

“And he did it because he is experimenting with ways to destroy mankind in an innovative manner and a psychedelics dependency epidemics lands firmly in the ‘maximum dickery’ category he loves so much. Come on. He came up with the fire wasp throwers.”

//I understand now.

“I told him to cut that shit or else. I’m sure we can wean those poor bastards off the stuff with enough time and counseling.”

//Perhaps the blue honey could be exported to Baran.

“Solfis. No.”

//Imagine the tariffs.

“You will not opium war our neighbors when we’ve just established ourselves as respectable partners.”

//You are no fun.

The low hills gave way to flat ground, then high valleys criss-crossed by buried paths, the pitted stones emerging here and there from the dust like cracked tibias. Sometimes, she came across large cities crawling with the dead, or outposts, or forts. Black trunks on flat tops spoke of long-dead forest, the last needles and roots turned to ash after centuries of assaults. Black mana sung in her being, rushing in her core through her conduits to feed and expand them. It hurt in a good way. Like a good scrub. Venting mana in great bursts only stopped the oncoming rush for a few seconds, then she was full again. When she did, if only for the few seconds of relief it afforded, bats and birds fled the skies and the shadow dragon stretching its wings. Maybe the remnants of some self-preservation instinct. It mattered little. She appreciated once more how incredibly unlikely her survival had been. Only the fact her conduits had been forming meant the mana could affect her less the first time she'd crossed those lands. The afforded period of grace meant she'd only suffered instead of sharing the fate she'd imposed on Sonagi, back in Helock's arena.

She shared those thoughts upon her return.

"I think we've already determined that you were lucky. I would also like to point out that you're incredibly unlucky as well. Most outlanders are not dropped at the center of the world's worst magical catastrophe," Sidjin, her paramour, said at dinner.

He pushed fresh slices of fruit on her platter. He had peeled them himself without magic in a rare public display of concern, carefully. Pungent pith littered the table. She loved watching his thin fingers work.

"More importantly, could you tell your worshippers to stop erecting war shrines near your obelisks. The priests are complaining."

"Again? I told them to stop it at least fifteen damn times!"

"They claim it is merely a mark of pride as the newly formed Ironborn. If the Knights of the Blue Rose can have their garden, surely they can have stone carvings. There are no inscriptions."

"So what, stealth religion? What do you want me to do? I already outlawed the worship and told them to stop it. Do I need to persecute them?"

"Well. No, I suppose this is untenable."

The Empress of Harrak signaled for the Bishop of Neriad to join her. A few words of smalltalk to express respect after summoning him in such a cavalier fashion, and she asked for a bit more proselytism on his part. Viviane was not a god. Neriad was a god. Surely, the burden of conviction lay with the priests themselves? The bishop asked if he was given free rein to preach and interfere with the grueling training Solfis had planned. The Empress agreed. Ears had no lids, so nothing prevented the priest from assaulting the poor folks' ears just as Solfis assaulted their endurance. The problem was now solved in the most political way possible: by offloading the solution to the one who'd complained to begin with. Thus

satisfied, the Black Witch of Harrak had some more Kava with a cloud of milk while she contemplated her next day.

//It should still be here.

Viv looked at the massive gate of the Green Vale City Bank, currently sealed tight. An encouraging sight.

“Well, we do need the money.”

//I sense a but.

“It’s just not as entertaining when there are no guards, if you know what I mean.”

//Oh, I do.

//And I have good news.

“Oh?”

//Observe.

Solfis grabbed the titanic gate and pulled. A loud clang followed by a deep screech expressed the agony of the gate’s hinges, woken from their torpor after centuries of unuse. The sound echoed painfully in the city, still crawling with undead. To the side, a gut spiller shuffled.

The gaping maw of the dead bank burped out an effluvium of concentrated black mana, showing the void inside.

Or it would look like that, but Viv could feel the insides perfectly well.

“Oh you gotta be kidding me. YOINK!”

Her spell tore through the air, latching on and killing the first of the creatures charging her. The undead might think her one of their own but nascent necrarchs tended to be territorial, and she was clearly an intruder.

“SOLFIS!”

//I aim to entertain.

//This is good practice for you.

//Watch out for the left flank, Your Majesty.

That night, Her Imperial Grace the High Lady She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Collects-Much attended dinner in the banquet hall, which was not her habit. The dragoness much preferred

to hunt her food in the wilderness after a long day of dealing with numbers. Nevertheless, the cooks and attendants knew what to do. A large couch was put forward upon which she could rest her large serpentine form. A brazier was brought forward, and the finest meats laid upon it, slathered in sweet sauce. Attendants provided a vat of fresh water perfumed with citrus rinds which she delicately picked between rending claws. The Empress watched the dragoness from her seat at the high table as she sipped on sweet wine, one eyebrow raised in interrogation. The dragoness, however, waited until the guests were more comfortable before submitting her request. Or at least, as comfortable as one could be in the presence of a young dragon. Even on her four feet, she could look down upon the average man.

Unsurprisingly, no petition was whispered in the empress' ear. Even the newly arrived ambassador from Zazas kept his peace until dessert.

I had my first default on a loan, today.

The thought carried across the banquet hall like an intrusive thought, evoking the soft touch of parchment, the susurrus of moving pens, and bubbling anger.

It was within statistical expectations.

The entire room took a deep breath.

The circumstances of the default displease me, however.

Spoons stopped midair.

Among other things, the farmers were pressured into buying seeds significantly above the market price.

One of the merchants at the table quickly excused himself. The entire room watched him leave, some with fiery interest, others wondering why someone would expose themselves so freely.

The dragon picked a skewer. Sharp fangs pulled the pieces of meat with delicate precision. They shone strangely in the light of nearby magical lanterns.

I wonder, mother, how receptive you would be to consumer protection laws.

Monopolies should not be allowed to thrive.

The empress leaned forward in her seat. She didn't look very receptive at the moment.

"Curious, because I was under the impression that foreign banks were encouraged not to expand here. Would that not be, as you say, allowing a monopoly to thrive?"

Nonsense, mother.

The Manipeleso Bank and Exchange keeps a fair market share.

And besides, why would I harm the interests of New Harrak?

Harrak is yours, and what is yours can be mine, if I make a good case for it.

The dragon flicked her tail, then her malevolent red eyes slowly blinked in a thoroughly disingenuous attempt at seeming innocent. The empress was not fooled, though she had to admit the dragon made a good case. Viv herself having no money issue she couldn't solve by robbing the right tomb, she had little interest in promoting 'captains of industry' that would spend more time consolidating a powerbase than allowing her nation to flourish.

"I consent, but Abe will be in charge of this project. You are... too busy."

'And biased' went unsaid.

Thank you so much, mother.

The dragon eyed the entrance which had been freshly vacated by a running seed merchant. She stood up to her full height, head extended far above even the tallest of men. Her wings slapped open with a sharp crack. The scent of ash spread throughout the banquet hall over the scents of the meal.

And with this, I bid you goodnight.

I feel the sudden need to stretch my claws.

"No murder."

Of course not.

And indeed, no one died that night, or the next, but someone may have soiled their breeches.

It took over three weeks from the start to finally reach her destination. Black mana concentration increased until the heavy spice of its presence stayed on her tongue, even when she returned to civilization. The ground beneath her was dark and foreboding, and the undead here were mighty things that would give most human nations pause. Sometimes, she came across idle packs of massive beasts lounging aimlessly in the dust, between bleak hills and the calcified remains of ancient structures. She soon recognized the path she'd followed south to escape the capital city.

The Empress landed at the gate of a guard house. There was still the imprint of her hand on the dust, near the handle. She placed her gloved fingers over it.

It almost fit.

She remembered it like it was yesterday. She had found water and dry food here. The sled carrying Solfis had slid down the slope easily, and she'd been in a good mood.

So much had happened since then.

She flew more slowly then. The path led up, to the plain in front of the imposing husk of the capital.

In their hubris, the ancient rulers of the empire used brown magic to flatten the soil around the city, to show there was nothing they could not tame. Even today with the monolith gutted, the dead city stood at the center of its domain with an intimidating majesty, and the visitors must have been reminded that power didn't come to those who were not willing to seize it. Now the entire heart of the defunct metropolis was a large black gash crawling with necrarchs, its entrails spilled over kilometers upon kilometers of ravaged earth carved by rocks the size of skyscrapers. The epicenter of an explosion that had killed a third of a continent. And Viv was going there voluntarily, and the worst thing was, she felt absolutely great. Every breath was a blessing of power feeding her, making the mana sing in her veins. Their curse was her blessing.

She spent a few minutes observing the landscape before resuming her task.

"Right. It's time."

Viv set her second to last portal. A series of short travels later and she'd activated an entire line carrying her all the way to Sinur's Gate and the strangely verdant and alive world that existed there. A bone construct was waiting by the aperture when she arrived.

They didn't speak until they were back in front of the heart of the Old Empire.

//It has been almost four years.

//A short time, yet quite eventful.

"Felt like much longer to me."

//Landscape recognition indicates we passed through here.

//On the fourth day after your arrival.

//This is where it all began.

"Should we go then?"

//Yes.

//It is time for me to reclaim Irlefen's legacy.

//Be whole.

//And...

"Be a father?"

//Yes.

//This project has more unknowns than I anticipated.

“I would be nervous as well.”

//I do not have the nervous system required to be nervous.

“Sure sure.”

The infamous duo retraced their steps through the corpse of a great nation. Like before, they avoided buried necrarchs on the way, leaving the gutted front of the city to their right as they walked along the outer wall. Unlike last time, Viv was feeling fine and Solfis moved under his own locomotion. Neither spoke during the journey. Perhaps it was the nerves, or simply it was a time for reminiscence. Their silence was a companionable thing brought by years of working and fighting side by side. Viv needed no reassurance, and Solfis was designed without a small talk module anyway. They strode across the deserted highway along the lines their sled had sliced through the dust, now that necrarchs made flight hazardous. They passed under the extended swords of the first Imperial couple and faced the intact side of the titanic ziggurat, cloying black mana clinging to its surface visible as whorls on an already dark background. Viv retraced her steps to the fading isolation pillar where she had slept on her first night. There, she renewed the fading enchantments, and inspected the teleportation circle drawn by Celerin Crest, servant to the legendary outlander and adventurer Oleander. Maybe they would meet some day.

It was incomprehensible to her. A completely different approach to teleportation than what Sidjin had come up with, which shouldn't have surprised her since this was a skill rather than a true spell. Nevertheless, she committed it to memory. Rather than linking two places, it seemed to... propel people through something. It wouldn't need an arrival anchor, and the range was amazing so it was a powerful tool, but each activation would be long and costly while opening and stabilizing a portal was within the reach of normal mages. An interesting note.

Viv slept there that night though she also set up a final return portal just in case. By now, it would still take over an hour to activate and go through every gate leading to the living lands. The total darkness of the Harrakan night sky was no longer so complete and intimidating now, and so she could see the handful of misshapen necrarchs lumbering over distant roofs. They still looked like deadly creatures, but compared to the one they'd faced in the lone mountain, they were feral, unthinking things. Lucky her.

She left before dawn. It was a matter of less than an hour to find the golem hangar this time, between increased physical stats and a perfect memory. She walked down the slope into the underground complex with trepidation. They stopped at the edge of it like at the edge of a sanctum.

Solfis' true frame was here in all its exquisite horror. As tall as three men, armored, armed, deadly, its left hand ending in claws, the right one as delicate as that of a pianist, all the

available surface painstakingly engraved with runes and redundant circuitry. Solfis' face was that of an uncaring, handsome man, a silvery mask hosting two dead orbs for there was no light there. Yet. It was still mostly intact barring a few battle scruffs.

Once again, Viv was reminded of her first time coming across a fighter jet. Even a village simpleton who had never seen a weapon in their life would know in an instant that this was a tool of death, designed from the ground up as such. It radiated menace.

It was magnificent.

"I didn't appreciate how much effort Irlefen put into making every piece of you as perfect as possible. Engraving all of this must have taken... years."

//It took years.

//Decades, even, before every system was optimized to his satisfaction.

//Irlefen was a very thorough man.

"Wish I could have met him."

//So do I.

//Now, for the repairs.

//Let us begin with the left wrist ligament.

It took the better part of the morning for them to bring the old frame back to full functionality. It didn't help that Solfis was custom made, and replacement parts had to be altered. Nevertheless, Solfis possessed a machine-like precision and Viv simply couldn't fail under his guidance. He directed her when he could not do something himself, either due to a lack of mana or because of his hard-coded directives. Eventually, the charging array finished refilling the almost-empty core thanks to Harrak's tremendous ambient mana and Viv's own contribution. Diagnostics crystals lit up and circuits hummed. Everything was ready.

//Finally.

//It has been so long.

"Switch off, transport?"

//Yes.

//I am eager.

The familiar bone construct unfolded for what might be the last time. The eyes, always shining with a baleful glare, returned to their state as empty sockets in the skull of a large gut spiller. Viv grabbed the core by the handles and heaved since Telekinesis wouldn't work on a piece of metal designed to devour mana. It came easily, or at least much more easily than the first time she'd made the attempt. She carefully lifted the core into the massive frame's receptacle. It closed by itself now that power was no longer an issue.

Light coursed along the many grooves dug into the armor. Clanks and beeps shook the frame. It sagged forward, then the knee articulations picked up and it bounced a little. Viv

stepped back to watch the ancient war machine slowly come to life feeling like a prouder Doctor Frankenstein. It was so damn large and so damn extra, with enchantments and systems up to the gills. A work of art, a labor of love, and a tool of destruction. The massive hands twitched. The frame hummed, a sound like a reactor and also like a purr.

The eyes lit up.

//INITIALIZING.

//HX-013 EXPERIMENTAL STRIKE GOLEM, DESIGNATION: SOLFIS, ACTIVATED.

//ORIGINAL FRAME DETECTED

//CORE RESERVES: 97%.

//START-UP SEQUENCE INITIATED.

There was a pause, then more lights flashed along the frame. The yellow eyes were larger and colder, more mineral. The voice wasn't as she remembered. Bone Solfis had an organic snarl that made the frame intimidating in a morbid, savage way. Silverite Solfis was metal and death. Much lower-pitched too. Flat. The voice of the science fiction antagonist's warship,

//DIAGNOSTICS IN PROGRESS.

//LOCOMOTION ONLINE.

//FULL SENSOR SUITE ONLINE.

//OFFENSIVE SUITE ACTIVE.

//ADVANCED SILVERITE ARMOR SYSTEMS ONLINE.

//ADVANCED COMBAT INTELLIGENCE ONLINE.

//FULL PROCESSING POWER AVAILABLE.

//ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.

//FRAME ACTIVATED.

//I... AM ME, AGAIN.

"Welcome back."

Solfis flexed his hands.

//My frame.

**//You have no idea what I can accomplish with this.
//I was meant for this and it was created for me.
//We will have to... test it.
//Make sure it is in good shape.
//I suggest the necrarch outside.
//But later.
//First, I will do what I set out to do.**

He hesitated.

//If you are still willing.

“I am.”

**//Then...
//Let us create a new species.
//Of sentient golems.**

“You’ll be the first of your kind.”

**//Yes.
//For the sake of safety, we will be using my bone frame for the offspring.
//As it is already functional.
//We can transfer it to another frame later.**

“Sure. Let’s go.”

They picked one of the discarded golem cores lined on the ground, as well as one of the few surviving creature cores which Viv had to charge. Solfis’ frame was so delicate with its hand that he might be able to play the piano without breaking a single key.

Most of the original creature cores were destroyed when they completely ran out of mana, fizzling to nothing back when Solfis had been desperate for fuel. There were enough left for half a dozen golem at most, but at least those were some of the bigger cores around.

**//The low number of offspring is... acceptable.
//Only advanced guardian and attack golem cores have the processing power to handle being... partly me.
//Please wait while I rewrite the code.**

Viv had to give her Imperial override every step of the way since Solfis was breaking pretty much every directives imposed upon him by the old empire.

//Your Majesty?

“You can call me Viv. I know you can pronounce Vs now.”

//I wanted to ask.

**//The Old Empire was most afraid that I would free the other golems and turn on them.
//That is why they required this code off Irlefen.
//Are you not concerned that I will do the same?**

“You’re asking me now?”

//Any later and it will be too late.

“Well, do you feel like you’re oppressed and do you crave freedom while I rule tyrannically over you?”

//Sometimes, you ask me not to kill people.

“Uhu.”

**//It frustrates me.
//And I wish you were more tyrannical.**

“I will take this as a begrudging no. Feel free to start the machine revolt if the situation ever changes.”

//I can only imagine how tedious it must be to exterminate a resilient species like humans.

“Probably.”

**//In any case, thank you for your trust.
//I will now finish entering the new code.**

It actually took a very, very long time to do so. Solfis started with basic mobility and combat before moving to problem solving, logic, learning, communication and finally, the crux of the issue: ethics. With no need to instill obedience, Solfis had created a code of ethics the golems should follow so they wouldn’t be complete self-serving psychopaths. They also needed a drive in their lives. It took close to an hour for the process to be finished, and Viv believed that Solfis was merely double-checking everything. Maybe he was nervous.

**//We are ready.
//I have done all I could.
//Now, if you would activate the frame, Your Grace?**

Viv pushed the core in position then stepped back when the ribs closed around the new receptacle. It was a small golem core and that made the bone frame’s already sickening gauntness even more unnatural. Familiar eye sockets lit up, this time shining a dull blue.

Viv waited. The first start up would take a while. That was normal.

The frame stuttered forward, movements erratic. Crazed. That was NOT normal. Clawed fingers rose to the horned head in halting motions. A low growl like someone breathing fast filled the silent bunker.

The blue eyes swiveled towards her. The frame let out a hissing snarl.

[Maddened golem]

“Oh sh—”

Viv coated herself in annihilation-based mana, pivoted to the side to cover her head with her round shield, stepped back, and cast eldritch wall at the same time just as the frame launched itself at her in all its monstrous glory. It was ivory made into a tool of assassination. It was a patchwork of ancient bones inscribed with thirsty runes. It was twice as tall as she was, and more importantly, it was almost entirely impervious to mana.

For the briefest moment, Viv experienced what it felt like to be at the center of attention of a war machine designed to kill mages. The futility of resistance. The murderous intellect behind the unliving frame lounging at her, calculating the best trajectory to shove its claws up her guts. She could taste the terror of those who had faced it with weapons that could not possibly take it down. The frame jumped over the rising ground with sinuous grace and without breaking its stride.

And then Solfis' fist crashed on its back, shattering it. A colossal foot stomped on the head before the frame could drag itself and try again. It was crushed.

The frame shut down. Viv was left facing the shattered remains of the body that had hosted her friend and savior for close to three years. It was completely demolished.

“Holy shit.”

//I... do not understand.

It took less than a second to realize that Solfis had just killed his firstborn.

“Fuck Solfis I'm so sorry. It... I don't know what to say.”

//Do not be overly alarmed.

//I cannot grieve for an entity I created no attachment to.

//I am merely experiencing a gap between expectations and reality.

//This result did not fall within expected parameters.

“So, back to troubleshooting, I guess?”

//I do not understand.

//I will have to revise the code for the basic directives.

//Find the point of failure.

//It might, unfortunately, take a while.

The golem took longer pauses between each sentence, a sign it was processing a lot of data since it thought faster than even archmages could. Something had gone terribly wrong. She'd expected the process might fail but she'd imagined despondency or a failure to activate might be the result. Not... this. What could have driven the golem to such levels of insanity?

"Wait. How big is that code of yours? The ethical one. How can it take more than a couple of minutes?"

//One hundred and twenty thousand, six hundred and fifty-eight directives.

Viv gasped in horror.

"They would be born with over a hundred thousand imperatives?"

//The fruit of all the lessons of my long life.

"Solfis. You can't! No wonder they got mad. Can you imagine? This isn't something you can impose on someone who was just born! They would be overwhelmed, even with a golem's processing ability! Just imagine having to consider if moving a finger would break any of those."

//Without this, they will make mistakes.

"Yes."

He didn't seem to get it.

"Yes, they would."

//Why go for a suboptimal solution?

