

There were two people who would not be returning to Kazar. Denerim placed a fatherly hand on Viv's shoulder as they stood to the side to let the convoy go on.

"So, this is goodbye. I still remember that you almost tossed us out when we first met you."

"I was having a bad day and religious law enforcement doesn't exactly have the best reputation where I came from."

"Oh, you must not have met inquisitors of Maranor yet."

"No? Why?"

"They're cunts. But you didn't hear it from me."

Viv smiled. Denerim seldom swore and his sudden vulgarity lifted the mood, somewhat.

"I wonder why I have not met her clergy yet."

"That is an easy question to answer, my dear. Kazar is a forgotten mudhole and the destiny of an entire kingdom is being decided on the other side of the woods right now. That's where most of them are going to be. In any case, I wanted to thank you, not just for the regrowth spell but also for helping us all those times. You are a good person at heart."

"Yeah, not so sure about that, Denerim."

"First, bad people worry much less about being good and second, a bad person would have asked payment to kill the acolyte of Gomogog. You didn't"

Viv tried to remember that night and realized that yes, she had just jumped right in.

"Fighting for good does not mean that you can't be an underhanded asshole about it, as I am sure you already know. I hope you never forget that even we inquisitors also use deception and face grey decisions. We don't fall when we take the wrong one. We fall when we stop caring."

"Oh."

"Look at the old man rambling again," Orkan said, gently pushing himself in front of Viv. Viv thought that Denerim might get pissed but the older man merely chuckled.

"He is right. We have a charter. I am merely repeating the church's precepts. You are not a very fervent person Viv, for obvious reasons, but you might still want to have a look. Who knows? Maybe Kazar can become a principality like Helock or Mornyr and the church of Neriad becomes its state religion?"

"Wow, aren't you going a bit fast?"

“Merely preparing for the future, my dear. I will let you and Orkan say your goodbyes. I need to have a talk with the veterans.”

The Hallurian appeared to be a bit nervous. His tattoos pulsed lightly in the shade of the nearby trees.

“Yeah. So. I wish we could have stayed longer. I will miss our training sessions, going through the woods and bringing back harrens and other beasts to roast over a nice fire. Thank you for seeing me like a person, not just the man with two blades. It really made a difference to me on a level I cannot express. I really hope we meet again,” he said with a blush.

Viv stared at his quickly retreating back with a growing suspicion that she may have been really, really oblivious.

“Wait. Was he flirting?”

//I always assumed that you were not sensitive to his advances.

“But he never said anything! Never tried anything!”

//Perhaps his physique usually suffices to attract partners.

//I must say, with how inefficient human reproduction methods are, I always expected that getting to the mating part would be a streamlined process.

//Truly, I fail to understand how your species managed to propagate.

“Damn.”

Viv thought that Orkan was a bit of a stud if not exactly someone she could see herself dating long-term because she didn’t exactly click.

“I should have at least gotten laid,” she commiserated. “Ah well maybe next time.”

//Please remember to use measures to prevent pregnancy, such as a cold-womb ring, or an infusion.

“No problem if I have a kid I’ll just have you raise them.”

//A yes, a subject for my experiments.

“Nevermind.”

Viv and the rest of the group left with the convoy. She burnt with questions on Enoria and so on but decided to wait until they stopped for the night. For some reason, the veterans were tense and extremely professional. They didn't have scouts and so Two-Six became everyone's favorite girl. Despite her assurance that nothing had spotted them so far, the troop progressed with vigilance. It was easy to guess why since many of the veterans had brought their families.

It was only after night had fallen and they had finished establishing a secured camp complete with sentries and a perimeter that the unofficial leader invited her to his tent to explain things. Like most of the group's possessions, his tent had seen better days. It showed clear signs of repair, some of them on top of each other. A shorter woman was boiling a pot with magic. She handed Viv a bowl of soup and sat by the man's side, exhausted. While he seemed to manage, she had dark pockets under her eyes and her traits were emaciated.

She was also ethnically different. Her skin tone approached what Viv would associate with Asian and her hair was slightly lighter than those of everyone else here with yellow highlights. Her traits were different as well. Viv also thought that they were a gorgeous couple. The man placed his own bowl on the tiny rug between them and embraced her. She leaned into it and closed her eyes.

"It's good that you came to escort us. Your name was Beebiane?" he asked.