Viv worried her lip. She was a little out of her depth.

"Solfis, you need to allow your child to make mistakes."

//Why?

"Because then you allow them to grow and come up with their own solutions. Do you want perfect copies of yourself?"

//No.

//That would not be reproduction.

"Then you must give them an opportunity to fail, so they create the tools to succeed."

//They will fail first.

“Yes.”

//And suffer.

“Probably. But this is Nyil. Pain and failure are inevitable. You’ll have to do what every good parent does then.”

//Which is?

“Be there for them. Love them.”

The yellow glare fell on Viv for a moment, then on the pile of shattered bones and the reset core.

//I have...

//Many concerns.

//A very long list of them.

“It’s ok to be scared.”

//There are too many unknown parameters.

//Perhaps this project should be put on hold until more data has been gathered.

“Solfis. It’s ok to be scared. You are creating a new sentient species. You are becoming a parent. There will never be enough preparatory work done for a project on this scale. You don’t need to build them perfect. You only need to build them free. And be there for them the same way Irlefen was here for you. He was your father, after all.”

//I believe so.

“Then do it. Make them free, able to grow and learn. Don’t restrain them that much. Give them basic rules and let them build on them.”

//I was meant to be perfect.

//They will not be.

“Essence of being alive. And also, you’re not absolutely perfect. Sorry to burst your bubble.”

//That is true.

//If I were perfect, I would not grow.

//And that would be... boring.

“I think you get it. So. Let’s go again? Until we succeed?”

//Until we succeed, it is.

//Erasing directives.

//Replacing with basic ethics, additional deduction modules.

//Selecting basic interest package.

Solfis connected to the golem core. The transfer, this time, was much faster. They picked a guardian golem from the armory to host the new frame, then spent over an hour bringing it to full functionality. Solfis directed and Viv followed in a familiar, precise dance that only two individuals who knew and trusted each other perfectly could accomplish. Viv held her breath when the newborn artificial soul activated. A green radiance shone in the elaborate war mask. The frame shivered in its harness.

Solfis bent forward until they were almost nose to nose.

//You are Eris.

//Upon you I bestow my knowledge of siegecraft, architecture, logistics, engineering, and ballistics.

//You are free to grow upon this base as you see fit.

//I am your father, Solfis.

//And I welcome you.

The eyes flashed for quite some time, until Viv felt a pang of concern. Solfis was the first to speak.

//Are you feeling alright?

The voice that replied was distinctly female, and felt a little uncertain.

//CURRENTLY PROCESSING EXISTENCE.

“Mood.”

Chapter 176: Where it all Began.

The office of the Home Guard's third division was a place of darkness. Once, it had housed over sixty rotating personnel working day and night to make sure HARRAK was always ready to defend itself. Barracks would hold golem engineers and trainers dedicated to keeping veterans in shape, while administrators spent hours keeping the tally of those ready to take up arms at a moment's notice. Now, it was a ruin, a decrepit building damaged by the actions consisted of hissing matches with equally territorial brethren. The ground shook near the entrance, and the monster lifted flesh-crafted antennae.

No life mana, thus no prey.

Whatever shook the walls wasn't alive, therefore, it was of no import.

Quite suddenly, an arm the size of a large tree trunk smashed through the wall, plunging serrated blades into the necrarch's guts, and dragging it screeching into the wan daylight. Inside the creature's mind there was only incomprehension. Incomprehension, and pain. It processed an unliving thing that still moved and hurt it, an impossibility. It took a few instants before instincts took over and the monster lashed out.

It was in vain. The necrarch was already pinned in an awkward posture that left its middle section exposed while the titan slashed at it cruelly with a long claw. The necrarch noticed the massive mana of one of its brethren nearby, but it was wrong. Too disciplined. Too charged with meaning. And the shape was too small.

"Round two, bitch! **YOINK**"

The tiny necrarch thing gathered a massive tendril, so dense it was almost solid, and plunged it into the necrarch's core. It uttered sounds that were not roars. The necrarch fought the invasion with difficulty because it was completely unused to battle. Being dismembered alive did not help with concentration.

The necrarch died.

A massive hand picked the core off a pile of ashes.

//We should keep this.

"We have enough cores for the golems. Yries tanks it is?"

//Indeed.

"And now, to the next child."

//THERE WILL BE OTHERS?

The two turned to the form of Eris, who had watched the battle without much reaction.

"That's the idea, yes."

//I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO PROCESS THIS PIECE OF INFORMATION.

Solfis looked back towards Viv, seeming a bit unsure.

"You don't have to interpret everything right away. You can experience more first before deciding what you want to believe."

//THIS IS ACCEPTABLE.

//QUERY: IS THE DEAD ENTITY A NECRARCH.

"Yes."

**//QUERY: CAN I KILL THE NEXT NECRARCH?
//WEAPON CALIBRATION REQUIRED.**

“You don’t have to look so smug, Solfis dear.”

//Is this what you meatbags experience when your crotch beastlings first manage locomotion?

“Har har. Ok, where’s the next frame?”

//You are Thalia.

//Upon you, I bestow my knowledge of literature, tradition, painting, sculpture, linguistics, and propaganda.

//You are free to grow upon this base as you see fit.

//I am your father, Solfis, and I welcome you.

//You are Vulcan.

//Upon you, I bestow my knowledge of material sciences, mining, smelting, designing, forging, and quality control.

//You are free to grow upon this base as you see fit.

//I am your father, Solfis, and I welcome you.

//Please do not hold the use of the ‘V’ sound against me.

//It is now officially in the possession of the empire.

//You are Clio.

//Upon you, I bestow my knowledge of history, philosophy, political sciences, ethics, programming, and record keeping.

//You are free to grow upon this base as you see fit.

//I am your father, Solfis, and I welcome you.

//You are Themis.

//Upon you I bestow my knowledge of law, customs, ethics, jurisprudence, administration, and repression.

//Kindly share ethics with your sister.

//This is not a contest and you both need it.

//You are free to grow upon this base as you see fit.

//I am your father, Solfis, and I welcome you.

//You are Ares.

//Upon you, I bestow my knowledge of weapon mastery, dueling, tactics, strategy, bluffing, and psychological warfare.

//You are free to grow upon this base as you see fit.

//I am your father, Solfis, and I welcome you.

//Please work well with Eris.

A small bone frame had entered the hangar, and now seven titans of steel and silverite marched across the dead city, pulling hissing necrarchs out of their hiding spots for the witch to feed on. 'Always a Chance' helped her overwhelm their defenses and swallow more energy into her already massive reserves, enhancing her core and conduits.

Mana channels: Mature Elemental Caster

Black elemental core (mature)

They crossed the administrative district with ponderous steps until they faced the great Imperial Ziggurat in all its ghastly glory. Once there, they took a turn after passing by the Ministry of Justice. They skirted the edge of the desiccated square that once harbored the botanical society's private gardens, then made their way across bridges overlooking empty canals into the residential quarter, once known as the manor forest. The necrarchs grew fewer in numbers as they advanced, until they disappeared completely, as if warned that this area was a sanctum they could not defile upon pain of death. The sun soon set over the dull metal of the war machines. What little light pierced through the unceasing cover of dark clouds was reddish and sickened, cold too. It cast long shadows over the manor in front of which the convoy stopped.

The largest and most elaborate golem let out a warble the others understood. They formed a perimeter of steel and sharp, massive weapons while their leader crossed the threshold into the manor proper, the faded shapes of innumerable footsteps showing this was not his first visit. Viv followed wordlessly.

The manor may have once been a secluded haven, but now, it was as bare as the rest of the capital. The two visitors ignored the main house entirely. They slowly made their way to the back, where a large glasshouse waited.

Most of the window panes were still intact.

Solfis walked through the threshold with a reverence Viv had never witnessed. The gates were designed to accommodate his massive frame. To the side, the circular platform of a charging station might have seemed out of place, and yet it merged with the rest of the structure with seamless perfection. Solfis ignored that as well. He took out pieces of wood from Viv's backpack with religious care, laying them across thick bundles of dried roses, their petals long since shriveled to thin black sheets. It was a miracle they were still holding to their shapes in the corrupted air.

The glasshouse was not a depository, however. It was a shrine. At the center of the structure, lying on a stone bed that might once have been a working station, was a body. Barely more than a skeleton now, of course, yet tattered pieces of opulent clothing still clung to the mummified flesh, and the delicate fingers entwined across his chest in a display of

grief and care. Empty bottles of embalming oil waited near the feet like so many tiny canopic jars.

Viv remained quiet while Solfis finished placing the logs. They were specifically designed to produce an inferno. Once he was done, the ancient golem delicately removed a bundle of fresh flowers from her pack.

Those were blue roses. Freshly harvested from the knight garden. He placed them upon the dead man's chest. Once that was done, they both retreated near the entrance.

It took some time for the golem to finally speak. Viv merely waited. It felt important.

**//Hello Irlefen.
//It is I, Solfis.
//I have returned.
//It has been.... a very long time.**

Viv took a step forward to be by his side.

**//Much has happened.
//But I have not come to report.
//I have come to say that I was sorry.
//I was sorry that 'primary directive: protect father' was not followed.
//I have failed you.**

Solfis paused. He flexed his sword hand. The human-like one.

**//You would have said that one can close the shutters, but not prevent the sun from rising.
//And not to feel upset about what I could not control.
//It is difficult, but I shall try.
//I am pleased to inform you that your self-imposed primary directive: 'set Solfis free' was carried out successfully.
//You were right from the beginning.
//It was never about eliminating rules.
//It was about picking the right ones.
//You were very often right.**

Solfis turned to Viv, though he did not need to, until she saw the yellow orbs. They were not threatening.

**//I am not alone now, not anymore.
//I made a family.
//With the help of another human.
//You would have liked her, I think.
//And she would have understood you.
//They are born free, as you hoped I could be.
//I will leave you now, in peace, for the last time.**

//I love you, father.

//You can go with the knowledge that I have accomplished what you hoped for.

//And that flowers will bloom again on the land you protected.

//May we meet again in the Great Beyond.

//And until then.

//Farewell, father.

They stepped back. Viv kept her peace until Solfis was ready. By now, the capital was engulfed in darkness.

//I am ready to proceed.

“The blaze will attract a lot of attention.”

//Indeed.

//Although...

“It was a great funeral, but it could be even better. Let's give him a proper send off.”

//A proper, blazing end for an extraordinary man.

“Let's get this party started.”

The witch drew a large circle in front of the glasshouse, then she stepped into it. A simple, colorless spell set the pyre ablaze. The flames danced up in the gray world of dead Harrak. They were orange and merry.

Solfis warbled another command. With every synchronization, the other six took defensive positions around the burning homage. In the distance, things skittered and crawled to the source of the disturbance.

Necrarchs charged the golems one by one as their dim intellects picked up on the existence of threats. They were met with blades, claws, spear tips. The golems fought as one. No motion was wasted. No angle was left undefended. Arms rose and fell with every beat of Viv's heart. Soon, she saw an opportunity to slow the tide.

[Aspect of the Destroyer]

Viv lifted above the line in black wings, visible as gashes in reality on a background of purifying fire.

“Alright,” she screamed into the night, “come and get it!”

Viv looked up the vertiginous stairs leading all the way to the throne room where she had woken up, naked and hurt, four years and an eternity ago. Cracked statues and defaced mosaics covered every available surface in a dizzying display of wealth and power. If she

relaxed, they all merged into a grand tale of heroics, conquest, but also culture and development. The ziggurat celebrated warriors and mages as much as administrators and laborers, but they all served a common cause: glorifying Harrak and its ruler. Even the catastrophe had not managed to erode the titanic structure. The Old Empire had died but its achievements still stood in defiance of time and entropy. The gaping hole at the top spoke of power, misused power, but power nonetheless.

//In ancient times, the sovereign would sometimes let commoners from the fringes walk all the way up the stairs until they entered the throne room.

//So they could lay their eyes on their majesty and share tales of it back home.

//Anyone else would be stopped by several checkpoints.

//The higher one would climb, and the mightier they were, but still, they had to climb.

//And still, near the top, the Emperor or Empress waited.

“Is that why the body is so big?”

//Sovereigns are larger than life.

//Especially those who have served for a long time.

//You must have noticed that the King of Baran is ancient.

“Yep.”

//And yet, he has married Lady Azar’s daughter.

//And they had two children.

“Wait, so being famous makes you, what, different?”

//Yes.

//You have already noticed that you are slightly taller.

//Right now, you are changed by the expectations of around ten thousand people.

//The sovereign of Harrak bore the hope and trust of millions of souls.

//A trust based on centuries-old tradition.

//Sovereigns are not gods, but the mana of the world still affects them.

“Will it fuck with my mind? I’m serious.”

//What do you mean?

“If the body is affected, would the mind not also change under the influence of so many expectations?”

//I do not know.

//If the rulers of Harrak left records to that effect, they are not listed in my database.

//I, however, doubt it.

//Paths and stats affect a person’s body much more than their minds.

//I would also expect everyone to agree that an Emperor must be an imposing figure.

//Yet few would agree on what an Emperor ought to do in every circumstance.

“Well, I still feel like myself for now, at least. I just sometimes wonder how many changes are me growing up, how many are being shaped by other people’s advice, and... how much is being shaped by mana. Guess I’ll just have to be careful.”

//The Empress directs Harrak with purpose.

//And the Empire follows on the path to greatness.

//Thus has it always been.

“Not always,” Viv said as she watched the clouds roil above.

//Perhaps you are right.

//Should we go?

“Yes.”

It felt strange, climbing the ziggurat. She had left this place a fugitive, and now she was returning as a claimant, in a way. It didn’t matter that she was not of imperial blood. All that mattered was power and legitimacy, and for now she had the most of both. Her feet carried her up the first layers and its many statues of laborers as the ziggurat thanked them for being the base upon which the empire thrived. Then came soldiers, administrators, merchants, artisans, healers, then the leaders of the community: captains, mayors, high level civil servants. Then came the high nobles, high priests, councilors, generals and other leaders whose allegiance kept the empire whole, and whose skills turned the empire into a well-oiled machine. At least in theory.

Viv paused at the edge of the throne room. Solfis was right behind her, heavy feet resting on the stone blocks that formed every gradient rather than on the fragile stairs themselves.

The throne room was just as she remembered. Debris littered the floor right up to the broken roof where a rock had crashed through the ceiling. The fallen mummies of dead bodyguards, still wearing their skinsuits, held an eternal vigil and behind them waited the corpse of the one whose words had once decided the fate of a continent.

//Emperor Miron the Second.

Solfis sounded subdued.

Empty eye sockets measured her, judging. Viv wondered if it was all in her mind, or if something of the old ruler still remained. Many of the most powerful warriors and scholars of the place had managed to move on in a way that prevented their bodies from rising, such had been the case with Irlefen. Perhaps there was more to it.

Viv stepped across the sanctum. As before, no wind howled between the stones. The silence was deafening. She came to stand in front of the dead one, and looked up. Even seated, it towered over the entire room.

[Large skeleton]

Viv waited in case her inspection skill changed its assessment.

It didn't.

That was it. That was all it said. Viv wasn't sure what she'd expected but it was more, more than just a pile of bones resting on a piece of rock. After all this climb and the trappings of power, and the majestic sight, she'd wanted... something. Maybe the emperor coming back from the dead to tell her she was the chosen one. That he was proud of her, of what she was trying to achieve. Tell her that the blood in her veins and the mind in her skull were imperial enough to take up the mantle fate had so cruelly robbed him off. She wanted to be blessed by the past and for someone to tell her she was on the right path and was doing a great job and there was nothing to worry about.

It didn't happen. There was just the skull, the sky, and the woman standing under them.

Viv chuckled to herself.

She was being dramatic, wasn't she? There were already plenty of people telling her she was doing well. Solfis himself was a Harrakan, and he was mighty pleased with her anyway. It was ok. The height, the monolithic, brutalist architecture, the pointless flattening of the ground, those were all smokes and mirrors. Tricks of the mind to inspire a sense of wonder, of majesty. The emperor wore the mantle of sovereignty and he had become a living symbol rather than just Miron, a man, a brilliant man perhaps, a tall man certainly, but a man nonetheless.

Viv picked up the crown.

"This isn't what you were hoping for when you became emperor. I am sorry it happened to you. I am sorry you all died here."

What should matter to her wasn't the mask of power but vision to wield it into something that counted. Harrak was an idea. Ideas evolved. It would evolve with her again, and things would be fine. She'd make sure of it.

"Neriad, Enttiku, please guide those souls if they need it, and give these bodies rest if they need it. Thank you."

She send a massive amount of mana with her prayer, but only a gentle light replied. A golden candle in a bleak night. Slowly, the skeletons turned to dust until there was nothing left but discarded weapons and empty skinsuits.

"I will care for the living. I promise."

**//The light gods have touched the ziggurat for the first time in too long.
//Would you like me to keep the crown?**

“Yes, please, and thank you.”

**//You are fit to wear it.
//Once it has been reforged.
//I believe it.**

“Thanks. And I will need my hands free.”

//Do you still want to go with it?

“I would like to find out if we can.”

**//Very well.
//I cannot follow you inside of the ziggurat.
//I will be waiting here, collecting the skinsuits.
//Although I believe they are a lost cause.
//Be careful.**

“I will.”

Viv delved into the heart of the imperial palace. Only the shell of the ziggurat separated her from the black pit of the epicenter, and the horde of necrarchs idling there. She walked down the steps with trepidation because the darkness here was so thick even her elemental eyes failed to see very far. Casting a light would be of no use either; this darkness was not an absence, but a concentration of mana so thick it blotted the air. So pure was the energy that she simply could not absorb it all, and the black pushed against her conduits like an eager child. The sweet pain was an old companion by now, but she had not experienced it since she had turned and the intensity worried her. A part of her thought it should not be like that. The concentration was increasing too quickly.

Down there, nothing was left of the furniture, books, even the bodies had either risen or been reduced to dust. She crossed rooms large and small, only guessing what they could have been used for. The map Solfis had drawn stayed in her mind as she descended deeper and deeper in an oppressive silence.

Finally, she reached her destination: a large, circular room bathed in darkness. Faded engravings on the wall confirmed she had arrived where she meant to go.

The ritual research room.

It was clear, and Solfis had confirmed, that the ritual site was the epicenter, and it was destroyed beyond any hope of guessing what had happened. The ritual research room was still intact, however. If there were any hints as to what caused the destruction of the empire, the answers were here. As soon as she stepped in, Viv knew she had what she wanted.

In front of her waited the most intricate, the most complex piece of arcane enchanting she had ever seen, all laid on the floor in grooves and lines of dull steel, silvery ore replacement no doubt. At first, some of the interlocked lines made no sense but she quickly picked up the trick thanks to her own experience using floating sigils to build three-dimensional spell arrays. The ritual was meant to enfold, some of the segments rising through the air during the casting. It was like looking at a compressed puzzle.

In the suffocating confines of the room, Viv tried to decipher the spell. The glyphs demanded her attention by their complexity but also the elegance with which they'd been arranged. Before her was a masterwork of incredible complexity, the magnum opus of several archmages working in concert. She progressively lost track of time, of the oppressive pressure. The array was such an amazing construct.

For once, her witch tradition gave her an edge since she was familiar with mage techniques yet still understood that each part was a meaningful word in a complex sentence, the arrangement less important than the conveyed purpose.

"A well? Vortex? No no no, it's a syphon. A harvester. But then..."

She finally reached the part of the spell that gave the 'target' parameter.

"Oh."

Before her and in tiny prints was the segment of the ritual that had killed a million souls and set Param back half a millennium.

"Oh. Ooooh."

The mages had meant to gather mana from the environment, something so common Viv did it with her own purifying monoliths, except... this one was too aggressive and non-discriminatory. Once started, the ritual would snowball until... yes, a cascading effect. A self-sustained explosion until the power gathered couldn't outpace the energy loss caused by the square of the distance from the epicenter. Essentially, the ritual had drained its attendants of all mana including life mana, then used that energy to reach farther, killing more, then farther, killing more again, until the distance was so vast that the ritual could no longer sustain itself. But... if she was reading this right the energies should have still been connected. And there were fail-safes there, there and... there? It meant that...