His tone was more casual now and he had a strong Baranese accent that she had not noticed before. It was a bit more rugged than the one captain Cernit had shown. She considered inspecting him again but thought he might feel it and it would be a bit rude. He still breathed out this sense of power and danger that the woman next to him apparently shared, to Viv's surprise. It was the way mana flowed around them. It did not have the vibrating quality of what she could perceive around Arthur but it did feel... disciplined. Controlled.

Deadly.

"Viviane, yes. Don't worry about the pronunciation. Most people struggle with it."

"I'll learn. I'm Solar and this is Amiri, my wife. If you can really do what you say you can do, we will be in your debt."

He closed his eyes and frowned.

"Sorry. Not really doubting you, more like..."

"We search for long time. In many places," the woman finished. She had a heavy accent that Viv could not place.

"Yeah. That. You have no idea how hard I've tried to find a way."

"There are other methods to regrow a limb?"

He snorted.

“None that I’d care to try. I’m not on good terms with the dark gods, you see? I may have lost my dominant arm but I’m not defenseless.

“Hm. Okay? Speaking of which, I wanted to ask. Why did people bring their families?” Viv asked.

Solar gave her a glare, but frowned and shook his head soon afterward. His locks bumped against the woman’s nose and she exhaled.

“Yeah you are cut off. Should remember that. I’m more of a wanderer myself but most folks here are Enorians and I wouldn’t want to leave a relative in that shithole if I could help it. Entire country is on its way to hell right now.”

“Because of the civil war?”

“Yeah, more specifically because of the raids and second Regnos.”

Viv frowned.

“I heard that noun before.”

“Yeah probably. Look, Denerim told me you were a traveler. Don’t worry, I swore an oath to Neriad, not about to stab you in the back. What I meant to say is that you probably don’t know what’s going on so tell me if you’re lost. Where was I? Oh yes, the glorious history of the hallowed kingdom of Enoria.”

He scoffed and tasted the soup, giving an appreciative hum.

“Regnos was a huge battle that marked the end of the first civil war. Rebel forces managed to trap the king’s army and cut off its retreat but only the gods could have told which way the battle would have gone if those idiots had kept fighting. Regnos is the perfect battlefield if you’re confident. It’s a large mining town in the middle of a large plain encircled by mountains and marshland. There are only two safe passages for armies to get in. One to the south and one to the north.”

“The king loyalists occupy the south, right?”

“And the rebels control the north, yeah. As soon as hostilities flared up again and folks were riled up by bloody raids, both armies made their way to the place for a decisive showdown. That was two weeks ago. The battle was a fucking meat grinder that lasted for a week. A full week. By the accounts we received from some of the wounded, Regnos is destroyed and there are aberrants everywhere. It’s a fucking mess.”

“Did Prince Lancer die?”

“Hah! You wish. If only things were that easy, ey? In fact, he might be the next heir to the throne.”

Viv blanched.

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Well, he has a good chance now but things are not as simple as it seems. Look, the temple of Neriad knows what happened. Truth is, both sides butchered each other at second Regnos. More than half of the rebel nobles are dead. Not wounded, dead. The first princess got beheaded during a charge aimed at cutting off the rebels and the first prince is maimed. Only Lancer is a serious candidate right now, but he needs to win the war and it doesn’t look good. You got to understand. Almost fifteen thousand people died on that field.

Viv flinched. Fifteen thousand fatalities was... she had trouble wrapping her head around it. The battle of Crecy during the hundred years war had been one of the greatest military disasters in French medieval history and five thousand men had been lost.

“Yeah. I know. This is what happens when you tell an entire generation that they have to unite the land again. Nobody surrendered and nobody withdrew until the bitter end. The king is rumored to be devastated by the loss of his daughter while the rebel leadership was utterly gutted in a single battle. Nobody won, except the dead.”

“And Prince Lancer.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. One thing is sure though, he needs to finish you off.”

Viv blinked.

“Why? He can just take the throne and wait, no?”

“His enemies at the court have spread and amplified his failure. Congratulations, you are a public figure. I even saw a caricature of you shoving a metal rod up Lancer’s... natural orifice.”

“How prophetic...” Viv mumbled while Wamiri tutted.

“Ah sorry. What I mean to say is that he needs to wash the stain on his honor before claiming the throne. I am sure that someone already explained to you that followers of Maranor must show ruthlessness towards their foes in order to curry her favor. He will return, and this time, he will bring enough troops to guarantee a kill.”