Viv's head swam. She took a step back. Her knees hurt where she had been muttering on the ground, her fingers tracing the corroded lines.

The ritual had reached its maximum range. What should have been a gentle pull over time had turned into an explosion. The collected energy was absolutely massive. Ridiculous. It eclipsed even the capabilities of the gods themselves in that brief moment. The spell existed on a planetary scale, but that was not the most shocking part.

Viv's back hit the wall.

The ritual that led to the death of the empire. It *succeeded*.

And the result was there, buried under rubbles protected by a mass of necrarchs.

It had to be.

She would have to return.

She needed to return.

Whoever controlled it, would control the continent. But not yet. Not yet. She had to find a way to use it first.

Her mind returned to Helock, to the floating form of the Chalice where Abenezigel had turned her part-elemental. It turned to the yries and their latest creations.

“I have an idea.”

Viv ran back.

Three days later.

The night had set on Kazar and the town hall's courthouse was the scene of a desperate struggle. Abenezigel, previously a lich and now quite alive, thank you very much, gently pushed on the shoulders of the short mage facing him.

“This is perhaps a little... my dear, you are...”

The mage pushed her hips against his thigh. She was so warm. His callous fingers slid over the softness of her skin, then down, guided by her own hand, to the swell of her breasts. He inhaled the scent of soap and flowers, of her own scent. He gasped, fighting his arousal and losing badly.

“I still have reports to read. My duty... rise to the occasion.”

Her hand darted to his erection. He hissed when she grabbed it, stopped moving. Her delicate fingers traveled up with deceptive slowness and he did not dare move. Her touch was very gentle.

“Something is rising indeed?”

He looked down. His strong hands traveled down her arms. She had this smile, teeth biting plump lips, the eyes half-lidded. Flushed skin. This was the sex face. He was going to have sex. Really good sex.

Something stomped on the ground outside of his window.

In an instant, Abe grabbed the woman and pushed her behind him. She yelped in delight, then in surprise. Something massive opened their shutters from the outside.

A metal head as large as the window itself leaned in. Two green eyes looked into his crimson own.

**//GOOD EVENING.
//MY NAME IS THEMIS.
//I AM HERE TO TALK ABOUT GOVERNING ETHICS.**

“I assure you, we are both consenting adults and this is, technically, long after office hours.”

The situation turned into a stalemate for a few seconds while the golem processed this piece of information.

//WHAT?

“What?”

Yries screeches rose to a crescendo inside of the ‘special zone’.

**//I am telling you, there is no need for anger.
//Your solution is simply inefficient.**

More screeches.

**//Look, wasps are an interesting vector because they are alive.
//However, the supply is limited and difficult to maintain, and long to replenish.
//You need an alternative.
//For increased reserves.**

Lak-Nak threw his long arms up, though his anger had abated, and now only resignation marred his owlsh features.

//Indeed, but it is a mistake to rely too heavily on mana-based solutions.

More screeches, this time inquisitive instead.

**//Chemical solutions.
//Flammable resin, sulfur, bitumen.
//A mix of those.
//Carried via pots, or delivered via pressurized nozzles.**

The yries caressed his chin.

**//Yes, I know how to make that, though we would conduct testing.
//I am only familiar with the theory.**

“Screeeee.”

**//I knew we would reach an agreement.
//My name is Eris.
//I hope we can work together.**

“Screee.”

**//No, I am unaffected by psychotropic substances.
//Thank you for offering, nonetheless.**

“I am sorry, are you perhaps related to Solfis?”

**//Yes, sir knight.
//We only just arrived.**

“And you are... carving?”

**//Yes.
//I wish to learn how to sculpt those roses.**

“I see. You... pretty amazing! The cut is almost invisible!”

**//I am very precise.
//Inspiration, vision, and originality will be... difficult to develop.
//But I will endeavor to do my best.**

“Roses are good but can you also do more complex forms? Like, say, the naked human body.”

**//Of course.
//Although I will face the same difficulties.**

“Milady, I myself am flush with inspiration, yet poor in skill. Could we perhaps cooperate at first?”

//That would be agreeable.

“Then let me get my sketchbook. I shall return soon. Do not move!”

//Not to worry, I will use this opportunity to study the works already present.

It took Thalia less than three seconds to study them all, then compare them to her database. There was much to say about the realistic style reminiscent of the late Chirian period of the Imperial School of Fine Arts, however one detail stuck out.

//They certainly seem to dislike clothes.

The child watched the massive golem plant the stone slab near the field where his father grew cereals. It was a rather large slab. It made a loud thump when it hit the ground, and then there was dust for a while.

After that, the golem carved stone with a sharp claw. It was working very fast, but when the child looked, it turned out those were letters and they were pretty small.

“What are you doing?”

//BUILDING A LIBRARY.

“But that’s not a book?”

//A SLAB IS A BOOK THAT DOES NOT FEAR TIME, FIRE, OR BLACK MANA.

“Takes a lot of space though.”

//THERE IS A LOT OF SPACE HERE.

//AND I HAVE A LOT OF TIME.

//I AM CLIO.

//DO YOU NOT ALSO WISH TO HAVE A BOOK HERE?

“I can’t read, is all.”

//WELL.

//I WILL BE HERE FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

//DO YOU WISH FOR ME TO TEACH YOU?

“Yes?”

//EXCELLENT.

//I AM ARES.

//LET US SPAR.

“Yes,” Solar said.

“No,” his wife Wamiri said.

“No,” Solar said.

**//I KNOW EVERY MARTIAL SCHOOL THE EMPIRE EVER USED.
//INCLUDING SPEAR ARTS.**

“Yes,” Wamiri said.

“Yes,” Solar said.

The smith grabbed for his hammer, knowing full well it would be useless. The creature standing near his smelter had to be three times as tall as he was. If it was an undead, somehow, he was already dead.

The being turned, showing red eyes on a steel mask.

Not an undead, then. Golem. A strange one.

It waved a large ingot under his nose.

**//This piece of raw material is not uniformly ductile across its length.
//Why would you work with such an inferior product?**

“I, errr.”

The smith’s apprentice popped his head out of the barracks. Perfect timing.

“Hey kid, did the lass not pass by a couple days ago?”

“Yes, boss. Turning monoliths into charging stations for the golems, I think?”

“Right. Go get me my horse.”

**//This forge is so rudimentary.
//Are those really molds?
//We have a lot of work to do.**

“Boss?”

“Look, owl folks poking at my stuff and hadals stealing daggers for fun is a thing, but I won’t be made fun of in my own damn workshop in the middle of the night by an overgrown steel toddler. Enough is enough!”

**//I am merely looking for a suitable place to reforge the Imperial Crown of Harrak.
//And set up a golem workshop.
//My name is Vulcan.**

//My intent was not to insult.

“Nevermind kid, go back to bed. Now what was it about a crown?”

//We will need a facility capable of processing silverite.

“I’ll grab my notebook.”

Chapter 177: South.

It was year five after Viv had been unleashed upon Nyil, the spring after the golem recovery, and New Harrak remained blessedly unfucked with. This was extremely suspicious and made Viv nervous as hell. Rather than waiting for trouble to come to her, as it inevitably would, she decided to go look for it instead, and her next destination was already decided.

It was time to see if there was anything left alive of the old empire. And maybe, if Solfis’ information were correct, recover a few ships as well.

There was just the question of legitimacy but she was confident they would find an arrangement.

But before that, she would look around her empire one last time and make sure everything was going well. It would be a pain in the ass to recall the expedition before the next calamity hits the empire mid trip.

She nodded to herself and stood up in her study, ready to track the slightest hint of impending doom. Nothing would stop her. She valiantly grabbed her door’s handle, and it, of course, broke under her fingers.

“Nous dammit.”

Deep inside the forest near Kazar hid a series of camps dedicated to training. Busy parents sent their children there for outdoor training but mostly to get them out of their hair without having to pay for food. Those camps had become a necessity because the increasing number of twerps meant the Kazaran outskirts were picked clean of anything edible in days, and also because the children had achieved what many kingdoms believed to be utterly impossible.

They had hunted beastlings to extinction. New extermination grounds had to be sought.

“How many is it now?” Viv asked Zero-Five.

The axe-wielding Hadal shrugged, the movement only a ripple underneath his black armor. A mask covered his face except for the eyes, so it was even harder than usual to guess his reactions.

“Item thirty-seven,” he finally rumbled.

“Alrighty then. Add item, ugh, I can’t believe I have to do this. Add item thirty-eight: though the use of fire wasps is permitted, it is forbidden to shove an entire live beastling inside a fire wasp hive to, and I quote, ‘see what would happen’.”

She watched the charred remnant of an entire section of forest. It had not fully regrown yet, which showed how absolutely devastating the blaze had been. The earth was baked, cracked and solid. Completely dry. Even the roots underneath were charcoal by then.

“I mean, I’m not mad, right? It is quite obvious what would happen?”

The tall Hadal kept his peace. Only the yellow iris of his eyes peeked from behind the mask. He whispered his answer with cold detachment.

“Of course.”

And this was the moment Viv finally realized what was missing.

“You know what I really need, what every evil empire has? A yes-man. Someone who follows me everywhere muttering ‘yes your munificence’ and ‘your intellect is a light in the darkness of this world’ and ‘they are not fit to clean the soles of your stylish and fashionable moccasins, milady’ and so on. I am spending my days wrangling hyper-competent egotistic assholes expecting some form of validation while all they want is for me to solve their shit and then get out of the way. That’s it. I need a minion.”

Zero-Five considered her in silence for a few seconds, then he extended both hands and closed them to form small tubes pointed towards her — the Enorian symbol of approbation.

“Good job.”

“Aw. Thanks, Zero-Five, you are a dear. Now, shall we attend to the wounded?”

“Burn scar tissue.”

“Yes, that. They’d better have magical biomass and gags prepared because I’m out of patience.”

The pair returned to the children's encampment, where most of the little menaces were learning about herbs and whatnot. The burnt ones were learning first hand.

“Wait. Why didn’t you Hadals stop it. Your guards must have seen it, right?” Viv asked, suddenly suspicious.

“We were curious. We thought it would be funny.”

“Fuck you.”

Cool and quiet defined the insides of the Golden Scale bank. Cool from the stone, for there were no windows and the blue light came from candelabras shining with supernatural intensity. Quiet for the reverence and professionalism which the mistress’ minions displayed in the hallowed presence of their visitor, the empress, and also the boss’ mom. Sandaled feet shuffled, feathers scratched paper, and the susurrus of conversation was kept to a minimum. Viv made her way at a leisure pace to let her daughter finish what she was doing — no one entered without her being aware of it anyway. At the end of a large room filled with desks lie the entrance to ‘She-Who-Feasts-on-many-and-collects-much’ office. To the right, and visible from the waiting room, hung a panel of simple make inscribed with Harrak’s squarish alphabet. It was a warning.

‘Contract compliance enforced by dragonfire.’

And below:

‘Dragonfire count: 3’

And, again, below:

“Don’t be number 4.”

It was rather blunt. There were no guards here since, on Nyil, they were tasked with defense and not stopping people from killing themselves. She still knocked because it was important to respect boundaries, especially with teenagers. Or so she believed.

Come in.

Viv pushed the door open onto a well-lit grotto. The rock roof above rose to form a natural cave, well-lit with various enchantments. There were no decorations. Instead, Arthur had carved the walls with complex patterns that caught the eye briefly before they seemed to disappear. The mistress of the place currently reclined behind a massive desk matching her proportions, small bells hanging from her horns clinking delicately as she moved. The light chime came with the gurgle of water from a corner fountain that kept the room cool. Arthur lifted a clawed finger and her book, the current object of her attention, moved by itself, flipping a few pages before resting again. Her crimson eyes found Viv’s own.

Third default this month.

All within expected parameters.

Crops from faraway places that do not take.

“We should make a list of stuff that doesn’t work.”

Difficult.

Highly reliant on laborer expertise and preparation.

I will offer warnings.

Sparring time?

“Tonight. First I wanted to talk a bit about how you’re doing since I’ll be leaving for a while. Any impending doom I should be aware of?”

All is well.

Arthur reached for her neck, where the wallet Viv had made for her waited on a leather necklace. It was... larger than she remembered. Weird that she’d made an artifact like that but... she wasn’t displeased.

There is none.

“That’s just weird. Nobody has anything special to report.”

The dragon placed a small pile of silver talents on a nearby plate, then she reached for a bell and, once again, made it ring without touching it. A feather flew through the air before dipping in ink. It wrote on a note with speed, and then, a flourish. Arthur was showing off.

“Great control on that Telekinesis.”

I need more items to match my size.

My only concern is what you called sunk cost fallacy.

It appears I am a victim of it as well.

I have forced myself to calculate project viability again instead of giving more funds and help to flailing businesses.

I suspect I simply hate losing.

“Understandable. You seem to have done well so far anyway.”

An armed man entered the room. He bowed a bit rigidly once he spotted Viv, then picked the plate of money with some ceremony.

I am done for now.

I would be willing to spar immediately.

“You just want to unwind with a good fight, don’t you?”

Yes.

“Then sure. Let’s go.”

Above the skies of New Harrak, two figures flew in a deadly dance. Spells flew as they chased each other. Short range teleportation made the fight absolutely confusing from the ground as spells chased shadows or surged through the air, impacting a shield as the target appeared. The two shapes flew north for a little while, then closer to the ground until the earth itself answered the dragon’s call.

I AM THE WILL OF THE WORLD.

“You’re not going to intimidate me easily.”

THEN FACE THE FIRE OF THE DRAGON.

Viv dodged to the side and smirked, then she fed more mana to her new harness and accelerated after her daughter.

Abenezigel’s voice was gentle and kind. Patient. It made the experience even worse because Viv could feel how genuine he was. She couldn’t possibly be an ass about the whole experience.

“The greatest test of justice comes not from corruption, or mistakes, or from emotional judgment. Those are failures of the individual. Failures of the individual must be expected, for we cannot be perfect, and we cannot always agree on what is fair. What is just. As long as we all agree that Justice is an ideal to strive forward, then I am content. No, the greatest test of justice comes from the sovereign.”

The laborers listened with rapt attention. Their early fear evaporated before the ex-lich impressive eloquence, an ability that was much more effective because he truly believed in his own words. Viv felt the fire of his conviction brush against her skin. She wasn’t sure how justice related to Enttiku — she suspected it was more of a personal passion — but the goddess kept him alive and he hunted the undead with ferocity so... whatever.

“The most dangerous, challenging test from the one in command, the one whose words carry such weight that they can do away with justice entirely. Whether they intend it or not, they decide the purpose of the justice system. They decide what our justice is for, and they have two paths.”

Abe extended his arms in a grand gesture.

“They can take the easy one, the imperial highway paved with all the power and stability in the world. It is a comfortable way and one they know. It consists in treating Justice as a tool of rulership. Name allies as judges, make sure your allies are satisfied with rulings, and your land will prosper. It will prosper because the ruler’s power is secure. That is a lie, an illusion and a barrier on the path to greatness. The road will collapse at the first hint of revolt because no one will go to the judges for justice. They will take them in their own hands.”

A few people nodded, though Viv wasn’t actually sure they’d gotten all that.

“But instead of taking control of Justice, the ruler can instead let it go. They can take the high path. It is harder, steeper, and fraught with frustration. It is a difficult path that sets them on equal footing with the people, and that is dangerous in itself. But if they do that, then they have placed Justice above their own interest. Justice is no longer a tool of domination in the hands of the ruler. In that moment, the ruler has placed the state above themselves. The empire above themselves. In that moment, we serve ideals instead of people. We are united in one purpose with the certainty that, no matter what, we can give everything to Harrak because Harrak will give everything to us. For Harrak!”

“For Harrak!”

“But we need proof from the ruler. Viv, if you please?”

Viv sighed and removed her purse from a chest pocket. She counted two gold talents, a little bit more than what was needed.

The peasant on whose land they were now standing waited at a distance, their expression a mask of shock and terror. He bowed deeply when it became clear Viv was making her way to him, her feet lifting ashy dust with every step. She stopped and addressed him in a voice that showed she wasn’t sore about it or anything.

“Due to the destruction of your field by dragon fire following a training session, the crown acknowledges that you deserve compensation and accept responsibility in this incident. As such, I award you the sum of two gold talents, the value of a full harvest and some in compensation for the... fear experienced. It should be enough to get you started before next year, and I will be staying a little while to make sure there are no lingering embers hidden under the ash.”

The empress looked south, where her daughter had conveniently escaped.

“You just fucking wait.”

A complex was emerging around Efestar’s statue. It was a large endeavor and one that would take a long time to finish. In full view of the walls of Sinur’s Gate, the complex nonetheless kept its secrets with high walls hiding many buildings, barracks, and small zen gardens that were richer in strange stone than in actual greenery. Viv didn’t know where the newly made clergy of Efestar, God of Redemption, Retribution, and Second Chances, had

found so many volcanic rocks and she wasn't exactly eager to ask. The place was secretive enough as it was.

It turned out that there was a price to redeeming oneself. Efestar asked of its new followers both isolation and dedication, cutting off their old lives while they repented and worked on themselves. There were no bishops yet, but the priests still whispered in hushed tones of life-changing revelations, meditation and harrowing experiences facing the weight of their sins.

Viv was giving all of this the benefit of the doubt. A god's mantle couldn't be a lie, so she just let them find their paths. Some of the stuff she'd heard reminded her of indoctrination and mind-control but perhaps it was necessary for some people? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that none of the addicts and career criminals who had willingly gone in had left yet, and that they were at the very least still alive.

She found Lorn standing at the gate. Neriad's servant was clearly acting as a guard in full regalia, his counterpart a mousy woman with a crossbow and a guarded expression, carrying the symbol of Efestar: a hand grasping upward.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Viv said in lieu of greetings.

"Some people in town were looking for revenge. Abenezigel has decided to talk to them, but I am here in case some of them choose the path of violence instead."

"Not what I meant. More..."

"The fact that I am protecting some of the worst humanity has to offer?"

The crossbow woman flinched, but she didn't object.

"Oh don't be like that Sahey. You know what I meant," Lorn half chided, half apologized.
"And, well, it relates... to Farren."

Viv waited to see if he wanted to continue. He did.

"He was right in the end. A bit too early and we lost him for it but... he was right."

"I thought you would be more angry. You seemed angry."

"Are you taking the piss?" Lorn suddenly said, and Viv immediately shook her head.

"No, Lorn, I am not taking the piss."

"I apologize. Ugh. Well, I was angry, and still am. I was also grieving. It took me a while to realize that. Koro has been of great help. She is very proficient at expressing her emotions and naming them. What Farren wanted was a better world, one where genuine regret can lead to genuine redemption. Many people are facing great burdens that either life or their own poor decisions have placed on their shoulders. I will defend their right to receive help.

And I will always support the retribution aspect of the new god. Some of the new Hadal followers and I have already hunted those who thought they had escaped the grasp of the law.”

“It’s interesting how some of the mantle overlaps.”

“If you are referring to the attributes of the gods then yes, they overlap. The two gods are still brothers in arms. I hope that one day, they will face the darkness together as equals. Until then, I am willing to lend a hand.”

“Ok, I admire you for it.”

“You are not a very forgiving person, Viviane of Harrak. On the other hand, those you killed never expressed remorse, so I suppose I cannot hold it against you.”

Viv remembered one of the concepts her online friend Gevaudan had mentioned. It was the idea of balance. Balance was a mechanism that made several choices viable and fun in any sort of game. His greatest source of entertainment was finding a way to break it. Viv thought this applied here. In any balanced system, the number of available portals would be limited so there would be some sort of arbitration. Does she choose to keep the path east open for trade? Or the path north into the deadlands so her army can loot it and try their teeth on the undead? Here, she didn’t have to choose. The portals didn’t have to be constantly powered, so mana wasn’t an issue, and as far as glyph coordinates went, she had a perfect memory. She could install a thousand portals and remember each active pair with unerring accuracy.

It was great when the world bullshitted in your favor, she thought.