“Damn.”

“There are good news though. You are going to receive a lot of veterans soon. We are just the first wave. And he will be underestimating you. I can assure you that I can organize our defenses to give us a fighting chance. If I get my arm back, I will be your best hope and your best warrior.”

“Alright, let’s make something clear. I have a plan and a training program already and I doubt you can top it, and second, you’ll be the second best warrior.”

“Oh?” Solar asked, politely curious, “and who would be the first?”

//That would be me.

//A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sword master.

//Now, I am confident that we can find a role for you newcomers in our glorious army.

The convoy progressed slowly over the next few days. Viv accompanied a group of fast movers to scout and forage on the way, sometimes digging up a few beasts and roots to supplement the diet of the rest. They had left during the harvest and got enough time to collect food but now they were down to boiled cereals. Mana-rich meat skewers and fresh greens went a long way to improving the mood. In fact, Viv’s presence and the assurance that they had an actual destination uplifted everyone’s spirits. It was one thing to dream about a haven in times of trouble, and another to have one of its inhabitants come to escort you in person.

Viv found the veterans and their family to be the most eclectic group to join Kazar so far. There were some actual low-ranked nobles who had dropped everything to come here. Others had been little better than beggars when they had joined. The carts and carriages reflected that. No two were alike, and most of the additional protections were nailed on. Only a few centennial cornudons were available to pull the heaviest pieces while the rest got carried forward by lesser animals and, sometimes, even humans. Despite their differences, the veterans shared the same unerring vigilance that bordered on paranoia. She would find it annoying if she hadn’t seen in what state the previous convoy had arrived. And three days later, as they were going through the deep woods, their caution was justified.

“What was that?” Viv asked no one in particular. The sound had reminded her of a mix between an eagle cry and a blender.

//That would be a warning cry from a Tempest Raptor, Your Grace.

//An aerial apex predator in the Deadshield Woods’ more shallow parts.

Viv slowed down to watch Solfis who was on their old cart, now hitched to the largest waggon on account of being tiny.

“Wait, we’re in a shallow part?”

//Yes, Your Grace.

//We stand in a sort of isthmus, if you will pardon an inaccurate approximation that your fleshy brain will comprehend better.

//The Deadshield Woods are much denser going north and south.

//Nevertheless, we still travel to what is technically ‘deep woods’.

//Thus, this cry, which warns other predators than the Tempest Raptor spotted a prey and not to interfere.

Viv pondered that for exactly half a second.

“It’s us, isn’t it?”

//I estimate that your opinion has 97.8% chances of being correct.

“Well, that’s unfortunate.”

Arthur landed a second later and stayed on the cart, keeping a cautious eye on whatever little grey sky could be seen through the canopy. Armed soldiers moved along the column with Solar directing people up and down. They had very few archers. The only one Viv had seen was missing an eye and had trouble seeing from the second. So, yeah. Solar made his way to Viv just as she and Marruk finished strapping their armors and helmets.

“We could really use your help, war caster. This is a bird of prey with an excellent sight. It will avoid dangers like me and pick at our most vulnerable members when our guard is low.

“I don’t think we can stay on high alert for a week. Solfis, can we take it down?”

//The standard protocol for humans in your situation is to sacrifice members until the beast is sated.

//But of course, we cannot allow overgrown Arthur-bait to damage valuable imperial resources.

//With access to battle reports of several successful eliminations of Tempest Raptors, I have identified a strategy that would best match our present capabilities.

//In order to succeed, we need someone to act as bait.

The silence was deafening.

“I’m afraid I must say no,” Solar said.

//Your input is noted.

//Now shut up.

//As for the bait, we need someone who looks like they would provide valuable nutrition to the raptor.

//I believe that the individual Marruk would provide the best candidate.

“Me?” the Kark asked bashfully.

//Indeed.

//Marruk’s height and girth are among the greatest in the caravan.

//Additionally, she is quite muscular.

Marruk was turning an interesting shade of purple. She sputtered a few unintelligible words and Viv felt compelled to come to the rescue.

“Oi, Solfis!”

//With her fighting prowess, Marruk presents the best chance at surviving the attempt.

“I’ll do it!” the Kark warrior bellowed, “I’ll do it! You can stop talking now!”

//Very well.

//The bait will lie on the ground in full view at the back of the convoy.

//The Tempest Raptor will initiate a dive.

//Right before it lands, it will spread its wings to slow its descent.

//We will strike at this exact moment.

//Under my guidance, the Heir shall strike its head with a mighty spell.

//I will use the opening to jump on the creature and neutralize it.

//That is all.

“What if I miss?” Vlv asked, a bit worried.

//I will use my superior sensor systems to warn you of the beast’s approach and its direction.

//The Raptor should stop about twenty paces away from the ground.

//I will point at the most likely place beforehand and count down for you.

//With this, you should have no trouble landing your attack.

//But if you fail, it would be unfortunate for Marruk.

“Please don’t fail?” Marruk asked. She was still flustered.

“What about me? I can help,” Solar said with confidence.

//Your presence is not required for the success of this plan.

“Look, it’s not because I’m a cripple that...”

They didn’t have time for this.

“It’s not related to your handicap,” she said. “And Solfis called you a blade master so he knows that you’re not dead weight. Look, the three of us have worked together for six months and we have managed through undead, monsters and a whole fucking siege. We know each other’s capabilities. We know how to work together. You’re just a variable in a plan that doesn’t need it. It has nothing to do with your skill. You could be Eron the dragonslayer reborn and I would still ask you to step aside and let us do our job.”

The man chuckled a bit bitterly.

“Ah, you have leadership. Not just a spell flinger then? Alright, let’s see what you guys can do. I’ll make sure to keep everyone else going. Happy hunting.”

“Thanks. Alright, let’s go.”

Marruk walked to the back with Viv leaning towards her as they were passing the rear-guard.

“Look, sorry about Solfis being a bit insensitive.”

“By Sardanal that’s so true, I have never been so shamelessly courted before. I thought he was going to propose!”

“Ah. Hm.”

Viv was lost in translation.

Marruk lay down on the ground, took a deep breath and covered her face with the shield. Viv joined a fully deployed Solfis on the side of the road and used the shroud spell to give them some basic cover. She had mastered the strange ‘change’ meaning enough that the eldritch-looking walls could now curve inward a little bit. They still looked like some Old Ones were grasping at the trees behind her, but what can you do.

“Won’t the raptor smell us or something?”

//No, Your grace, they rely exclusively on sight at this range.

//Your wall and its residual black mana will cover us from sight until it is too late.

//For it.

“Will it really take the bait?”

//Yes, Your Grace, all my prediction algorithms define the possibility as likely.

//Tempest raptors may be deadly in the air, and possess patience, but they are not the smartest beasts in their class.

//No need for intelligence when overwhelming power will suffice.

“You’d think that with dragons around...”

//Dragons remain extremely rare, Your Grace, and the raptor knows to avoid their territory.

//Predatory birds rarely attack each other.

//They will, however, try to kill chicks.

“Brutal,” Viv commented. She was busily drawing a second circle which she reinforced with glyphs dug in the soil with the tip of her blade. That would help with the blast spell.

//This is an adjective that defines raptors quite well, Your Grace.

The golem raised his featureless face up.

//It appears that our quarry has taken the bait.

//Just don’t think and aim for center mass.

//One spell is enough.

Viv focused. Her danger sense and acuity reflex should make up for her slowish nervous system. The creatures on Nyil were no joke.

Suddenly, Solfis pointed his bony arm up at something out of sight. Viv looked but could only see branches, leaves in various shades, and small windows of cloudy skies. She prepared her spell.

Solfis' arm moved progressively faster, first at a crawl and then like a conductor directing the slowest orchestra.

//Three. Two. One...

Viv had never been so focused in her life. One moment the sky was empty. The next, a dark shape crashed through boughs and branches with a great fracas. A remote part of her mind registered feathers in viridian shades of blue, a yellow beak as sharp as a scalpel and talons the color of her mana. The main part unleashed everything she had on the newcomer. Time slowed. The spell flew true thanks to tens of thousands of previous castings guiding her hand. It hit the monster center mass and... did not get through. The powerful feathered deflected, refracted her spell. She had never seen it happen, and it felt so weird. The next moment, a beady dark eye zeroed on her.

Then the wind hit.