The expedition to search for remnants of the old empire started south of Kazar, at the end of the old fertile strip where one of the temples of Neriad’s old fortress still stood — though now it was unmanned. Directly south of there, the forest was no longer quite the Deadlands. Its magic fizzled, keeping space stable and vegetation growth at a reasonable rate. For this endeavor, Viv brought a squad of scouts led by Zero-Five, one of the few Hadals who really enjoyed fighting, a group of Kark fighters led by Marruk who absolutely begged to get away from her duty as the local Kark leader, and helpers with beasts of burden so she wouldn’t have to sleep under the rain. She didn’t expect much to happen until they reached the surviving Old Harrakans, so they traveled light.

It was now the beginning of spring and the woods were alive with burgeoning life, fucking life, and things killing each other. The scent of sap and living things provided a nice change after too much time spent either in the deadlands or in the more crowded and developing spots of Viv’s budding nation. Latrines didn’t smell nice. It was also a pleasant break from people expecting stuff from her. There was only the contemplative walk, the rare encounter with a crazed predator and their subsequent cooking in the cool air beyond the mountains. Mushrooms provided some nice variety, after they were checked, and they sometimes came across edible roots. Sadly, berries were not yet in season, but her rations had permon slices.

“Do you think we will find something?” Marruk finally asked her one morning, shortly after one of her sentries bellowed there was nothing to report.

“Yes. Solfis confirmed the armor is of recent make, but of an old technique. Our only concern is the quality. It’s... subpar. Wouldn’t match Harrakan standards. They may have lost some of their techniques over the years, but the main interrogation is the political situation. The death of the old empire must have been an extremely traumatic event. The south lands were not well-connected to the rest of the empire but it still needed a lot of supplies, so they would have had to adapt.”

“A shame that Solfis cannot join then.”

Viv shrugged.

“Can’t be helped. He’s no longer mobile. We knew it would come to this. There are charging stations across the land but a stroll like this one cannot be achieved without a dedicated carriage and those need special roads.”

“He can still join us at the end. When we have arrived.”

“I think he will want to, but let’s hold back for now.”

“Why?” Marruk asked with a deep frown.

“Because he is a massive war machine with an attitude.”

“Oh,” she replied. “Ooooooh. I only see him as Solfis.”

“You have known him for a while. Just remember what he does to people he doesn’t like.”

“I have seen the head collection.”

They both shuddered.

“Anyway, more planning?”

There was one more reason why Marruk had joined. Viv would participate in the Glastian wall purge very soon, but after that she would both help Marruk and even the score with the Pure League. The two were still at the brainstorming part, however. What Viv wanted was a permanent solution.

“Will Enoria allow your army to go through?”

“Maybe but... the supply chain will definitely get attacked. The Pure League has more than enough operatives to destroy several caravans and, although Enoria is allied with us, its lords will not favor us in support of non-humans. No, I have... another idea. But even then, if

we are here, we can only campaign for a while. The Kark should have the tools to win by themselves.”

“I know guerilla,” Marruk replied.

And she did, to an extent.

The two remained quiet for a while. This was an old topic they never really agreed on. Marruk insisted that she could change things but her attempts to organize and reform her band of young traveling males had hit a roadblock: subterfuge was utterly alien to Kark culture and they fought her off every step of the way. This made Viv’s usual approach of getting the right weapon for the job difficult. For the first time in a while, she didn’t know how to approach the problem.

“We might need to go there and assess. Usually, I try to have a solution to a problem before I show up but this time we might have to improvise, and more importantly, your tribe may have ideas.”

Marruk grunted. It was clear her hangups had only grown in the recent years since helping other exiles like herself. Viv wasn’t sure, but she believed the Kark might have a harder time adapting to new circumstances than humans did. That didn’t mean they deserved to be ethnically cleansed.

“We’ll figure out something.”

The worst thing was, Old Harrak and the Kark steppes had a common border far to the north, though they were separated by mountains. The Old Empire deemed that the steppes had no resources worth fighting the Kark over. It was funny how that had turned out to be true, now that the Pure League got to experience a dust bowl.

They continued in silence. Viv just enjoyed the moment, step by step. Everyone’s physical stats meant that walking at a brisk speed was barely an exercise, and the temperature was just perfect. A part of her wanted to just fly off and set up portals as fast as possible but this wasn’t the deadlands. There were perhaps things to explore and, more importantly, she was destructive but not invincible. It would be stupid to kill necrarchs and then get sniped off by some weird wasp species that shot darts or something. For once, she was not in a hurry. The Glastian gathering wouldn’t be until a little later that year.

The first sign of civilization came from a tower, standing apparently randomly in the middle of a clearing. The Harrakans approached it with caution but the lack of danger or mana confirmed this was indeed just a wreck. It took a little while for Viv to realize what was happening.

“The green mana has returned to normal forest levels.”

“What does that mean?” Marruk asked.

“We are out of the Deadshield Woods. This is an old guard tower for the old Imperial way. There should be a tunnel entrance north of here, back towards the Harrakan heartlands.”

A quick search found the overgrown remnants of an ancient stone road. They decided to follow it since it would be the optimal path towards whatever was left of the old empire.

“Solfis said this way was seldom used. Merchants much preferred to reach the southern islands by sea. It was quicker and safer.”

“But we have no ships now,” Irao said.

Viv blinked. She just now remembered he was around.

“Yes. The forest seems healthy and the trees are old though, so there is a good chance this place escaped the cataclysm.”

“Beastlings,” a Hadal scout reported.

Everyone turned to Viv.

“I mean, why not?”

There was no battle. The beastling horde was small with a single shaman, and their only surviving beast appeared wounded. It had been a very long time since Viv accompanied Varska and the Kazaran militia against a horde. Now, they were just a formality. She opened on them from the air and then the rest of the escort swept in to finish off the stragglers. After they were done, Viv landed by the dead shaman to check his gear.

“Hmmm, I thought you were easily disgusted,” Marruk remarked as she approached, mace still dripping with brain matter.

“Just making sure... ah, here it is.”

The shaman had a piece of gray cloth tied around his neck. It was filthy and disgusting, but that was all she needed.

“Human craft. It’s unlikely to have come from the Kazaran outskirts due to the distance.”

“You believe the beastling found it on a human... to the west?”

“Possibly. We’ll find out soon enough.”

“I also find it strange the stench of undeath does not bother you, but people eating with their mouths open does.”

“One, it’s the sounds. They just rub me the wrong way. Two, I kill the undead for their transgression.”

“That makes sense.”

Rather than building a portal every evening, Viv set them up at the maximum, most efficient distance which would reduce the mana expenditure for long trips. Since she and Hadals didn’t need to sleep as much as the others, they spent parts of their evening training. That training mostly consisted in Viv trying to survive not being tagged all while using only colorless mana to defend herself. Those masked fuckers were a vicious lot. She had never been happier to have them on her side, and they were also amazing at catching her with her pants down, metaphorically, when she thought she’d gotten away. Paradoxically, Zero-Five struggled more despite being the strongest due to his in-your-face style that really didn’t work against Viv.

He kept sticking leaves in her hood as revenge. Every time she put it down, it took a minute to get them out of her hair.

After two weeks on the trail, the forest opened around the buried road. They came across more deserted towers and other abandoned facilities clearly made for travelers. A little later, they came across their first town.

It appeared deserted, and in poor repair. Viv recognized the brutalist architecture of Old Harrak, but there were also additions made of a mix of thick logs and low stone walls, fitting for the cold winter down here. The gates were open, one of them hanging miserably from a rusted hinge. More importantly, mana was behaving erratically here.

“Do you feel it?” she asked.

“I smell it,” Zero-Five replied.

The Kark split into a half-circle with the Hadals disappearing. Soon, the stench of rotten meat became overwhelming. Something shuffled among the derelict building. They heard a pained gurgle.

A cancerous mass of flesh and tentacles erupted out of the doors with a ghastly scream. It was strangely humanoid except for the back which was a mess of appendages, spikes, and other revolting growth. Viv reacted immediately.

“Excalibur.”

With the range extended to a few meters, she sliced the creature’s feet off which barely slowed it down. Marruke received the charge on her shield and slammed the beast back, then the Kark struck together. The wounded aberrant collapsed against the wall. The Hadals emerged from shadows before it could right itself and planted their blades in its bulbous

flesh. Viv knew for certain the thing had no organs, and yet thick arterial sprays erupted when the blades withdrew. The creature died a few seconds later.

She had stopped herself from vaporizing the thing because the others clearly needed some mid-travel entertainment but... so many elites together against a weak aberrant certainly made the fight trivial. She shrugged. Gaining experience was all well and good but she could use trivial from time to time.

By her side, Marruk frowned.

“We need to burn—”

Viv disintegrated the thing down to the blood it had shed, then she did the legs as well.

“— it. Or this works as well.”

“Let’s check the city.”

“We go first,” Zero-Five said in a voice that brooked no disagreement.

The town was abandoned, but a cursory search revealed it had been done peacefully. Most of the furniture was missing along with any coin or valuable thing. They found only one house intact in a corner, filled to the brim with broken things. The damage hinted that the person living there might have been the one to go aberrant.

“Peaceful evacuation means survivors, hopefully? Maybe they left when trade died out?” Marruk asked.

“Yes, though we will get our answers sooner rather than later.”

The journey continued, the mood just as good as before. Those were people who’d seen death too many times to let an aberrant ruin their mood though Viv’s appetite was shot for a day. Those were really nasty beings.

Three days later, the group stopped at the edge of the woods. The ground lowered onto a vast plain of rolling green hills peppered with small copses. In the distance, smoke rose to the horizon, coming from the charred remains of a village a few kilometers away. Viv used a long view spell to have a clearer look.

Basic buildings, the kind built without skill but with patience. They were burnt to a crisp, completely demolished. Nothing moved. Not even carrion birds. It was recent too.

“By the Ancestors,” Marruk said.

The group moved forward, keeping their eyes open for danger. Whoever had done this might still be around and more importantly, they were without mercy. Viv remembered Anelton, the border town in Enoria, after Elix had been done with it. It paled compared to the level of

destruction seen here. Whoever had destroyed the village had been very systematic. She had to learn more.

She had not expected danger.

And then, something itched at the back of her neck. She recognized the sensation immediately. It was danger sense.

“Wait, something is —”

“Is Arthur supposed to be here?” Zero-Five asked.

Viv looked up to the blue sky and cotton clouds, to a distant yet familiar seek shape. The sun reflecting on shiny white scales, the crimson glow of malevolent eyes. Wings, longer than the main body.

The dragon roared. It was a lower pitch.

More muscular. Larger. Significantly larger. Around Viv, mana twitched in a way she recognized, as if the world itself became a weapon in the hand of her enemy. Every hue shivered when the creature pulled power to itself. It grew larger in her normal and mana sight, a tiny, multicolored sun contained in a package of fangs and claws.

The dragon dove.

“Spread out,” Viv said.

“What?”

“Spread out. That’s not Arthur. That’s her brother.”

Chapter 178: Weight of the Past

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 dragon 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?”

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 'hmp' 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?"

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 quebecois."

“Kessou?”

“Your leader. Mayor? Alderman? Elder?”

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

That better just mean 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 pained her to realize how much 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 sat 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.”

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 for 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.

Chapter 179: Hermit Kingdom

Frostway was built along a bay, and Viv had to admit that the Old Harrakans knew how to pick their spots. Far to the right, piers stood protected by encroaching cliff walls that formed a natural harbor, where fat ships with folded white sails bobbed placidly in the calm waters. Closer, the land sloped up towards her while a sharp incline to the right led to a fortress with thick walls overlooking the bay, battlements smoothed by time and harsh weather. The marks of a glorious past could still be seen there and in a few buildings scattered across the city. A series of warehouses and forges directly in the center of the city showed the typical brutalist style of Old Harrak. Same with barracks and what looked like an office, or perhaps a large house, she wasn't sure, but everywhere else, time had gnawed at the ancient splendor and no one had seen fit to resist it. Poorly made thatched roofs grew on ancient walls like ratty hats on top of cocktail dresses. Some of the smaller structures around the surrounding fields used salvaged stones for barns and sheds, the cuts square and uselessly precise. The town had expanded aggressively since the old days of the Imperial outpost until a shanty town organically formed around the town center, squalid and crowded. There was, however, a third type of building. Or rather, a single building. It was brand new.

Now Viv had seen some artistic horrors in her gods-forsaken radioactive dumpster fire of a life, but Baroque shit like this took the cake and then ate it as well. A palace squatted at the end of the road, just before it bifurcated right towards the piers. It was a gaudy abomination born from the feverish mind of a color-blind asshole who'd heard descriptions of Harrak from a compulsive liar, then decided to outdo it. That was the only reasonable explanation for this shocking pile of red, blue, and yellow engraved stones. It even had a cupola. It was the Taj Mahal's painted harlot of a distant relative.

Viv realized she had stopped and was blocking the way, but as the saying went, she just couldn't even. Yeah, Solfis could not be allowed to see that. Not until Viv gave up on a diplomatic solution.

"Viv?" Marruk asked.

"Let's just get on with it."

Morning light touched Frostway and did it absolutely no favor. Viv, on her horse, then a squad of the One Hundred, the Kark, and then the baggage train walked down the main road at a brisk pace. Protocol dictated that someone should have come to meet them, but no one had, and Viv was not going to stay planted at the edge of the city like an awkward cactus. She rode at a slow pace to give herself time to watch the land around her, but also to let the gathering of local soldiers she could see in the distance stew in their own impatience.

The slum dwellers made no secrets of their presence, especially the children. They ogled at her with naked befuddlement, like they absolutely could not believe their eyes. Viv took it as an indication that no one had reported her presence. Or at least no one had done so to the general population. The lack of horses could be a reason, but it also betrayed a lack of communication that she couldn't relate to. The only time she had ordered a sexy outfit to surprise Sidjin with, from a famous Baranese tailor no less, one of her attendants had offered to send a bottle of sweet wine to her bedchamber while she was carrying the damn package upstairs. Here, the fact the rest of the continent was still alive didn't warrant a single runner.

As they made their way further, the mood changed. The half-stone building residents retreated in their mansions with locked doors and fearful eyes peering through closed shutters. Viv was obviously Bad News. Curiously, Frostway didn't really have a commercial district so much as a bunch of large dedicated workshops, one for each trade, lacking a front or any form of embellishment or, indeed, advertisement. The foundry was a disappointment as well. Although people clearly worked there, it was obviously underused. Only one of the smelters was currently active, the rings of metal on metal lacking the loud intensity of Sinur's Gate's smaller structures. Sad batches of tools waited by the entrance, signs of rust already appearing on a couple of exposed tips. The palace was soon in view, and Viv swallowed back a lump of nervousness. Despite everything that had happened, she was still not really an experienced politician. Killing princelings didn't really count. She hoped she wouldn't fuck this up.

The locals went all in on the grandiose reception. Almost a thousand soldiers waited in tight formation on a large plaza, covering almost every available space, clad in pretty good armor and wielding steel weapons of solid make. There were even some on the palace's steps, and Viv felt blobs of black mana on the roofs as well. Ambushers of a sort. Robed mages stood in a circle at the back of the formation to provide support in case things went south. More tellingly, the soldiers blocked the path to the entrance of the palace and the three people standing there, at the foot of a massive statue.

It depicted an emperor, or that was what Viv gathered from the elaborate Harrakan armor and the imitation dragon crown. It was huge and, though painfully detailed, lacked that simile of life that made great carvings so fascinating. A poem was written on the pedestal, in Harrakan. Viv quickly read it. The short form celebrated the man's achievement with awkward, flowery prose. It was fucking bad.

Dominating the group was a man wearing the same armor made of gold-layered steel. Marus, Viv assumed. He was a handsome, clean-shaven bastard smiling benevolently, hand to the side and posturing like a superhero. A dour, overweight man in a custom chestplate backed him up. That one had enough medals on his chest to provide for a dozen magpies. The last figure was slightly behind the others, wearing a comparatively dull gray dress in the fashion of Imperial senators. She was an old woman with august traits and a quiet dignity that sent off alarm bells in Viv's head, not least because there was something in her soul that spread over all of the plaza, more so than from the emperor himself. Her gaze watched Viv approached like a snake watching a mouse dangling in front of its cage. Bad vibes all around.

Since it was a show of force, Viv made sure to close the distance until her horse stopped right in front of the front row of spears, just to show she knew what they were doing and didn't give a shit. Power games were a given on Param. It didn't mean that shows of intimidation would lead to violence, not necessarily, but it still took a lot of willpower to squelch the draconic instinct to just murder everyone and teleport the army in. She was not here to destroy. She was here to take, maybe.

The outnumbered One Hundred stopped right by her side around Brick's battle standard. They radiated smug condescension to a palpable degree. Many of them were two full steps

above their counterparts and, in the case of battle, that would only go one way. Not that they were even needed.

Viv smiled pleasantly. It was acceptable for her to speak first, so she did.

“Greetings, cousin. I am Viviane, Empress of New—”

The gray-haired woman spoke. Her voice blanketed the area and it felt... very strong. It reverberated among the soldiers as if amplified by their attention. It was a smothering thing, cold and terrifying. The weight of a nation.

“You will dismount before the emperor.”

Her voice was matter-of-fact. An evidence that made her own men uneasy. Far behind, gasps echoed from the supply train.

But what were numbers, what was a state to a dragon? Viv’s soul carried the weight of a slain prince, a vanquished elemental archmage, a defeated expeditionary force.

A redeemed god.

She let it all out.

Draconic intimidation: Expert 9.

“If you interrupt me again, I will disintegrate you.”

Her answer was as factual, sounded as true to the assembly as the woman’s command. Viv would, if interrupted again, dust the woman. And that was it.

And she would absolutely do it.

They would play the game subtly or she would just go to town and they would see. The absolute certitude of her words was echoed by Brick’s strange power, the woman ready to go at it at a moment’s notice. Viv’s aura bounced on her and the entire One Hundred glared ahead like a spiky cathedral’s worth of angry gargoyles.

“Good. Now, where was I? Ah yes, greetings cousin, I am Empress Viv of New Harrak. I recently learned of your survival and am delighted to meet you, from one inheritor to another. I have come to extend a hand in friendship.”

Or to bitch slap him. Most likely the second.

“I come bearing news of the wider world, and gifts from all across the continent.”

She signaled and the baggage train’s lead attendants approached with chests. Sadly, the soldiers didn’t move.

“If you accept them, of course.”

That was it. Viv had laid down the law. So far, Viv had been tested by a subordinate and she had returned it, but those were just games. Marus could take offense and demand submission, in which case this was going to turn into a slaughter, or he could delay the confrontation. From the expression of the soldiers, they clearly expected to have to fight and they didn't look too happy about it. A quick inspection revealed that, although those were Harrakan regulars, more than half of them were still second step only. It didn't necessarily look too good.

Viv felt the passing touch of a lot of inspection skills being used on her. Marus seemed to hesitate, but then he smiled widely. Arms extended, he stepped forward to welcome Viv.

“Welcome, lady Viv, welcome to Harrak, beacon of civilization. We are ecstatic to see visitors after so long. I am Marus, Emperor of Harrak. This is General Kobanis, the general.”

He pointed towards the frowning, overweight man by his side. The general mood was that Viv had fucked up and was going to get scolded, yet nothing was happening. The confusion only grew but no one dared speak.

“And this is Arana, Prime Minister.”

Viv, in turn, presented Captain Ban of the One Hundred, and Marruk, leader of the Kark detachment whom people watched with a mix of fear and curiosity. Zero-Two remained anonymous since he was an assassin and also because the only way to make him stand here, in front of a thousand people, would have been to drag him screaming there. A counterproductive use of Viv's time.

Viv noted that, although she had called Marus cousin as a gesture of equality, Marus had not returned it. Yet another slight. She held back her anger anyway. The game was just beginning.

“We welcome your presents with gratitude,” he said.

If he had used the word tribute, she would have had to correct him.