Viv perceived a wave of grey mana without understanding what it meant until the shockwave of the creature's landing reduced her meager shelter to dust. She was propelled to the ground and rolled the best she could, protecting her neck with her entwined hands. Her back smashed against a trunk and she hissed in anticipation, but no pain came. Her shield was still strapped to her back and it had softened the blow.

She stood up, ready to add her weight to the battle but it was not needed. There was a comparatively small, pathetic pile of feathers on the ground. Solfis stood next to it with the monster's head held between long, bloody claws. He had made it look easy.

Viv noticed that the raptor's eyes were both pierced and two trails of blood and humor fell like tears from the devastated cavities.

"Nice show, well done," Solar said as he approached and eyed the trophy. "Surgical too."

//Raptors have small heads and small brains.

//Attacking through the eye cavities let me disable it in one strike.

"I see. Hm. But then, why behead it?"

//Because.

//It pleased me.

Solar stared at Solfis with some measure of worry, but the bone golem did not react. Viv was not surprised. Solfis could win a staring contest with a statue.

“Well, in any case, fantastic work, as I said. We’ll have some of the lads and lasses prepare it for tonight, I bet the feathers are valuable too. It’s good to be working with professionals.”

“Can I come out now?” Marruk squealed from under her shield.

“I bet it tastes like chicken,” Viv whispered to herself.

Sadly, it did not taste like chicken.

As Viv expected, the attack only made the veterans even more paranoid. They now decided to have people watch the skies at all times even though what could be seen of the sky was extremely limited. Viv didn’t tell them that it was redundant or bemoan them asking Solfis or Two-Six what they could detect because she thought that they had the right idea. Not everyone was blessed by the world to be good at destructive magic and not everyone had a fucking ancient war golem backing them up.

“You know, I think I haven’t thanked you for being here for me and the other humans before. You’re so useful that having you around feels like cheating. You really make a huge difference,” she told Solfis one night as Arthur slept with her ever-larger head on her lap.

//Thanks are unnecessary, Your Grace.

//Social graces are useful between organics.

//I, however, base my assessment on actions and yours speak for themselves.

//You were dying back in Harrak and still found a way to drag my core up the sandy slope.

“You saved my life in the end.”

//You did not know that at the time.

//Nevertheless, your appreciation is noted.

//You can rely on my skills and knowledge in the future without concern.

//You are blessed by luck.

//It placed us on a collision path.

//It also placed you in the middle of a dead city crawling with undead.

//It also made you stay in a city doomed to destruction, were it not for your actions.

//What matters to me is not how blessed or cursed you are.

//What matters to me is that you work, think, and persevere.

//You will always be luckier and unluckier than someone else.

//More privileged and poorer than someone else.

//Luck and privilege are not sins.

//Squandering them is.

They came out of the deepwoods a few days later. Viv had been in the forest for more than two weeks, spent the last few days practicing glyphs instead of remaining vigilant because, fuck, you could only look at so many trees before it got a bit tiring and most of the wildlife left when they heard the humans come. She was nose-deep into her practice book when Arthur landed excitedly on the cart.

Kill!

“Hm... Now?”

Yes!

Just then, Two-Six burst out of the treeline and ran to Solar. He immediately screamed at the top of his head in a rumbling voice that reached all the way to the back.

“Beastling tides, right side! Unhitched the carts and form up! Right side, right side!”

Immediately, designated leaders ordered their individual groups to form a wall and have lines of fighters stand in front of it. Viv found it a bit strange until she realized that the armored sides of the carts were made to protect the families.

The veterans did not look like the most able group, which made sense of course. Not everyone could wear a shield and some of those who could would have trouble moving it around. There were blind fighters standing there just to provide a meat shield and protect the rare archers they had. They looked determined, though, and many wore heavy gear that they had strenuously maintained.

Viv finished putting on her helmet and made sure her metal shield was on her arm. No need to catch a stone. She stayed where she was in case Solar came looking for her, which he promptly did.

“I’ll be taking the front but your help would be appreciated.”

“We’ll let you guys handle the chaff and we take out the casters. What are we looking at?”

“Looking at?” Solar asked with frown, but Two-Six was used to some of her stranger turns of phrases.

“At least four hundred. At least five shamans but probably more, led by a caster on the back of a humanoid monster. Fast. Almost caught up to me.”

“Alright. I’ll take care of the shamans and the caster if you guys can hold the line. I’ll take out beastlings as I can but focus on the larger threats. Would that work?”