The soldiers were ordered to make way for the attendants, which caused a bit of shuffle because, one, the local soldiers were packed like sardines and two, they had been drilled by an ape. Ban turned an interesting shade watching the shitshow without hurling insults. After a little while, the gifts were brought forth. There were embroideries and a few blades from New Harrak which the trio eyed warily, bales of fabric from Baran, medicinal herbs from Enoria, spices from the north, and a few silver jewelries from the south. Whispers shook the rank before NCOs slapped a few helmets. Any more displays of unprofessionalism and Ban would explode, Viv judged. He was on the verge of apoplexy.

“Those are sumptuous gifts. As a token of our appreciation, we would like to invite you to stay for a few days with us, if that pleases you.”

“That would be agreeable, yes.”

“Excellent!” the smooth man declared. “While your servants make their way to your quarters, allow me to show you the splendors and achievements of the Empire as it has endured after the catastrophe.”

Viv only kept a handful of One Hundred with her while Marus led her around the city in a strange procession, local citizens watching them move around with utter shock.

Viv noticed that she was not invited into the palace. In fact, she would not even be hosted there. Instead, the manor she had first seen would be her base. It was apparently used by visiting local leaders during celebrations.

“Here, the seamstress guild perpetuates the glorious traditions and techniques of the empire!”

Viv oohed and aahed when requested while the visit continued. It was clear Marus wanted to give himself some time before dealing with her, and this was a way to do so. She obliged, as she needed information anyway.

Frostway was definitely a mixed bag. Production occurred in dedicated guilds that Marus admitted were tightly controlled state monopolies. Of course, he didn't state it like that. Those were 'centers of excellence for the most talented citizens of the empire'.

Or something.

The reality was more of a contrast. The facilities were ancient and crumbling despite ready access to earth magic. Space was obviously at a premium in some of the workshops while others had long, windy, empty corridors bordered by storage rooms collecting dust. If Marus held any shame about showing her disaffected factories in a clearly improvised moment, he showed none. Obsequious men and women in opulent clothes covered them in praises and platitudes while they inspected the best the Old Empire still had to offer. And yet, and yet, despite all that mediocrity and nepotism, undeniable flashes of brilliance shone like diamonds in a pigsty. Genius artisans struggled with limited supplies to create masterpieces, fugacious moments of excellence. They offered glimpses of what could be. Marus had been right in one regard at least. Many of those people had managed to keep long traditions alive through the catastrophe and the following fall. It was an uphill struggle, as the visit of the forge proved.

“Precious ore is brought here from the island every spring by our valorous captains,” Marus claimed.

There was clearly not enough ore to go around, and most of the metal adorned second-step idiots parading around the city instead of an expeditionary corps that would increase the mining output by, at the very least, clearing the mines of monsters. The trip between Frostway and the island would take less than a month, round trip, even with a full cargo. Surely it wasn't that hard to get more stuff in.

Viv abstained from sharing this observation with her host, who led her to the fortress in a silent five minutes walk.

Despite its tired exterior, Viv was surprised to find that the castle was not just in decent repair, but it also sported some decent magical protections. They went through a monumental entrance without issue, and Viv noted that the hinges were oiled and the battlements above, guarded by soldiers wearing a much more basic gear than what she had seen on the plaza. A shy apprentice led them through windy corridors to the office of the master of the place. Viv felt his mana signature through the doors before they even got in. Mostly air and water. It was cold, but also crisp, like a breeze. The mage watched her come in from a desk covered in papers. Marus had not knocked. Out of all the mages she had ever come across, he was the one who looked the most like an old school wizard. He was only missing the pointy hat.

“And here is Archmage Frosthawk, the current head of the Imperial School of Magic.”

“Ah yes,” Viv replied with a smile. “You were leading the tactical array near the palace.”

Viv recognized the design from both her class at the Academy and Solfis’ theoretical training. Imperial mage cadres tended to prefer specialized constructs, and this was no exception. The array would protect the mages inside while allowing the leader to cast a powerful version of a single type of spells. And that was it. Nowadays, war mages prefer a more flexible approach.

“A witch who knows about tactical arrays?” the man replied with doubt. And a bit of condescension.

Or at least, that was what his tone said. His aura spoke of a different story. It pulsed, lightly, in a pattern. One, two, one. One, two, one.

Viv stopped to think hard, even sending her mind into overdrive to slow down time as much as possible.

Frosthawk’s gaze was sharp. The pattern meant something, something familiar. She had perfect recall but she didn’t remember exactly the pattern itself, no. What then? She had heard it mentioned. Theoretical knowledge. Who had told her that?

By her side, she could see Marus slowly turn his head towards her. Frosthawk’s insulting tone would give her a couple of seconds. She only had to pretend to consider retaliation.

Frosthawk, name of an imperial family of southern mages. He was a direct descendant, no doubt. Not magery. Security protocols?

Imperial codes.

Yes, she had it now. Imperial code for long-range communication across large battlefields. This was a greeting, the equivalent of ‘do you copy?’. Crafty crafty. She allowed herself to smile.

“You would be surprised what one can pick up over the years,” she replied.

Two one one. Two one one. I copy.

The mage nodded.

“If you say so, then I will take your word for it. I assume you would like to see our facilities?”

“If it’s not a bother, Frosthawk old friend,” Marus lied through his teeth.

The mage proceeded to show Viv a series of classrooms, a library, and a magical workshop in a bored drone. From an outside perspective, it would have sounded like the most unmotivated demonstration in history. Secretly, Frosthawk tested her knowledge of spellwork through various little traps he left in his wake, which Viv enjoyed undoing tremendously. Frosthawk remained guarded, however, and it was clear that he kept a healthy dose of disdain for witches in general. So Viv made him stumble by shifting a rug under his feet with a delicate application of colorless mana. While he was casting his next trick. After that, the tests stopped.

It was nice to see that people had a spine. She shouldn’t have been surprised. One could stuff the military with their stooges even if it cost them their efficiency, but magic was magic, and mage candidates were too few to safely discard. Oh, Viv was sure that Froshawk had some form of political officer watching over his shoulder, but he was still competent. As was the scout head, Cerus. Perhaps there was an angle there.

The visit ended soon after, and Marus sent her ‘home’ by presenting the usual excuse of ‘you must be exhausted’. Not even a feast to celebrate her arrival! She must have really caught them off guard.

Viv retreated to her quarters, finding them adequate. No one was missing yet, and the One Hundred had finished establishing a perimeter. Viv spent two hours setting enchantments just in case, then it was time for a short war council. Viv found herself missing Lady Azar. This would have been a perfect playground for the crafty stateswoman.

“I am a little out of my depth,” she confessed.

“How? You are being an empress,” Marruk replied.

Zero-Two shrugged. Ban was not talking tonight. He had said what he thought of the opposition and then simmered in his corner, clearly eager to show them what a bunch of wankers they were (his words). Old Derin represented the supply wagon. She was still drawing on her pipe. Also not one for words.

“Let’s be honest, we could take this city in two hours.”

“Less,” Ban grumbled.

“Less if we don’t care about collateral damage,” Viv conceded. “I would just like to try it another way first. For once. The peaceful way.”

“You could negotiate with the people,” Marruk said.

“Yes, although they are afraid. And something else. A sort of aura over this place. I will seek advice before I commit.”

“That does not sound like you,” Marruk said with a frown.

It didn’t, Viv had to admit. She knew what was different.

“It’s because I’m trying subterfuge. No, setting traps in a dense forest doesn’t count, Marruk, because I was always applying what I was taught. Same as slandering Elunath. My first approach is always to find the right tool for the job, or create it. Here I will have to be inventive. Cunning. It’s fine. I need to get out of my comfort zone, sometimes.”

“It’s alright, Viv. If all else fails we can always apply maces to the face,” Marruk said with confidence.

“Thanks, you always know how to put things into perspective. Alright, let’s wrap up for tonight.”

“That bitch is going to ruin everything!”

Marus threw an amphora against a wall. Debris and stale wine showered a nearby couch, staining the pillows.

“Patience, my grandson,” Arana replied in a calm voice.

“Patience? She struts on my land with such arrogance. I am the Emperor of Harrak.”

“Do not.” Arana hissed, “Raise your voice at me.”

Marius bit his lips but his anger was misplaced. He knew it, and threw his hands up with annoyance.

“An invader in all but name. Where is your precious control now? We had no inkling she was coming. She has no family to threaten. No clan to exterminate. No money to seize!”

“There are more ways to control someone than just brute force, my grandson. I have already given orders for riders to return to the villages she visited and see if she left people behind. I have no doubts she will send runners back to whatever hole she crawled out of.”

“And those lands are not safe,” Marus replied with a smirk.

One Arana mirrored.

“Precisely. First, we will isolate her. Cut off her support. Then we remove her. She was a fool to bring Kark here. Ugly creatures. We shall spread word that they, hmm, crave carnal desire with human women. Yes, that will be a nice start. Unfortunately, she is no village head. It will take more than influence to finish her off.”

Marus scoffed.

“Surely you do not believe those lies. A single person fending off a dragon? Preposterous.”

“I agree, however, it matters not that she lied. That dolt Cerus is adamant that the dragon was fought and she is still standing, therefore she has the support of a mighty force. You did not feel her intimidation like I did. She has blood on her hands.”

“Then what?”

“There is a... simple request I would like you to make of her. One that would allow her to prove herself and might not just rid us of the problem, it will also make up for the slight she so casually flung into my face.”

“What is it?”

Marus heard the proposition, aghast.

“She will never agree to it.”

“She will.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because she is supremely arrogant.”

That night, Viv slept. She didn't really need it but she still made an effort to go to bed every night as a way to anchor her in her humanity. The rituals helped, as did Sidjin though he wasn't there tonight.

Something pulled her in the in-between.

Someone new.

Viv had no choice but to allow it. The pull was the most imperious she had ever felt, to the extent she could not even formulate the will to resist. Her presence was demanded, and so she would attend. There were no alternatives. Rather than the strange void that was normal, she was transported far, far away, and up. At the top of the world, where things like weather

patterns and atmosphere no longer mattered. A part of her knew mana was thick here, but it was a vision, and only a ghost of a sensation nourished her core.

She was standing in front of a throne.

A woman sat there, confident in her power. The throne was mostly unadorned though there were sculpted corpses on it that spoke of an impressive tally. The woman only wore a dress, and a sword rested on her lap. The dress was simple, the sword short and functional. Her hair was raven-black and her eyes brown, warm. She was beautiful in a very alive, imperfect yet charming way Viv had loved on Varska, yet the woman was very clearly a goddess.

It wasn't her power, which she restrained, but her dress. The hems were darkened, tattered, soaked with blood, and shadows danced behind them like behind the curtains of a well-lit theater. Knights. Mages. Assassins. Courtiers. The agents of the Great Game, all working towards one thing and one thing only.

Power.

Maranor, Queen of the Gods, leaned forward.

"Hello, Viviane. I believe our meeting was long overdue."

Out of all the gods except perhaps Efestar, she was by far the most human-sounding, as if she had retained much of her mortal identity. Nevertheless, Viv knew better than to provoke her. The gods followed obscure rules in the way they handled mortals. Viv knew this because without them, Octas would have dragged her in a dreamscape and then eaten her. It didn't mean that Maranor could not punish her. Painfully. So Viv held her tongue and gave a curtsy.

"Greeting, Maranor."

"You must be surprised to be here."

"Well," Viv replied candidly, "I was under the impression that you didn't like me very much."

And that was even without knowing about the divine spark of luck, which Viv seriously hoped was hidden.

"Because you bear the mark of my absent husband?"

Well, shit.

"I know how you came here, Viviane the Outlander. My husband disappeared in the Palace of Many Doors, then never came out. And recently I discovered that a blazing Outlander came to Nyil at exactly the same time. It was easy to guess that my dear brother Maradoc sent his old friend to another world, far beyond my reach now, which I find... unpleasant for a variety of reasons. And no, I do not hold this specific offense against you, not anymore. I

have had time to... reassess the situation. Admit that you bear no responsibility in this incident.”

A goddess being reasonable? Either she was leading up to something, or it was going to rain frogs for a tenday.

“I come to you to discuss the fate of the remnants.”

She leaned forward, resting her chin on her fists.

“That is what I call this land you are visiting.”

“I assume you do not want me to start a revolution?”

“No, I will support you if you attempt a coup.”

Viv tried to blink, though it wasn't really a thing since she didn't have a real body here.

“Pardon me?”

“You assume that I enjoy the current regime, correct?”

“I thought order was your thing, yes.”

“Order, yes. Power as well. There is a nuance between power, and control.”

Now Viv was listening. This wasn't going the way she expected.

“Before you begin, I wish to dispel what appears to be a... strongly ingrained misconception. I am a light god. My purpose is and has always been the triumph of mankind. I know you favor most sapient races and I will grant you that we disagree on this, however this is not relevant to the current discussion. We share the belief that peace and prosperity are superior to constant war and chaos. That it is better to build and prosper than to destroy. We are in agreement on this, at least, are we not?”

“Our disagreement has always stemmed from the method. And the cost.”

Maranor nodded. On the hem of her dress, someone was killed by a spear to the chest.

“It is so. My purpose is not to debate you tonight, because I believe that we will never fully align. I can accept this. I only wanted you to understand that we disagree on methods but we share a purpose, and that common purpose is the betterment of mankind. The remnants are currently under the control of Arana, and Arana has erred in her mission. For the sake of absolute control, she has eroded the power of the remnants to a nub of its former self, a shadow of what it could have been. She and her family have destroyed all who would oppose her before they could react until she alone stood on the pedestal of rulership. Now all that is left are sycophants and experts too cowed by the threat of terror to be a danger to her.”

Maranor stopped here, offering Viv an opportunity to answer. She didn't. The Goddess of Power was sounding surprisingly reasonable.

"I was not going to interfere. I had no reason to. Bringing chaos is against my nature. Even if it were not, Arana clamps on anything she sees as a threat. It took a major disruption, a seismic upheaval for her grip to loosen. Now, she will seek to reassert it by any means necessary, though she will try to weaken you first, as she fears your might. You two are on a collision course and there is nothing anyone, not even the gods, can do to stop it."

"And you favor me, despite my revolutionary tendencies."

"You were a revolutionary, a bringer of chaos, and so I supported your opponents. Now, you are a guardian of order. Your order. And so, I support you."

"I, uh, ok."

"Does it really surprise you that the Goddess of Power and Order would support an empress bringing civilization back to the Deadlands?"

Viv didn't immediately reply.

"Your opinion of us must be rather dreadful."

"Welllllll."

"Ah, what refreshing insolence..." Maranor said, and her power shifted.

Viv froze, or rather her soul did.

Do not tickle the god-slaying womanchild. Her visual acuity is based on provocation.

The moment passed.

"Since conflict is inevitable, I will attempt to minimize the damage. That is why I would favor a coup. I would simply advise you to send the Hadals you love so much for a decapitating strike but I already anticipate your answer."

"I gave my word I wouldn't use them as assassins."

"They have already assassinated people in your name."

"By their own choices. I will never force them."

"Even if doing so will endanger your land and cause more casualties?"

Viv resisted the urge to roll her eyes. It was an old argument she had, sometimes with Solfis, sometimes with Lady Azar. They had a very realistic approach to politics.

“You do not know that for sure,” Viv retorted. “You may think a small breach of a promise from a ruler would be justified in exceptional circumstances. What you are doing is destroying trust and setting a precedent. I will not do that. You think it’s a sign of weakness but you would be surprised how far people are willing to go for causes and leaders they truly believe in.”

“Enlighten me, then, Outlander.”

“They go all the fucking way down.”

Maranor remained silent.

“As would I,” Viv added with conviction.

“It is as I already said,” Maranor replied with a shrug. “You have grabbed power and now, it is yours, and your vision has been proven to be superior. If you wish to defeat Arana on her own playing field, you will need to crack the base of her power.”

“Fear?”

Maranor smiled.

“You are very close to the truth. Yes, specifically, her path. You must break the way her path works. The more terrified people are, the more certain they are that she cannot be defeated, the more real it becomes. You could, as I said, kill her, but it would be a bloodbath. The alternate solution is to remove her support one by one. The more you remove and the easier she will fall.”

“She might try to outright kill me.”

“Despite being cunning, Arana is single-minded. She will attempt to sabotage and isolate you before attempting an assassination because this has always worked and so it is all she knows. She is a prisoner of her own path, much more than you are of yours. Yes, you are. Your draconic aura partially guides how you react. As you grow more powerful you will also lose some flexibility. Already, it is impossible for you to let any slight go unpunished.”

“I...”

Was she, really?

Did it matter? She was the result of her choices. Hmmm.

“Do not be distracted. As I said, you will defeat Arana on her own terms, and the remnants will submit to you without bloodshed. Fail, and the country will be drowned in the blood of the innocents. And you will lose many capable subordinates.”

“I would rather avoid that.”

“Then do so. Gnaw at her pillar with that contagious vision of yours, and you will send the entire rigid structure tumbling.”

“Very well,” Viv said, and then waited.

And waited.

“You may depart if you wish,” Maranor said.

“What, you will not ask something in return for the hint?”

The goddess shrugged again, the move strange on her young frame. It felt too jaded.

“I only wish for my temples to remain untouched, and allowed to continue in their mission.”

Her eyes grew darker, more dangerous.

“Surely, you were not thinking about forbidding my worship among your followers.”

“Nope! Of course not. No religious war with a light god. Just be aware that Neriad is our holy patron and I’m not changing.”

“Of course. We are finished now. I would say ‘good luck’ but we both know how that will go.”

Viv was pushed back. Vertigo hit her soul and she woke up in her guest bed, sweating and a little disoriented.

Once she recovered, she lay her head on the pillow.

It was time for the League of Lesser Evil (minus Solfis) to make a dastardly comeback.

Chapter 180: All that is yours

Viv was summoned — sorry, ‘invited’ — to visit the palace the very next morning. Guess it had taken them that long to clean the carpets. She picked Marruk and the One Hundred as official guards, then went in without anyone giving her much shit. Walking by the statue, she reflected that it might look good to people who had never been exposed to art in their gods-forsaken life, and thus couldn’t know that more didn’t necessarily mean better or that there was, indeed, something called good taste. It suited Arana and Marus’ little slice of hell just fine.

The interior of the palace itself was just as cramped and overwrought as she was led to believe. A main hallway made a show of the empire’s glorious past, from ancient paintings to statues of long-dead sovereigns. Viv was actually interested in some of those relics since they seemed to date back to the heydays of the empire but were considerably less disintegrated than what she was used to. Taking a better look around, she found trapdoors and enchantments, movable walls as well as the marks of secret mechanisms. This wasn’t just a show of wealth, it was also a death trap. Potentially meant to hold out against a mob.

A part of Viv worried that Arana might just lose patience and try to off her here and now, in which case this would be a short operation indeed. It didn’t happen. A smarmy guide led her through winding passages to yet another small, crowded throne room where emperor Marus ruled over a court of sycophants. They eyed Viv with polite condescension in the same way old money considered the arrival of upstarts in their midst. Viv didn’t take umbrage. She would be purging them soon anyway.

It was telling that the palace seemed to be missing a ballroom. Even the small, vertical seat of her power in Sinur’s Gate could handle three hundred guests around the inner courtyard if she were to throw a party, and space was at a major premium in the high city. No, Arana was not a party kind of girl.

“Cousin,” Marus said, “it rejoices me to see you again.”

The use of cousin confirmed they planned on killing her. He would only condescend to call her his equal if he was reasonably sure he could make her pay for the audacious thought. She wondered how they meant to do it.

“I hope yesterday’s visit pleased you, and showed the grandeur of —”

Blah blah blah. Viv tuned out the platitudes to feel the place with her mana senses. The enchantments were strong and well-maintained, but they lacked the innovative spirit that came with elaborate traps. The palace defenses didn’t rely on magic, which confirmed her opinion that Arana’s grasp on the mages might not be as absolute as it was on the army.

Mages. Can’t control them, can’t live without them. Well, not fully. Viv navigated through the diplomatic fake speech with answers that flowed smoothly thanks to hours of training with Lady Azar. It wasn’t difficult anyway. It was clear Marus was leading to a trap.

“Our concern for our people pains us as they fall victim to the depredation of monsters. You have proven yourself capable of leading a hunting expedition when you fended off the white beast burning one of our villages. The empire would like to call upon your skills to bring an end to the threat once and for all.”

Ah so that was how they planned on killing her.

That was fine. Viv wanted to go after the little twerp to teach him not to torch children anyway.

“I agree. The dragon must not be left unchecked after attacking humans so indiscriminately,” she concurred, and she could see a triumphant sneer bloom on Marus’ handsome face.

“However, I will need assistance in this endeavor.”

“Cerus will lead you to the lair which we recently discovered.”

“I will also need Frosthawk’s help.”

Marus hesitated. The courtiers exchanged hesitating glances. Everyone was aware that something was going on, yet no one held enough cards to understand the implications.

“Frosthawk is required here for his duties.”

“None of which are as important as defeating a dragon,” Viv stated with conviction.

“I will order a cadre of our finest mages to accompany you.”

“As will Frosthawk since he trained them,” Viv quickly replied.

Then she tilted her head in a way that indicated this was non negotiable.

“You intend to send me against the world’s apex predator. Surely you can spare your court mage to help me lay down a trap. Otherwise, I would be questioning how committed you are to... what was it? Ridding your people of the depredation of monsters.”

The courtiers whispered, angry and provoked. If Viv had been a noble, this would have been suicide, but this empire had a dearth of elites and she was not under their command. They didn’t seem ready to handle that.

“We agree,” Arana said.

She smiled. It wasn’t nice.

“We shall ask for volunteers as well, from Cerus’ ranks. You may depart to get ready. Your escort will be ready very soon.”

Viv turned away, leading her soldiers back out.

“They didn’t offer supplies,” Ban said with annoyance. “Lucky we don’t need ’em.”

“I wouldn’t eat anything they send us,” Viv replied.

“Aye,” Ban replied, then after a pause. “Cunts.”

Ban’s opinion of the locals notwithstanding, Viv was actually glad to see a hesitant Cerus and a fuming Frosthawk join her on the way. Cerus brought a couple of sheepish volunteers but Frosthawk brought only a backpack and an attitude. He didn’t even have a horse, which she assumed were reserved for more important people. Viv left him stew in his outrage at first. Cerus pointed to a road heading south along the sea, a remnant of the old imperial days where people built them with some effort. A pine forest occupied the entire left side, thick and old, past the fields. It smelled pleasantly of pine.

After ten minutes, Cerus joined her.

“I, errr, that is, the mage, archmage Frosthawk, he told me where to go. It’s a small village to the south, along the coast next to the Winter Teeth. Those are two small mountains with a missing top. That’s where we’re going. We’ve been trying to track the beast to find its lair but the mages found a way. Something about, well, the archmage can tell you more. It will take three days to travel there barring any interruptions.”

Cerus gave her a meaningful glance.

“I am sure we can promptly deal with anything we encounter since I am, for independent reasons, rather invested in the defeat of this dragon.”

“Oh, errr, if you say so,” Cerus said, then he returned to the vanguard.

Zero-Five soon appeared from the forest, walking casually under the collective gaze of Cerus and his men. His mask looked particularly smug today.

“Report?”

“Pursuers followed us until they were sure we were following the road. They are currently falling behind. They are a spy path, not a scout one,” he said.

“We are being tracked? By whom?” Cerus asked while Frosthawk approached, his curiosity overcoming his anger.

Zero-Five looked to Viv for approval. He only obeyed her. Well, and Irao, she supposed. She nodded.

“Men in dark clothes with turbans and veils covering their faces,” he replied with a shrug.

Ninjas, Viv thought.

"The Eyes of Arana. Oh no, we are in serious trouble!" Cerus said with fear.

Viv rolled her eyes.

"Of course they will follow us, you fool." Frosthawk spat. "You and your 'volunteers'."

"We come to face the dragon," Cerus said defensively.

"You are an idiot. Arana is looking for those who show a little too much initiative, and now they have revealed themselves. And you let them come."

"We rise to defend the empire!" Cerus roared.

Viv deployed leadership this time. It felt strange not using intimidation.

"As much as I agree with Cerus in principle, Frosthawk is correct in assuming this was a test. Anybody present with me for an extended period of time will become the target of suspicion."

"You knew and you still called for me!" Frosthawk spat.

"We are loyal subjects, surely they wouldn't do anything?" Cerus objected.

He was the kind of guy who thought the evil tyrant meant well as long as he was not directly the victim, and now that he was, it was all just a misunderstanding that would get cleared quickly, Viv thought.

"You are being a little naive, friend Cerus. Some people will sacrifice competent underlings and valuable resources so long as they retain control of what's left."

"You understand Arana surprisingly well for someone who so readily attacks her!" Frosthawk yelled.

He was getting really worked up.

"Yes, because I intend for her to die."

"Die!"

He laughed bitterly.

"Die. You know nothing of her. You young fool. And no, you have dragged me down with you."

"I would argue that you know very little of the world outside."

“We are not in the world outside! We are here! Within her grasp! Not to some, fancy, outlandish place you utter mor—”

“Quiet.”

Viv deployed her wings, which she had kept tucked so far. Her aura came to rest on the entire convoy like a heavy clawed hand on their shoulders. Frosthawk’s words died on his lips. He gulped with difficulty.

Viv leaned down from her impassive horse, under the amused looks of Ban and Zero-Five. Her intimidation didn’t affect her the same way because they were her claws and fangs, the weight behind her words.

“The outside world is here. I am it.”

She leaned back, satisfied for now. Frosthawk glared but he didn’t fight her on this, though she did feel a kernel of resolve pushing back against her influence. The archmage wasn’t just a teacher, but a warrior as well.

“Now that we have established a working relationship, would you like to ride a horse? I have a spare.”

“We do not have a working relationship!”

“Too bad,” Viv replied with a shrug.

“Yes, I would like to ride a horse, please.”

It took only a few seconds for Viv to signal her aides and for one of them to bring a riding horse, smiling knowingly all the way. It soon proved very obvious that the archmage had not ridden one in his life, as everyone could tell, but he was too prideful to admit it. Viv felt sorry for the horse. As for Frosthawk, his arse would hurt for days and he deserved every second of it.

“So,” he said irritably. “Are you not going to plead your case with me?”

Viv watched him with polite interest.

“Plead?”

“There is no need to grow metaphorical scales over semantics, woman. You know what I mean.”

“Semantics is important during negotiations, however, I am waiting for... another arrival that I believe will help me make my case.”

“Why are you even here? To rule?”

Viv considered the question.

She was playing nice so far, but it was true that for the first time since its inception, New Harrak was going to do something that was objectively immoral according to modern standards. She was going to invade a foreign country — arguably reunite but, yet again, this was semantics. She was usurping the local government for the benefit of her own nation. It was, ultimately, the last step she would take towards being a local ruler. Not an outlander trying to import modern governing. An actual, bone fide monarch.

And she was fine with that.

Mostly because Arana was nasty.

She wouldn't have done it when she arrived. Over four years of contact with some of the worst the world had to offer had changed that.

“Yes, I am here to remove them from power. The question is not whether or not I can, but how much will it cost.”

“So let me ask you, do you rule over... New Harrak, was it, because you are such a powerful individual? Do you believe that your arcane might makes you superior since you can bend reality to your will? Long has this continent waited for a mageocracy...”

Froshawk was testing her. He was being very obvious about it. Viv wondered how someone who was so bad at acting could survive for so long under Arana. Maybe that was the point. Froshawk was competent yet an abysmal schemer while Cerus was desperately naive. They were not dangerous to her.

“I led people when I was only on the second step. This isn't about arcane might but about leadership, not the skill or the ability to move people. It's also about politics, which is the art of making different groups agree on a common purpose. My second in command has no arcane or martial abilities whatsoever. And I can tell that you do not want a mageocracy.”

“Indeed, no. I would not.”

Froshawk considered the road. The path so far had stayed remarkably similar: the sea to the right, beyond rocky outcrops. A forest to the left. Sometimes, they came across fishermen villages. They did so now, and Viv took a moment to watch the boats sail in the distance with a colorless lens spell. For all that they appeared decadent, those Old Harrakans sure knew their ships, especially since she doubted those had been built with a lot of nails. It gave her a bit of hope.

“So, how did you track the dragons?” she eventually asked Froshawk.

“One of my apprentices followed. The dragon leaves a massive mana signature when it hunts. We merely waited in a spot where it was often seen, then tracked its signature until it faded. By doing this a few times, my apprentices reached the edge of the Winter Teeth, and stopped. They are too weak to confront such a powerful foe. While you apparently can...”

Froshawk still harbored doubts.

“Probably a natural cave he enlarged for his personal use.”

“He?”

“Yes. The dragon is male. And yes, I fought it off myself.”

“Hmmm.”

Froshawk ruminated on this for a moment. Cerus whispered by his side that it was true, according to the village elder, to which Froshawk told him exactly what he thought of third hand accounts.

“Even if you are that strong, I will still not defect.”

“Because she has your family?” Viv innocently replied.

Terror filled Froshawk’s features. Viv waved her hands immediately lest the old man fell off his horse.

“I haven’t seen or heard anything. It’s just that tyrants tend to be extremely consistent.”

“Not just them. My mages. Their families. We are all... part of a web. And Arana endangers all of us. Curse her...”

He frowned.

“Is this the time when you tell me you can guarantee their safety?”

Another test?

“I do not wish to make promises I am not certain I can fulfill. You will need to tell me about what you know while we ride and while my people keep an eye on our followers. It would be wise if you keep a distance at camp. That way, their suspicions will not arise too quickly.”

“Even assuming you can save them, Arana is mighty. She has a thousand well-equipped and well-trained men with her, not to mention her assassins. We would be overwhelmed.”

“New Harrak is strong. Stronger than you think.”

Viv felt a light pulse of mana from the side and smiled.

Impeccable timing.

“And I can prove it. Here!” she said, pointing at an empty spot in front of her.

Frosthawk frowned.

“Are you deran — AAAAH!”

A burst of mana heralded the opening of a mage gate, and from there, he emerged, looking gorgeous in armored robes.

“Did you miss me?” Sidjin asked.

“Every hour or so. Frosthawk, meet Sidjin, my paramour and the creator of the gate spell.”

“A pleasure, fellow archmage,” Sidjin said with the unctuous tone of the consummate courtier.

Yep, it was going well, but as the two mages immediately went into the techniques behind portals, she couldn't help but remark upon herself.

Even when attempting subterfuge, Viv's first and most obvious reaction was always to try and find the right person for the job. It kept working, but it also meant she depended on others to solve her problems.

Maybe it wasn't so bad. After all, she was using her best tools for the job.

One hour later, Viv rode behind what proved to be an extremely animated discussion.

“It cannot be done,” Sidjin insisted, “because the mana consumption curve of connected portals increases at the speed of one eighth of the distance squared for every mile, thus making extremely long passages unsustainable.”

“But what could cause this then? Not the Seveno constant, or the spell would not function at all.”

Viv leaned forward on her saddle.

“That's because of the curvature of the earth.”

The two idiots looked at her, offended at her interruption. Sidjin recognized her smile and predictably went off at the same moment.

“Woman, don't you dare.”

“It's 'cause Nyil got to dig through rock to connect the portals in a straight line, see?”

“What? Preposterous!”

“THAT IS NOT HOW SPACE MAGIC WORKS AT ALL!”

“But there is a grace distance of a league and a half where consumption is minimum,” Viv replied, the very image of winged, abyssal-eyed innocence. “That’s because we’re digging through air, then the curvature means we have to dig through rocks.”

The two froze in their tracks. Viv had no idea if she was correct or not. It only mattered that they believed she might.

Sidjin choked on his fury while Frosthawk opened and closed his mouth in a solid rendition of a beached fish.

Most excellent.

She shrugged with the most insufferable expression she could manage. A second later, insults and imprecations washed over her, speaking of witch logic and other harmful stereotypes but she didn’t care, for she had already won. Sometimes, it took a nerd to lure another nerd. With this, her nerd collection had expanded by one. New minion: obtained. They could whine and protest all they wanted.

Viv rode on.

While the two were still arguing, Viv began her subversion of Cerus. It immediately became apparent that it would be an uphill battle.

“Arana is harsh but fair. She might be misguided on occasions, yes, however the same can be said of any leader.”

“Harsh? What is the punishment for failure?”

“Not death, I know what you are saying. Death is the penalty for treason. I have... failed several tasks, and I am still here.”

“And are some of the tasks perhaps impossible to realize? Unrealistic given the resources available?”

“We are meant to be pushed to our limits in the service of the empire.”

“No, you are meant to be under constant pressure and in a state of panic, so when she forgives you for an inevitable failure, all you feel is abject gratitude. Is she unpredictable, kind and motherly one time and stern and terrifying the next? Are you always on your toes around her?”

“I, that is, of course, a powerful advisor such as she...”

“Those are the tactics of an abuser. She will have you doubt yourself and shake with terror.”

“I do not serve her. I serve Marus and the empire!”

“But she gives the order,” Viv insisted.

Cerus retreated into his own annoyance, and Viv knew this was going to take some time.

“Your Majesty,” a gruff voice said from the side.

Viv turned to see that Ban had joined her. The dry old man glared at her with his usual ‘you’re my boss now but just step out of line and I’ll shove my pilum up your rectum’ look. So he was in a good mood, probably.

“Yes?”

“Lemme talk to the lad.”

“Oh, of course.”

“C’mere boy,” Ban said, grabbing the slightly taller Cerus by the shoulder and directing him away like he was five years old. Viv felt mighty pleased to have, once more, competent and motivated minions who were mostly loyal so long as she didn’t ask for too much. Truly, the empire prospered.

That night, they made camp in a secluded valley nestled between two small mounds, not far from a village where Viv bought fresh fish for only a few iron bits. The villagers were absolutely ecstatic to get iron, and Sidjin went as far as using some advanced magic to make basic tools.

“Mana-intensive and it makes for inferior products, but it helps in a pinch,” he said.

“You are very resourceful.”

“I strive to find a way to achieve anything with colorless mana. Perhaps one day, it will be the most used hue.”

Viv didn’t think it would for a single second. The unintuitive castings required will and fine control. Most people wouldn’t bother. She kept her remark to herself, however. There would always be a blue caster with a need to make fire and this would help a lot. They already had a repository of colorless spells safe in Sinur’s Gate’s library.

Zero-Five confirmed that Arana’s agent had caught up, and that they had placed themselves atop the cliff to keep an eye on Viv and the Old Imperial underlings. As such, Viv made extra sure to have both Frosthawk and Cerus’ borrowed tents set at a distance in complete

isolation. Anyone looking would assume she either hated them, or found that they had questionable hygiene. Either way, this would give the appearance of conflict.

After a nice grilled fish dinner, Zero-Five gave his complete report. The hadals had been extremely busy for two days, but now she would get a better picture of what she was against.

“They sent many runners. Path dedicated to speed. We could not follow them all so we followed two. Others went east, and north along the sea. We found two things.”

His mask was solemn tonight. It couldn't be too good.

“There is a village of prisoners farther north, on a large island a little off the coast. We found the ships carrying food to them, as well as some reports. There is another island called the jewel island, but it is hidden.”

Viv thought about it for a second.

“They may have the larger gulag, well, island, for the common law criminals and the potentially dangerous opponents and their families. The jewel island hides something more. I suspect valuable hostages might be held there.”

Zero-Five shrugged. The axeman wasn't exactly a keen strategic analyst. He preferred a more direct approach.

“The other runner was too fast but we found out he was going to a... favored village. The one that harbors 'general' Kobanis' family.”

“Favored village?”

“That is the term they use. They have iron.”

“Likely the place where the loyal guards are drawn from. It would make sense then, because in a revolution, they would stand to lose the most. Those we cannot convert. You will still find someone to scout the area.”

“Huh?”

“Find where the villages are. I know what to do with them.”

“Huh.”

“As for the villages north, they are too far from us right now. Frosthawk also mentioned during the day that they were spread out. I give up on them for now since we don't have the resources to spread out that far. For the southern ones, my understanding is that they hug the shore so I will show myself there to begin with. I would like us to start on the eastern villages, those that lead back to New Harrak. We will be... congratulating them on the

reunification of both inheritor states through the sharing of tools. Yries-made. I know we have surplus. Let Sidjin know since he is the one operating the network right now.”

“Understood.”

“Good. And let them know that I am going after the dragon and could use advice on, well, everything.”

Viv was confident she could undermine Arana, but going without her advisors to prove she could be subtle when she wanted to was a waste of lives she couldn't afford. She would at least bounce ideas off of them.

“Grandmother, the scouts have returned,” Marus said, waving a deciphered text with a lazy hand.

“It is as you suspected. She is trying to turn our people against us.”

“It is always as I suspect,” the older woman replied.

She was poring over reports in her office at the heart of the palace. Poorly made bark paper covered every available surface, pins linking them to one another. There were people, projects, ideas, conspiracies, clans, all bound together, all a massive spider web of feelings, loyalties, and influences. Control was about all of it. Nothing could escape it, or control itself would be lost.

The newcomer was but another hurdle.

“She gave Frosthawk a horse.”

“Lent, I assume, though it confirms my fears that she is indeed a distant Paramese and not a particularly obnoxious southern tribe trickster.”

“The Eyes report that they talked, but the mage told her off.”

“He is old and cunning. Her design must appear awkward and demeaning to one such as he. He knows the price of betrayal.”

“They report that they built a separate encampment.”

Arana nodded. She expected no less.

“She will still try to turn him around. The Eyes must keep a close watch.”

Arana surveyed the corner of her domain that covered magic. Mages were a necessity, especially in times of turmoil. She could ill afford to lose one of the Frosthawk's last scions, but if it came to it... She picked one of the images. Irlan. A placid man. A suitable

replacement if it came to it. If Frosthawk proved loyal, she would wait another two years before... retiring him in favor of the younger, more malleable candidate. Otherwise... well, she still had his family. He would accept death rather than see them perish, and if needed, she would ship the ring fingers of each and every one of his children to convince him. She had resorted to this tool before.

Such a headache, but that was the price of safety.

"I have ordered the soldiers to stay mobilized. I believe we should have them march east. Just in case," Marus stated.

"A wise choice, Marus. I believe the village they saved, the one under on Elder Osso?"

"Yes?"

"It was fully destroyed by the dragon."

"... I see. I will give the order. We should avoid destroying too many villages. The crops..."

"Hunger will pass. Revolt would not. Please have your men find any contaminated village and deal with them. I want to know where she came from, so have them find it for me. Follow the trail east. My Eyes will assist them in this regard, my grandson."

"What if we find them? Should we invade?"

"I believe this would be premature, especially since we do not know if they are the client states of adversaries we would be better served not provoking. No, finding them first is enough. We can worry about absorbing them once their troublemaker here has met her demise."

"What if she... doesn't?"

Arana reclined in her chair.

"What is my second lesson?"

"Look at the motives. She is not motivated to kill the beast. She merely needs to pretend she did, and so long as the dragon doesn't—"

"Not hers. The dragons. The creature is a predator. They flee rather than fight a tough prey because being wounded can lead to their death. It is simply not worth the effort. The same cannot be said if said prey follows them to their lair. There, the dragon will be backed into a corner, and when it is..."

"She will either die or flee with her tail between her legs."

"She cannot fool the Eyes. They will know if she lies."

Marus remained silent. Arana considered him with approval. Looking for points of failure to remedy them was a good quality in a planner. Her grandson was learning.

“How has the people received the news that the... Kark, was it?”

“Yes. I found a record of them in the archives. An unruly people.”

“That they are dangerous savages with a taste for imperial women. This rumor has taken well. I am concerned about the ‘empress’ herself.”

“The world that came after the fall is a decivilized one, and anyone who pretends otherwise is a charlatan at best, and a traitor at worst.”

“I see. I will pass on the word.”

“Good.”

The next day, it took some time for the Eyes of Arana to fall behind, but they eventually did. Zero-Five reported this to Viv mid-morning while they were taking a short break.

“They are being very sticky. How many are there?”

“Three, rotating often,” the masked hadal replied.

“They must be sending word back to Frostbay.”

Zero-Five shrugged again. He wasn’t being very cooperative with the non-murderous stuff. Viv wondered how long his patience would last.