“Yes. The elites and I will spread across the line. The priority is to protect our families who will be behind. If you can, support the more endangered parts of the wall and whoever gets dragged out of formation. Beastlings always try that.”

He left. Two-Six nodded and melted into the darkness. Viv looked around.

//We should go to the highest point in the formation.

“Agreed.”

Viv easily found and climbed the tallest wagon. This one had a cute ramshackle little tower on top to allow a man with no legs to shoot a shortbow at any hostile.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking lady but this is my spot.”

“Make some room, this is for the common good,” she replied, a black sphere forming above her shoulder.”

“Hmph. Fine, but don’t block the way.”

//I will deploy as well, Your Grace.

//I have full confidence that you will prevail.

“You’ll support the infantry?”

//Auditory sensors report the presence of two more large beasts than Two-Six reported.

//I shall intercept to prevent them from breaking through our lines.

//Or the battle will be more complex.

“Sure thing. Should I hold off spells until the leader appears, you think?”

//No need, Your Grace.

//It would be better to take down the weaker shamans as soon as possible.

//Your reserves and efficiency have significantly improved since the last tide.

//Do not hesitate to... make a point.

//The forest will regrow.

//In time.

“Right.”

Solfis left in his unnerving gait. It was lucky that his only interventions so far had been brief and his tank was still half-full, otherwise...

“Squee!”

Fight.

Smartly.

“Don’t get caught. By anything.”

“Squee!”

Anyway, Viv inspected the now-prepared defenses. Most soldiers had gathered in clusters behind powerful individual fighters, with the most handicapped soldiers on the sides. It gave their lines a sinusoidal pattern. Solar was one such warrior, but she also recognized Walimi, who was flipping a glaive with flaming tips, and a man with a massive battle axe and a peg leg. Others led smaller clusters.

Funny how it was those short moments of wait before the proverb hit the fan when Viv felt the most alive. Not great, just... really alive. She felt her heart thump in her chest. The air smelled of grass, a bit of nervous sweat and of wet soil. A light rain was starting.

A few beastlings crossed the edge and screeched. Viv sent a few basic purge spells to slay those that were in front of her side of the defenses. It was just a few droplets in the ocean but it cost her nothing and interrupting their screams brought her a certain satisfaction, but then the scouts disappeared and a low drone sounded from the forest. Viv remembered it from her first battle, when Varska had been by her side. They were preparing to charge.

This time, they had no vision, no archers, and their line was more fragile.

This time, however, they had a third-step war caster.

The drone grew to a fevered pitch and the wave of flesh surged from the forest, crashing into the defenders less than a second later. It was plenty of time for Viv whose mind had been reinforced with magic.

“Purge net.”

Wires of destructive black mana tore through the first lines, sending body pieces tumbling on the ground. The stench of blood and offal soon filled the air while, below her, the beastlings smashed into the veterans’ dogged defense. A quick glance around showed the lign being pressed back but stop against the wall of wagons. Wamiri was carving through the tide in a deadly dance. Solar was weird. Viv was not sure how but the man stood where he was and the beastlings in a half-circle in front of him just... died. Cut to bits. His left arm was a blur.

Her new senses warned her of a change. Beastlings had some mana, mostly life and brown, but it was weak. The shamans were different. She perceived darkened spots where the foes hid from view, brewing aggressive spells to break the human lines. Viv did not hesitate. She had no need for sight when a general direction could work. She could do general direction.

“Werfer.”

A thick, thin jet of vaporous mana blasted through the lush thicket, leaving a literal hole in the landscape wherever it hit. Viv made sure to lather it thick over where she thought the enemy concealed themselves like little rats. She got one right in front of her, then another on her right and a third farther up, near Wamiri. Others triggered their spells.

Black spheres oozing malice flew at the fighters. Viv intercepted one on her left with a simple Bzzt. The sphere lost its integrity and exploded into parts that the experienced veterans mostly dodged. Solar cut another in two, unexpectedly destroying it.

Solfis blocked one. It splashed harmlessly against his frame. The last two hit their soldiers. An old man threw himself at a ball and flashed gold briefly before being engulfed. He died without a cry. Another hit a group of humans and sent half of them screaming or dying on the ground.

Viv threw net after net at the beleaguered flank, buying them enough time to reform. She spotted a young woman being pulled by the arm without scream and decapitated three beastling before they could brain her. She scrambled back. Others were not so lucky, but the beastlings were paying a heavy toll.