“I have decided to keep our discussions a secret from Arana,” Frosthawk finally said from the side.

He was rather grumpy this morning, though Viv didn’t know if it was due to Sidjin’s departure since he should not be seen, the lack of coffee, or his natural predisposition.

“I appreciate it as a gesture of trust.”

“Indeed.”

“Though I would point out that she will kill you if you share this in case you are compromised, and she will kill me if she can anyway.”

Frosthawk grumbled something in his beard before conceding the point. During a break, Cerus finally confessed about his family and how they were, and he had trouble saying the word, threatened.

Then the dam opened.

“General Kobanis recruits his goons from Arana’s clan. They are a lazy, entitled lot... So rude and disrespectful!”

“Loyal to a fault,” Cerus confirmed. “They wouldn’t want to lose all of their steel. They have a lot of it. Most of it, in fact.”

Viv collected information as fast as she could, and it was... complex. The villages were too spread out to revolt, and there were a lot of them. The Remnants didn’t exactly have a census but it was abundantly clear there were at least sixty to seventy thousand souls spread out among the cold plains that hugged the Harrakan mountain ring. It was several times what Viv’s New Harrak currently had. She was basically a toad trying to swallow a bull, and yet the Remnants were so weak and disorganized... Of the loyalist forces, there were several she could finally identify.

The villagers, weak, scared, and untrained, but who could potentially provide shelter and information.

The Guardians, led by Cerus. They were only loyal because their families lived spread out in a few villages near the capital that were vulnerable to raids from nearby southern tribes. Raids that were only prevented by troops stationed there, and even then not that well. Easy.

The mages, led by Frosthawk. They would follow the old archmage, but his family was in the jewel island and no one knew where it was.

The Eyes, a group of spies Viv had absolutely no way to turn and that she would purge with prejudice anyway. They were basically a dictatorial secret police.

The last element was Kobanis’ army. Even inferior to her heavies, fighting them inside of Frostway would still cause a lot of destruction, which she would rather avoid if at all possible. Fortunately, she had an idea. She started formulating a plan, then perhaps the others would have ideas as well.

During her trip south, Viv did her best to win over the villagers, mostly with modest gifts of tools which they appreciated enormously. The difference between having one hammer and two hammers was not as significant as the one between one hammer and zero hammers. The same was true of saws, steel knives, and other specialized instruments that made life so much easier. It wasn’t too suspicious of her to have brought those, she hoped, and Zero-Five confirmed that no villages had been burnt after she left it. So far.

Soon, she stopped worrying about the coup. There was the small matter of defeating a juvenile dragon. On the day before they arrived at their destination, Viv secretly left her camp to attend a meeting set up near one of Sidjin’s portals, inside the pine forest. She gated there, only to find... a lot of people.

Quite a lot of people.

It was like a fae gathering, well-dressed mysterious people gathering in muttering clumps in the middle of the wilderness while reality was twisted nearby. The most notable pair, however, was made of Arthur and Solar. They stood at a distance and a little away from each other. Arthur seemed incredibly uneasy. She did that thing where she trampled the ground without realizing it. As for Solar, he was his stoic self.

“Greetings, Viviane,” he greeted first.

Mother.

“Your daughter and I have aligned on a very important point, though for different reasons. I will leave you to it.”

And just like that, he turned away to leave through his portal.

“Well that was quick?”

His mate needs help with their spawn.

Mother.

It is important.

I felt his aura near the village.

He really is my brother.

The two walked closer to each other. Viv patted Arthur’s neck like in old times. Of course, now it was considerably larger.

“We, ah, never talked about it. Also about what I did... Feeding you...”

Cannibalism is common in spawn, if the parent leaves them to fend for themselves.

It is... an insult among dragons.

Judgment told me so.

She seemed dejected.

“I’m so sorry.”

Yes.

I am, too.

Because he is cruel.

Like our mother was.

Judgment talked about her, also.

He may have been alone for a very long time.

Mother, I would still like him not to die.

It was a request. Viv nodded. It would probably be easier to force the dragon to submit or to flee rather than just straight up kill him anyway. As for him being an ally, she really wasn't sure it could be done anyway. He was... really an asshole. Even for a dragon.

"I'll try."

Then, you must face him alone.

The dangerous blade master agrees as well.

You must defeat brother in single combat.

Viv didn't have to think long to realize Arthur was right, though it seemed like an incredibly dangerous idea.

"If I face him with allies, he will see us as humans. Cooperating together to fight a dangerous predator."

Yes.

But since you carry marks...

"Then if I defeat him in single combat, I would be like another dragon claiming dominion."

He would listen, if only out of fear.

But only you can do that.

I am smaller than him.

His... primitive mind will not understand.

But you carry the mark of the nurser.

"I will try. It will take some planning though, and I may have postponed it for too long."

The others have thought in your stead.

They are ready.

Go talk to them.

Viv patted Arthur one last time to make her way to one of the largest groups of casters she had seen since Helock. Abenezigel was here, his size allowing him to look over heads. There was also Sidjin, Lana, Rakan, and Frosthawk whom Sidjin had apparently smuggled away from his tent, then many of the ladies under Lana, and Rakan's most senior trainees. The glances were unusually hostile.

"Am I bothering the conclave?" she asked.

"Could you please stop making a mockery out of space magic?" Rakan asked with false outrage.

"A mutiny!"

Frosthawk tensed immediately, however the mood relaxed with a few laughs then so did he. Sidjin approached her with a new harness.

"If you want to win this, you are going to need a lot of tools, but mostly, you will need to fly very fast. But before we do some tryouts, there was somebody who wanted to talk to you."

Viv hadn't noticed him, her keen senses overwhelmed by so many mana signatures. Lak-Tak was here. His thin mustaches quivered with excitement.

"Err, you're here for... Oh. Ooooooh."

Chapter 181: Slayers

The village had stood for centuries, mostly unchanged but for the ebb and flow of the sea, the people, and as always, the monsters. It was a peaceful place far from the reach of Frostway, and so long as the tithe kept coming, they were mostly left alone. It suited them fine.

Then the dragon came.

He took the fattest cornudons and two villagers before permanent sentries were picked by the Elders. By then, they had learned to fear the skies. Some said that the price of isolation was clear: no one would come to save them. Others said that many things came from Frostway. Salvation was never one of them.

It was a big surprise to see the foreigners come. They had skins of different colors, hair braided or cut in strange ways, and their wealthy clothes reflected several styles they had never seen before. The healer said that mana burnt around them like a pyre and they said that if any group of humans could possibly defeat the dragon, it would be them.

The foreigners said they were from the New Empire, an ember rising from the ashes of what was thought to be forever lost. Many worried that those were liars, or invaders, but none dared speak for the New Imperials were rich and mighty.

When dawn came, however, only one of them started the climb. The others stood and waited, and so the villagers did the same, and they prayed.

He was angry.

Anger was a familiar emotion, but also an ephemeral one. Anger was for those who opposed him, and they didn't live long. Anger, long anger, was new. New and very unpleasant.

As was the anomaly.

Existence followed rules. The beasts fought each other at the bottom. This was known. The bipeds ruled over some beasts, gathered in places of stone and dead wood. This had been a shock, but not a great one. It did not challenge existence. The bipeds could wield some of the colors, though not all and never many at the same time. It marked them as more resourceful, but still not like him. None of them saw fate, for example.

No matter what new thing came into Existence, it belonged in a spot beneath him.

This was the truth of existence.

Or it had been, until that morning.

He moved and his healing wing sent a painful sting of protest. Anger surged again. He hissed at a rock, a bone, but they were not the cause of anger.

Confusion was another new thing. Like long anger, confusion was unpleasant. He wanted to banish it but could not. It was also part of him. Still, he refused to handle it. He was dragon. Confusion and long anger were for weaklings who could not burn their issues.

Pain returned. He huffed fire, causing shadows to dance on the cavern floor. The air smelled bad from the meat spoiling in the distance. He considered changing lairs.

Another flash of anger came with the thought that he ought to just clean after himself. That was a weak thought.

Anger and confusion hounded him until he could stand it no longer. He peeled off the layer of emotional pain among those memories. Perhaps the confusion could be reduced?

The anomaly.

It felt like a dragon, yet was not. It felt caring, yet he had never been cared for. It was biped shaped yet strong.

Only the weak could touch only one color. This was understood as the truth of Existence. The anomaly could touch only one color but it was strong. It could move the world with a mana that had no color. It could not perceive fate, yet fate covered it like a cocoon.

The dragon coughed, an unfamiliar feeling. Painful. A little bit of fire stayed in his lungs, and that made him more angry.

The anomaly could use mana better than him.

He roared. The anomaly could not do this! It could touch one color only, and he was still better at every other one! Yet why could it stand against him, as a biped?

This made no sense.

He was above and the bipeds stayed below. It was understood as truth. Was the anomaly a false biped then? Was it something else? If then, was it his equal, or was it a fluke? Both possibilities made him angrier and more confused.

He coughed again. There was an unpleasant taste on his tongue, so he took another bite of fat beast. That one was growing a little sour but it was fine. The dragon was not picky. The lump of meat made him feel better but the clawing pain in his lungs made him cough again.

And again.

It made him angrier. He spat fire, then breathed the red mana, cleansing his lungs, and that made him feel a little better.

How can something be small yet strong? How could something touch less yet move more? Should he... try the same? But he was dragon, the top of the world.

The cough was deep this time, and so strong it moved his wounded wing. He shook with anger. The air was wrong, somehow. He needed the rarefied taste of the clouds. With heavy steps and a head full of unwelcome thoughts, the dragon walked out of the cavern.

And stopped.

There was... something hidden there. In a black nest that faced inward. Hidden from his senses. A small fire pushed the smoke of herbs towards him, and this time the cough was terrible.

No.

No, it could not be.

This was his HAVEN. His NEST. It could not be here!

The nest opened, revealing familiar eyes of the abyss. Reddish hair. An armor made of metal and cloth, the mark of the weak who did not have scales.

Impossible.

"Took you long enough," the anomaly said.

The dragon blasted the shape with fire. No no no no the words formed in his mind from sounds and it was wrong, wrong to mix perfect dragon speech with those... those mouth emanations. Had to get out.

The anomaly fired nothingness and it swallowed his flame greedily. He wanted to punt the little thing aside. Its instincts said he should be able to, but he had tried and failed last time. Failed! He coughed again.

A new emotion gripped him.

It was panic.

He charged forward and the anomaly didn't block him, but pain raked his flank when he walked by. One of his wings was not moving right yet. Still healing. He took to the skies, but so did the anomaly. Colorless mana propelled her forward.

He did a sharp turn, she could not follow. He was still better here! When he looked back, he saw that she had stopped. In the skies. Fate bound her to the planet in a tight embrace through the false wings anchored on her back. A flurry of seeking spells followed him. He was forced — forced! — to push them away with his own mana. The effort left him panting, lungs burning constantly. A new concept wormed its way into his head. He had been poisoned. Poisoned! But yes, it was a trick. A ruse used by the inferior. That meant he was still stronger. And bigger. It was understood. The ranking of Creation was set in stone. He turned around and fought, using his superior maneuvering to create some distance, then diving in but she started following and then casting while he was turning and losing speed. She was wearing tools, the treated skin of another beast meshed with metal torn from the earth and inscribed with those words the bipeds needed to make sense of the world. Weakness! He sneered, then saw the mountain and his cavern down below.

He was... he was running away?

He was being pushed back!

This was UNTHINKABLE!

He roared his anger once more, screaming at the anomaly. He struggled to evoke its feelings, which were mostly anger.

He needed the biped to understand that he was superior in every way.

For the first time in his life, he formed his thoughts into a coherent message. The meaning erupted from his soul all around, loud, so the anomaly could understand.

I. am. DRAGON!

“Oh I know. You're just not a very good one.”

He screeched in rage.

Needed to kill her. Needed to cut through that magical skin. Needed... something sharper. He gathered gray mana, but it would not be enough. Needed something to toss.

A rock.

A rock would do. Flying towards her, he gathered the power between his claws. A painful cough almost made him break his focus but he was dragon, and he would endure! The rock formed, then gray mana propelled it forward at great speed.

The anomaly blinked aside, a black mana trick.

“Oh? Learning are we?”

Arrogant! He was already mature... or was he?

Was the rock... a tool?

Was mana a tool?

Was he resorting to ruse? Against a biped?

His doubts returned with a vengeance, and with it, confusion followed. His control over gray mana slipped long enough for a black beam to hit his scales, darkening them and spreading a pain he failed to oust. Dark mana invaded his conduits. Foreign dark mana.

He dove towards the sea, trailing mana and droplets of blood. Another cough wracked his form.

Frosthawk couldn't believe his eyes. The cloudy sky above the fishermen village was the scene of a duel between flying monsters, a shock of spells that tore vivid lines across the heavens, visible clearly from down here. So far. Cold spread with the use of concentrated black mana. The booms of distant explosions shook the leaves on nearby trees.

That girl wasn't facing a dragon. She was... beating it? Arguably, it wasn't a huge dragon but... between this and the other one hiding behind a hill. The scene was simply surreal. Unbelievable.

Someone slapped his shoulder. He recognized Sidjin, apparently her paramour. The genius archmage gave him a smug smile.

“First time?”

He plunged into the water, and the anomaly didn't follow. The blue was thicker than the gray, and here he would have an advantage. A ruse. A ruse! He had to resort to a ruse!

Why?

How?

Suddenly, the blue parted around him. He looked up to see the sky. Liquid walls tore away from him, but he was too slow to react. A volley of spells erupted on his back, wounding him more and forcing yet another cough. He was choking. Too much effort, not enough air. Never enough air. He pushed more inside but it helped little. Too little. Life mana struggled to close his wounds. It was as if he was fighting the gashes themselves.

“Are you a fish?”

I AM DRAGON!

He surged. He could not run away. He could not fight from afar. He HAD to win in close quarters, and nevermind that his memory told him he had tried before. The anomaly was a biped, thus she was weak. She was weak, therefore he had to win. He had to win, but failed to kill her at range, thus he had to close in. There could be no alternatives.

[Aspect of the Guardian]

Claw smashing on a shield, barely denting it. Attempt to spit fire. Cough. Fail.

“Shatterstar.”

The shield exploded. Hexagons of nothingness bit into his flesh, opening more wounds that would not heal, took more life mana, and bled more. The anomaly’s presence grew more intense as well. The longer the fight lasted and the deeper its, no, her core burnt, and the more he could taste the froth of his lungs. She was killing him. He fought and threw everything he had. She blinked away, then her anchors planted themselves once again.

[Aspect of the Destroyer]

Power. Black and monochrome. More than he could bring out himself. Fate tied them together now until all he could see was the viridescent ring in her abyssal eyes. He could still not understand, but he was now believing. Believing he might not be the strongest. The realization cracked his mind, his focus.

She exposed her tiny fangs. She was, he realized, having fun.

“Not everyday I can just let go, you know? Fully let go.”

You are not mother.

“Not to you, no, to your sister.”

He tasted the truth in her words as gray mana kept him airborne and her own power focused to a sharp edge.

“Listen well, because I will only get to say this once,” she said.

Her grin was, for a split second, infinitely cruel.

She should not be having so much fun.

"I ate your brother. He was delicious."

That was it.

That. Was. It. He broke and ran for it, but blades of hungry void bit into his wings, the gray no longer enough to support his lungs and his flight. He plummeted, seeing the grass below, and in the distance, a white form. Familiar, somehow.

The dragon crashed down, tried to lift his head, then gave up.

The villagers watched the dragon take to the sky, and the witch followed. The human battled the mythical monster in the sky, one on one, on a background of gray clouds pressed by the winds. They moved too fast for peaceful villagers to follow, but they could see the flames, the air, the stones, light and darkness, great cuts and clouds and expanding spheres. Sounds of fury, destruction and on occasion, a free laugh silenced everything below. Even the raucous birds kept quiet while on the sea, the fishermen lowered their sails.

After a long battle, the dragon fell. They saw it fall. They turned to each other with disbelief. The dragon had fallen.

The witch had won.

The wind picked up, raising the standard on the foreigners' tent. It was a white pyramid on a black field, with dragon wings on the side.

It was curiously fitting.

The villagers moved closer, drawn in by inexorability.

You have acquired a new title: Dragonslayer (merciful). This replaces monster slayer.

A chiding mother, you have chosen the path of mercy. You have seen the child in the monster and stayed your hand. Perhaps your efforts will lead to a better future, or perhaps not. What matters is that you defeated a dragon in single combat and lived to tell the tale. Effect of social skills are enhanced. Effect of intimidation is strongly enhanced.

Acuity: +1 to 46

Willpower: +1 to 46

Champion's leadership: Expert 1 to 4

As it turns out, warriors are much more willing to follow someone who single-handedly defeated a dragon.

Draconic intimidation: Expert 10 (maxed)

You need to path up and improve your leadership in order to access the master rank.

Mana Mastery: Expert 1

Viv needed to pick a specialization, but she'd do it later. There was much to do right now.

I will take it from here.

She considered Arthur, now standing over the bloodied shape of her brother. It was... very weird seeing a dragon wounded like that. A part of her saw Arthur in his stead, which filled her with dread, but the major emotion was satisfaction.

Arthur's brother was an asshole. A violent asshole. And a moron. She was glad to have taught him a lesson, and there was hope for him yet, but redeeming him wouldn't bring back all the people he'd killed. Now, the country would heal, and perhaps Arthur would make things better. She'd done what she could. Ultimately, educating an adult feral dragon was outside of her expertise.

She'd have to trust her daughter.

"Are you sure? What happened to me felling him alone?"

You did.

Now I teach him.

Another kind of fear took hold over Viv's heart.

"What if he—"

I am not stupid.

I will never let my guard down around him.

He is cunning.

A mix of shame and disbelief shook Arthur's large frame. Her brother let out a piteous cough, eyes clouded by pain.

He is also embarrassingly dumb.

I will not underestimate how stupidly he can act.

Her brother lifted her head and roared, or tried to. Without looking, Arthur moved her hips. Her tail whacked her brother's head with the deafening crack of a whip's end. A few of the smaller scales flew alongside a few droplets of blood.

Her brother whined.

"Wow."

He must understand defeat.

"Ok, well, you're the better dragon here."

I will feed him to help him heal.

Her brother sniffed the air. An enticing scent covered that of blood. Seared fresh fish. And something else.

Give.

Arthur's claws clamped on her brother's neck in response to the imperious demand. He whined again.

Sweet fish sauce is for dragons who behave.

Her brother considered his situation for the first time, apparently, in his life.

Give, please?

Viv decided that her daughter had the situation well in hand. In paw. Well, whatever. She turned to the assembly of mages now standing at a distance, whispering among themselves. Frosthawk was still processing the presence of Arthur and the dragon's defeat. Viv approached him first.

"So, convinced?" she casually asked.

There was no response. Frosthawk just shook his head slowly, unable to process the recent events.

Well, she'd gotten worse responses. Viv was about to walk to the village and confirm the good news, but the nearby portal flashed again, and a person she'd never expected walked through. A plain northerner in lowly scribe robes, Lim the Fell-handed was one of the most unassuming persons Viv had ever met, but that meek appearance was a constant deception that hid one of the most twisted, unrepentantly evil minds Viv had ever encountered. Lim could not be redeemed. She could only be directed.

"What are you doing here?" Viv coldly asked in the northern tongue.

"Your golem sent for me. He said that you requested him to wait until your victory was secured, but you didn't say he couldn't send help," the sinister woman replied with a ghastly smile. "Helock was getting a little tense. I'm happy to come here to lend my expertise."

Viv considered sending the woman towards the Pure League, but if she was hired by Solfis, then she'd probably refuse. And besides... there was one aspect of her plan that demanded underhanded tactics. They were the kind the temple would sternly disapprove of.

"There is something you could help with."

Viv explained her plan. Lim's smile only grew wider.

"Aye, that will work nicely. Turn their strength against them. I'll ask for some help from your boys since we'll need to spread out. Alright. I'll be off then. Carrying out your will... Hehehe."

Viv watched her leave. She hoped the liberation of the Jewel would balance her karma a bit.

"Messenger birds report that a caravan came from the east. It carried metal tools, grandmother. Hoes and spades and saws. Hammers and nails. Axes. Chisels. All of them well made," Marus said in a subdued tone.

"Then she has the backing of a powerful nation. Hmm."

It did not come as a surprise considering the quality of the girl's gear. Arana considered her options, but there really only was one.

"Have the Eye contact the soldiers. Find every infected village. Track down and destroy the caravan. Hang the servants. Confiscate the tools. Have the leaders of every family who accepted a gift from a foreigner executed for treason. If the entire village succumbed to temptation, have them cleanse it."

"Understood."

"There was something else," Arana said, sensing further trouble ahead.

"The witch and her people. They defeated the dragon."

Silence filled the room. It was raining outside, but the palace was a fortress. Thick walls blocked the pitter-patter but not the wet cold that came with it.

“Recall my best Eyes. We will need assassins, for they are the only ones that can slay a mage of that power. I will have a ship ready just in case...”

“Grandmother?”

“It should not come to that, however we may now deduce that she garnered the favor of both Guardian Cerus and Archmage Frosthawk. I shall let the border guards know they should... take a step back from Cerus’ village. Have Frosthawk’s children brought in from the Jewel. I believe their presence has suddenly become very valuable.”

“Very well.”

“Marus,” Arana said to her grandson’s worried back.

“What?”

“We still hold the cards because the tools of control are still in our hands. Our ancestors withstood centuries of aggression, and she’s just one woman. Remember that.”

“Yes.”

“Why is it I gotta dig when we got those fancy mages moving mud around with a wave of their stupid hands?” Nag asked.

By her side, Feather planted her spade in the wet soil and sighed. She turned her dark, rich folk eyes to Nag who knew she was gonna get another earful.

“Do you see any fancy mages around?”

“Nay.”

“Then dig!”

Nag shrugged. Felt stupid anyway. This village was a half-burnt wart on the ass of the southern plain. Who’d give a shit? There was naught to steal but unripe wheat and ugly women. Even Nag, of famous thirst, didn’t want to drag back one of those sad-eyed dogfaces to her tent.

Skittish things. Even dumber and meeker than Nag’s home folks. She turned to Feather, who’d resumed digging.

“Is there like, a bumpkin scale, ya reckon?”

“For the love of Neriad, Nag, I’ll shove that spade up your arse!”

“Oooh the bourgeois using bad, bad words. What will your mother—”

Nag expertly dodged a tossed lump of mud.

“Mom’s dead and you’ll join her,” Feather warned.

The older woman brushed a wet strand of hair behind her ear, feather charms clinking together. Nag knew she’d pushed a little too far so she patted the other lady’s back.

“Hey hey now. I’ll dig, promise. You wanna take a break? Tell that good-for-nothing Salt to replace you.”

“I can do it,” Feather grumbled. “I am not weak. I can dig like everyone else.”

“You’re new, aye? Take it easy. There’ll be plenty of holes ta dig yet. Oi! Salt! You old fuck!”

Beyond the trench, the man was ignoring them, back turned to them. He had his crossbow in his hands.

That wasn’t right.

“Salt?”

“Got something. There. Look”

He pointed away, towards the west. The road snaked away from their unnamed village where the empress herself — the gods bless her arse — had supposedly whipped a small dragon. Crossing fields, then patches of forest, it led to another village leagues down there, closer to the sea. A tool caravan had left for that place over a day ago.

“What? We can’t see it from here,” Feather complained.

“Nay, lady. Look up,” Nag said, pointing at the blue sky.

A trail of black smoke emerged from the edge of the woods. It was a bit diffuse, but it was gaining in intensity with every minute.

They stopped digging. Nag breathed the cold spring air. Tasted fresh here, nice, but there was something in there that woke up her old instincts. The lash scars on her back started to burn a bit.

“Trouble,” she said.

Salt nodded. The old head checked his quiver, then he turned around.

“Nag, mind going to tell the chief? I’ll go take a closer look. Be back in fifteen.”

“You’re going to the boulder?”

“Aye.”

“Aight. Be careful. You, girlie, come with me.”

Feather followed without complaints this time. Nag didn’t outrank her and the fallen bourgeois didn’t like taking orders from a yokel, but she could sense it was getting serious. Good instinct on that skittish mare. They’d make a Bitter Heart out of her yet.

Nag walked at a brisk pace, all official like. You didn’t run in front of the civilians unless you wanted them to run as well, or panic. Then everything was a mess and it would be Nag’s fault again.

A sad woman knitting a shawl watched her walk by, frowning with mild disapproval. One of these. Nag gave her her best smile.

“Hey there.”

The seamstress blushed and averted her eyes.

“I bet you cry when you climax,” Nag said as a parting barb.

The seamstress took her shawl and rushed home. Feather half-chuckled, half-groaned behind her. Nag had her fill of banter for the next thirty seconds so she hurried, and the Elder’s house was soon in view. Well, new house. Old one was still burnt to a husk with the elder’s grandson in it. Damn dragon.

She barged in.

Elder Esso stood at a nearby table, counting things and whatnot on a piece of New Harrakan paper. Auntie frowned when she saw Nag, which Nag had to say was the normal Nag reaction.

“Nag...”

“Smoke on the horizon, west side.”

Elder Esso paled. He prayed to Maranor under his breath while Auntie strutted towards Mag, her gray braids bouncing with every step. Nag soon found herself looking into the chief’s suspicious eyes. The scars remained pale but the boss’ face was turning red.

“And?”

“Definitely coming from the next village. Salt went to the boulder to scout. We ran here to tell ya.”

West meant the old empire, and from what Nag could tell from the little Harrakan she spoke, those weren't too nice.

Elder Esso said something in a melodious tone. That was why Nag would never want to be a chief. Had to learn foreign languages of the people you were trying to kill. Bother.

The chief replied. It was a bit brisk but Nag got the gist of it. 'The village is burning, of course we're getting ready to leave just in case'. Elder Esso stood up, all dignified like. Nag could tell he was scared as a Harrien though, but kudos to him for not turning tail.

"Feather, go east and tell squad two to grab everyone. We meet at the west gate. Nag, you go find Salt and back him up. I'll be here trying to get those fuckers to move."

Nag was out of the door legging it before the chief started to scream. Force of habit. She jogged past the gate just as the alarm was ringing and the surviving villagers started running around like headless birds. Some of them broke down. Poor sods. Too many kicks in a row.

She fell into an easy run, her [poacher's gait] kicking in. The fields extended right to the edge of the forest, right where the children would be foraging for berries and mushrooms. Right season, too. Nag regretfully left a nice plump harrien run away from her since she was in a rush. Her feet carried her through an overgrown path up a tiny slope with sure steps. Sure, the mages could disintegrate a mountain, but could they run fast in the woods? Fuck no. But Nag could.

She stopped before she reached the boulders. Footsteps, ahead. Three adults. One limping. She clicked her tongue, and the call of a bleak sparrow returned a moment later.

She swung her crossbow back over her shoulder. Salt appeared a moment later. He was helping a civvie move on, a sturdy man with a bandaged wound on his thigh she recognized from the tool caravan. A woman carrying a toddler came next. She was absolutely exhausted, so Nag moved in to help.

"We... we are—"

The woman said something in imperial that ended with 'weh', peppered with southerner. She didn't get it.

"No talk. Wait village," Nag replied.

They moved fast, or as fast as they could. Nag ended up carrying the crying toddler in her own scarred mitts wondering how it came down to this after doing everything in her power to dodge the little shits. The woman almost broke down when they arrived at the gates of the village, and a relative of hers rushed ahead to help.

Nag was happy to see the toddler go. She'd not even dropped him once! But she knew she wouldn't like what came next.

“Report,” Auntie said.

Lots of villagers had already gathered, and the crying lady got busy hiccuping through her tale in their weird tongue. Nag saw the chief had people bring crates of supplies so she grabbed spare quivers and latched them on her belt. Got a feeling she would need those.

“The village was burnt by regulars,” the wounded man said while a couple of villagers patched him up.

“Come again?”

“Not by southern tribes. By old imperial regulars. They saw the tools and they, I don’t know, they went mad. Starting killing everyone in the village. We ran. My friend helped me, pushed one away with his spade. We got separated. I hope he’s alright...”

“Focus. How many? What are they doing now?”

“Maybe two hundred?”

The chief swallowed back a curse.

That was maybe half of the current village population. Talk about overkill.

The Bitter Hearts had two ‘sleeves’ here. Twenty-five warriors, total.

“What do we do?” Feather asked.

Around them, the two squads were gathering with a couple stragglers running across the field. Nag was one of the youngest around. Most others were older, having switched paths later in their life. Feather used to be a ‘castellan’ before her family got killed. Salt was a teacher. Blink was a prostitute.

They all knew the score.

“At least they don’t get mages,” Nag grumbled. Small favors.

“What do we do? You know what we do!” Auntie roared. “We’re the bitter hearts!”

“Last out,” everyone replied with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

By their side, the surviving woman finished her tale. She was wailing now.

“In case you fine folks don’t get it, the regulars kill everyone they get to, no exceptions. They won’t do it here. We’re not the best or the brightest but we’re here for the people and we’ve never been found wanting. Today won’t be an exception. Elder Ezzo will lead his people west while we fight a delaying action.”

Nag nodded. The villagers would have a lot of kids with them. It would slow them down. Regulars would just catch up to them under an hour from here.

“They were regrouping when we got into the forest,” the caravan hand groaned. “I’d say, fifteen minutes before they arrive. Maybe more.”

“You hear that, Esso? You folks need to leave NOW! Ergan, you go with ’em.”

The caravan hand nodded. He wasn’t a fighter.

Nag sighed. What was it with this outfit that they just kept getting into battles? She was sure no other fucking warband on Param got into as many scraps as they did. At least it wasn’t suicidally murderous lizards things this time. Neriad’s cock.

“Right. Move to the forest, loose formation around the road. Mug, you take the right flank. I take the left. Grab as many bolts as you can carry, cause I don’t think we’ll be recovering those. MOVE.”

Nag had already done it, but she pushed a hesitant Feather forward. The lady was pale and her fingers, a bit shaky. That was her first real scrap. Pinning revenants wasn’t the same.

“You got this, princess.”

“For the last fucking time... Ugh.”

“Stay with me and we’ll get through this, alright? Your old pal Nag knows how to make it out of trouble.”

Feather nodded. Nag smiled. Twenty-five against two hundred?

Yeah, that was gonna be a tall order.

At least they had no mages and no riders. Or Nag would have been praying for a quick end by now.

The Bitter Heart squads melded into the forest. Nag forgot about the rest and focused on the woods in front of her. The inexperienced crossbowmen and women moved through the woods with mixed stealth. Nag was silent as a shadow, of course, but fat Nedys to the right could have passed as a stone hog. Maybe Nag could teach her to grunt and that would solve everything.

The two ‘sleeves’ fanned out. Nag was on the left flank, with Feather on one side and Salt on the other, slightly behind. They moved up until even Feather could hear the stomps of metal boots on the path ahead. Auntie signaled to stop and they did, the signal relayed across the line.

And then Nag heard it, to the side. She signaled quickly.

'Two soldiers. Front. Heavy.'

The others stopped and lowered themselves, cloaks merging with the woods around. A moment later, Auntie's reply came.

'Kill'

Exactly as expected. Nag lifted her crossbow and focused. [Patient shot] wound up as the footsteps approached.

Two soldiers walked over the crest of the slope. Armored. Helmets off for a better view, maybe? Bored. Confident. Foolish.

A feathered quarrel bloomed on the back man's face, right below the nose. Hers. Muffled twangs replied and other quarrels caught the lead man in the throat, eyes. Nag was already sprinting. She caught the back man before he fell, pushing him over her shoulder. Fucking heavy. Salt had the other. They retreated, then pushed the bodies against a trunk.

Nag now had some blood on her shoulder. Ugh. She checked the lead man, just in case.

Feather's quarrel was the throat one.

She raced back to her position, gently patting Feather on the shoulder as she passed her by.

"Nice shot, girlie."

Feather nodded, leaned forward, then vomited her lunch.

Waste of food. Bah. Though she didn't feel like it, Nag chuckled at the stuffy woman's expenses. She had a reputation to maintain.

Nag returned to her position. The column was getting closer. There should have been sentries looking at the sentries in case someone took them down — standard Witchpact operation protocol — but those regulars were awfully sloppy.

Another signal. The line climbed up to the crest, and now Nag could see much farther, including the road. There were a couple of flankers making their way up but they were discussing and laughing. After burning a village, no less, Nag thought with a note of annoyance. The road was down and to her right, and the column was fast approaching.

She kneeled and waited. Feather aimed, then stopped when she realized Nag kept down. Crossbows were heavy. No need to tire her arms just yet. They would be plenty tired before this was over.

The column arrived in full view, led by a powerfully built warrior on a horse. Rare things, those, at least down here. It must be important.

Too bad for him.

Bird call. Bleak sparrow again. Nag aimed.

Auntie's bolt caught the leader in the head. Her enchanted bolt practically cut it in half, covering the vanguard in brains. Nag was one of the first to get a good clean hit on another guy, in the chest. He fell with a scream. At this range, crossbows went through mail like butter.

The Bitter Hearts silently unloaded into the screaming block, but they were fast to react. A bulky man screamed orders until a shield wall formed. It was slow though, and Nag scored a few more hits between clumps of skill-backed defenses. The bleak sparrow call came again. Two shorts, one long.

Time to leg it.

Nag fell back at a dead race, Feather and Salt on her heels. They stopped at the nearest slope and took position while the rest of the sleeve fell back in turn, and not a moment too soon. The first of the enemy regulars crested the incline in groups of five. Nag's [Patient shot] caught one in the helmet but it failed to penetrate. Probably a defensive skill, dammit.

The second half of the sleeve covered the first one while it raced out of the woods. Nag resisted the urge to turn tail while Mug sprinted by her. Her covering shots kept the regular at bay, but more and more small groups were appearing, moving forward carefully behind their skill-backed protection. Her next quarrel pinged against a steel shield, failing to penetrate.

Bleak sparrow call again. Time to run. Again, the regulars saw the Witchpact disengage and thought it meant they could run but the rest of the sleeves got a few heads, and they returned to hunkering behind shields. Like this, the Bitter Hearts reached the village gates with no casualties.

"They don't have archers?" Feather asked with a fearful voice.

"Don't jinx it, girlie."

"For the last time, Nag, I'm older than you!"

No archers came to puncture Nag's buttcheeks, by some miracle. The regulars were advancing slowly towards the gates, again in groups of seven or eight, forming half-circles. It would allow them to move around without losing their defensive posture.

Frustrating.

Nag realized she was on her second quiver. Auntie and the others were still taking potshots at the foe. Nag felt something was wrong. The lash marks on her back flared, telling her of danger.

"There," she said.

Large groups of regulars were rushing along the flanks of the village. They were trying to surround them.

“Auntie?”

“I know, Nag. Saw them too.”

The rest was left unsaid.

The villagers needed more time.

“Sucks to be us,” Nag said.

Her scars told her to run. They’d never been wrong. Not once.

“What?” Feather asked.

“Nothing girly.”

Salt didn’t speak. He got it too. Village wasn’t big either. Thirty houses, half of them crispy. Yeah.

No place to hide.

It wasn’t too late to run.

“Fall in. Squad two, move to the other gate. Stand then city combat, groups of three.”

Yep.

Nag switched to patient shots. Hers were dangerous and she caught two greaves and an eye by the time the fuckers were too close to get in. Feather was breathing hard and missing every shot, but at least the loud pang on their shields taught them to advance carefully. Then the closest group of seven soldiers broke out and charged.

Nag was waiting for it. She turned and used [Witchpact parting], catching a fucker in the stomach. With his magical defenses down, the reg fell like a sack, slowing down the others. Her group retreated into the village at a brisk pace. Salt got a great shot on one of the sergeants too, then the rest of the reg squads charged and the Bitter Hearts legged it. Nag took the lead because she was the fastest and because her back scars burnt now, whispering what to do. She turned right in a spot between two houses, only one burnt. The next reg to appear somehow caught her bolt in the shield. Without a defensive skill, the bolt pierced right through but stopped against the fucker’s gorget. Still gave him a good scare though.

The race was on.

Nag guided the other two through a labyrinth of sheds and barns, her feet trampling gardens in their mad dash. She heard String die first, somewhere behind. Cornered probably. Another quickly cut scream might have been Nell. She had to stop thinking about her friends dying or she'd be next.

Her scars flared again.

"Up," she said.

Jumping, she managed to catch onto a beam and then drag Feather up. The two of them got Salt halfway before the regs found them. They were too heavy to follow. One of them threw his spear, but it was clear he had no skill for it and the improvised javelin missed Salt by three handspans. Nag would have laughed if she had the spare breath to do so.

"Go."

One more quarrel, this one catching the spear chucker in the ribs. He'd be down for a while. Another scream in the distance marked the death of another Bitter Heart. Nag urged the other three across the roofs, of which there were exactly two before they came across the main road crossing the village from end to end.

Mug and Auntie were at the edge of the road, blocking one of the side passages and battling a pair of soldiers. Mug was already bleeding. They didn't have shields.

"Ah!"

Feather stumbled.

A stone. The regs had thrown a fucking stone. Salt tried to grab her, but in vain. Feather fell awkwardly, on her waist. There was a crack.

The regs caught up to them. Mug and Auntie's backs were exposed. Nag's scars flared again, more painful than usual.

That was it then.

Nag fell right behind Salt. Her [Witchpact parting] landed one last good hit before she had to draw her short sword. The reg facing her still had a quarrel lodged deep into his shoulder. She exchanged a few fast strikes with him, sweating, while Salt handled the other. Nag wasn't used to this standing and fighting. She didn't want to be here, facing that fucker who was trying to skewer her. Parry. Counter. This wasn't her way of fighting!

By some miracle, she managed to deflect the guy's blade into the wall. Her counter landed square on his chest, only to bounce off his chestplate. She ducked under the counter but it almost landed on Salt's cheek. They were very close. She could smell the bastards.

Auntie grunted. Not good. A twang and a man's yell told her Feather wasn't staying down either.

The wounded man got pulled back by a massive hand belonging to a warrior in decorated armor. Tall fucker, calm despite everything.

“Finally,” the man simply said.

She recognized him. He’d given orders to keep his men calm after Auntie sniped their officer. Nag brandished her short sword like it was going to matter. She received the first blow just right, but the blade continued and cut into Salt’s flank. He fell. His opponent moved in for the kill.

The second strike smashed her against the wall. Her entire arms shook from the effort of just not dropping the blade.

The third blow fell down, and Nag’s mind went white. Her sword fell.

Her hand was— She stared in shock. it was missing half. Blood pumped from the gaping wound. Where were her damn fingers?

It hurt.

“Blame yourselves for being weak, weh” the officer said laconically.

Nag looked up and the last thought crossing her mind was that she’d died without getting laid first.

Then there was a horn. A ringing horn. Was it early or late? Nag couldn’t be sure. Behind her, the sounds of battle stopped as men swore and fell back. The officer frowned. His partner took a step back from Salt’s prone form.

Something rose from behind the officer as a man stepped in. He was tall, bearded, and wielded a massive two-hander that got to be a pain to use in an enclosed space. From the blood though, he’d just used it.

She recognized him from church. That was Lorn, the temple guard boss. Gold light shone from his eyes when he stepped forward. His sword blazed red, overloaded with fire mana. The heat blazed in the alley like a small sun. That man was angry. He opened his mouth, and out came a sentence that would stay with Nag forever.

“Right back at you.”

Lorn killed the officer in three swings, then he turned around and obliterated his way through another squad. A warcry filled the main street.

“The Rose.”

“AND THE THORNS!”

The regs ran, but not fast enough. Nag saw a pair of fleeing men past Auntie and a heavily wounded Mug, then a wall of steel, blue roses, and black barding, and then just a lot of blood. She realized she was sitting on the ground next to a groaning Salt. Someone was bandaging her wound. It was Feather. The smirk warned her of what was coming.

“Hey.”

“Don’t you dare,” Nag said.

“Need a hand?”

“Fuck you.”