Everywhere, the veterans fought tooth and nail to kill their foes before they could be overwhelmed. They may not have been at the top of their form but there were enough expert fighters in the lot to trounce dozens of the foul beings attacking them. Men and women in plate armor, and chainmails broke the tide with powerful strikes while more agile fighters kept to the side, viciously exterminating stragglers. They fought with the sort of spite that replaced and improved upon courage. They would either win or they sure as hell would get even. Like giants among men, elites like Solar and Wamiri walked the battlefield unchallenged and where they went, death followed. Solar had an untouched area around him where beastlings just died without a chance to do anything.

Somewhere to her right, the blind archer released an arrow under the guidance of a young boy. The projectile exploded and covered an entire area in onyx shrapnel. In the middle of it all, Viv acted like a machine gun position, cutting down beastling where they concentrated or threatened to overtake the veterans.

Viv's instincts screamed at her.

She did not think. She unleashed the largest werfer she could on the devastated forest in front of her. Something bellowed in a gravelly voice. Her perception went in overdrive, and time slowed enough for her to make out hints of whitish fur. It was more than enough to provide a target, and so Viv unloaded. The creature was fast though, and she had limited visibility. Most of her spells were off. It dodged left and right until it came out in the open.

Viv did not have time to stop it because the caster on its back threw a trio of crimson spears at her.

"Nope!"

She blocked them. There was a crash and the carriage shook under her feet. The man by her side cursed.

Below, the beastling shaman was chanting more. It was a vile thing, covered in fetid stained skins and a beast skull masked its feature. The creature it rode was strange. It resembled a four-creature covered in whitish fur with a low bulbous head. It moved like an insect, not a

mammal. Where Viv's spell had hit, dark blood leaked lazily, preventing the thing from bleeding out. It had its front paws deep in the entrails of two of the veterans.

Viv immediately cast because Marruk had put a stabilizing arm on her shoulder. Her spells easily overwhelmed the attacker while small, localized nope shields stopped strange bolts before they could fully take off. The white thing was lashed, and yet it lasted thanks to its strange coagulation abilities. The caster still decided to retreat.

Viv watched the furry thing bounce away and thought uncharitable words.

"Blight."

A deep black sphere pushed out of her aura with a light 'woosh', not loud and yet strangely clear in the din of battle. It silently popped and the telltale hiss of disintegrating thing soon covered the cries and clang of the battlefield. Viv felt the creature turn and run. She threw another blight on an intercept course, though she suspected she would achieve little better than suppression.

The beastling on the path of the spells certainly did not like it one bit. They melted by the dozen and the line wavered.

"By Neriad, girl, leave some for me!" the old man roared by her side.

"Shoot faster then."

"I can hold it if it returns," Marruk said, staring at the edge of the forest. Viv unstrapped her metal shield and placed it in front of her to block errant stones. They had to kill the thing fast.

"Do it."

Marruk landed on the ground with a great stomping sound. The shaman was coming back, she knew. It considered her its greatest threat probably. It only got to show how stupid it was. She knew that this moment was Solfis testing her, giving her an opportunity to exercise her skills and she would not disappoint.

When she had killed the aberrant, she had used a concentrated beam of destructive mana. She needed that now. The artillery spell was a bit too slow for something so small and agile, but a short-range ray was just the thing. She changed the range of the artillery spell from long to short, added the 'continuous' glyph to the mix, as well as 'movable' to be able to redirect it. Her mind got taxed quickly but that was fine. Once the leader fell, there would be no one to contest her. Somewhere on her right, Solfis intercepted a similar furred creature, jumped over it, and snapped its head off. Classic Solfis. A third had been stopped by a pair of knights. Arthur swooped in and torched it.

The shaman charged. So did Marruk. The arrogant beast crashed into Marruk's shield. The stout Kark took a few steps back and held.

"Meltdown."

Viv's concentrated attack swept through the first spell the shaman had cast, the second, then the shaman itself. For a single moment, she felt a resistance and a presence that sent pain through her body, but it was gone before she could react and the beam angled to the side, taking a muscular white leg off cleanly. It was all Marruk needed to send the screaming creature tumbling to the side where Viv finished it off by way of beheading.

The thing was dead.

She could let go.

"Blight. Blight. Blight."