

## Chapter 83: Green Hell

The army waited nervously for an assault that never came. Talan spent a good fifteen minutes scrutinizing the underbrush, identifying every twig in front of him until his brain was about to burst. Nothing emerged from the edge of the trees except for the odd insect and fluttering birds. Eteia herself led a short patrol around and confirmed that it was, indeed, only a parting shot. An act of spite, no doubt. The men joked about the witch being only able to achieve so much but Talan did not laugh. She was no mere witch, but a Lost Heiress. A unique path for an outlander. Even Eteia, who was on her fourth step, had been concerned about her power over black mana.

He had felt it as well. Magic was with that woman, coiling amorously around her though she did not pay it any mind.

Finally, everyone packed the camp and Talan felt compelled to remind everyone that he had seen things. Bishop Ereon had not forgotten, but there was a protocol to follow and a junior questor had no say at a prince's council. As soon as he was finished, however, he was dragged to the royal wagon where he found the rest of the elites deep in council.

"I will remain ready at all times to prevent another incident from occurring. There is no alternative," Eteia declared.

"We have siege experts. They are hybrid casters but there are four of them, can they not take care of defending the convoy?" the prince asked, concern for Goodmother Eteia obvious on his handsome face.

The war mage shook her head.

"If we were static maybe, and that is a strong maybe, but we are moving and brown mana specialists are the slowest. They cannot contend with her. Black mana has unmatched penetrating power. It has to be me."

"Then the champion will come with you to cover you from arrows, just in case."

"That would be appreciated, Your Highness."

The prince turned from his seat at the table and invited both newcomers to sit with a casual gesture. Talan felt flattered and buoyed to be in such hallowed company. He bowed smartly while the Bishop relayed his findings. The prince received the news with concern but no overall panic. Talan wished he could share in the man's confidence. He had felt the entity Solfis' mind and... there was no way to express what was in there.

"We already knew that the witch was dangerous so it does not change anything. The presence of a dragon is more troubling. Fortunately, the beasts are extremely hardy. It is always much easier to chase off a dragon than accidentally kill it, so our archers will be free to pepper it with arrows."

“Will Goodmother Eteia’s help be needed as well?” the bishop asked.

“No,” the woman replied, “the beast is too young to cast spells, of this I am sure. Dragons are highly resistant to magic. My efforts would be better spent elsewhere.”

“As for the golem, reports of such constructs fill the historical archives, but they speak of metal statues as tall as four men. My best guess is that she transferred the consciousness of one into a necromantic construct.”

“This would be highly heretical,” the bishop observed.

“Would someone like her stop at such trifles? She would certainly stoop so low if it gave her an advantage.”

“You must be right.”

“In any case, dragonbone is also highly resistant to spells so the champion will be in charge of stopping it. Do you agree, sire?”

“It will be done, Your Highness. Bones are brittle when they are dead.”

Talan wished he shared their optimism, but he refrained from commenting. Even if they didn’t manage to kill the witch’s followers, it was enough to take Kazar and subdue the population. Unsupported elites could not achieve much when isolated. They were systematically hunted, flushed out, and killed. Talan was probably worrying for nothing, but it did not stop that sense of dread creeping up his spine like vines up the innumerable trees around.

The short council ended with no conclusion drawn besides ‘it is probably nothing’, which bothered the questor on a deeper level. The truth was that they had no tools to adapt to unexpected circumstances, and this was one such situation. He just had to do his best.

The army walked on with Talan and his squad placed at the front, on account of his inspection skill. He praised Maranor for her teaching that hard work was often rewarded in unexpected ways, such as not eating the dust from eight hundred soldiers. He and his men strutted happily for fifteen minutes with the sun at the back and the pleasant smell of trees not yet marred by old sweat until he found the first obstacle.

There in the middle of the way, the earth was having a nightmare.

That was the only way he could find to qualify those horrific walls of twisted geometry, spirals, and grasping limbs.

“What in the name of Enttiku is that thing?” one of the soldiers asked.

[Eldritch wall, earth raised by aspected black mana, an extremely rare spell use. Variable durability. Soaked with black mana.]

“It does not appear dangerous,” Talan admitted to Bishop Ereon once the man came to inquire. The older soldier grunted some surprisingly strong expletives.

“If it’s not dangerous then I’ll check it out myself!”

“No, allow me!” Talan begged. Fortunately, neither of them had to do anything because the Bridgers had siege experts. The four hybrid brown casters gathered and crumbled the strange walls at a slow pace.

“Those constructs are still saturated with black mana,” one of them said. “It takes a while to overcome it.”

Talan wondered how long it had taken the witch, because it was obviously her, to make those. He hoped it had taken hours because it certainly wasted their time.

“Perhaps this is why she destroyed the water cistern. She hopes that we will run out of water,” he hypothesized.

“Stupid of her. Everyone can create some water with a bit of practice and the forest always has moisture to draw. The men will be thirsty, but there is no way for us to suffer too much before we arrive at the lake,” Ereon replied.

Talan nodded. She was an outlander. Perhaps her knowledge of magic was still incomplete.

“Those delays are still annoying. Ah, it looks like they are done.”

One of the earth casters levelled the farthest earth until all that remained of the witch’s work was unequalled earth. He walked confidently back to their line, then collapsed forward. His left foot disappeared into a hole, Talan could see. There was a dreadful snap and the man howled.

Talan rushed forward, but not as fast as Ereon. The wounded man snapped his fingers and the hole widened, revealing a simple trap lined with sharpened, downward facing stakes. Blood immediately poured from the wound in great gushes.

“Ah, you idiot,” Ereon roared. He kneeled by the wounded man and prayed. A reddish glow soon surrounded his form and the wounds closed. The earth caster sighed in relief as the torrent of blood turned to trickle, then stopped.

“Thank you.”

“You must not remove the stakes or you might bleed out,” the bishop scolded.

“Yeah easy to say it wasn’t your leg in that thing.”

“I’ve had plenty of sharp things in my body, boy, and I didn’t drain the healer’s mana because I couldn’t wait to get them out.”

“Sorry sir,” the man replied, chastised.

The army resumed its slow march and arrived at the next patch of strange earth not twenty minutes later. Talan volunteered to search for traps and found none, and neither did his squad. He also volunteered to flatten the strange earth, which he did without issue. By that time, it was already halfway to noon and the men were growing impatient.

“Better safe than skewered,” he moaned, but it didn’t look like the backline shared his common sense.

It soon turned out that a large amount of the path was covered in those strange constructs. The army took to just ignoring them after the third patch. Immediately after that, the first howls of pain sounded from the back. It turned out that the entire path was rife with surprisingly-well hidden traps.

“There is only one path. It makes it easy for them to use this kind of tactics,” Ereon said.

“A coward’s tool!” Talan fumed. “Isn’t Neriad supposed to be about righteous combat? Why would he favor them?”

“Yes, well, he is quite stern when it comes to causes yet much more lax when it comes to methods.”

“Tch.”

The morning went on. Talan made some real effort to watch his steps. He even found one by sheer repetition of his skill. Unfortunately, he had to look directly at it and the traps were quite small, so he could not use it systematically. The construct was so well-made and hidden that he suspected that a high-level skill was involved. Nevertheless, Taran did not give up. He never gave up. He would do what he could, as always, this time by focusing in front of him. Most shared this method and that was why they missed the tree traps.

Because the road was narrow and to move four persons abreast turned the army into a vulnerable snake, many soldiers walked among the small trees at the edge of the road, weaving between small trunks and rotting stumps left from previous deforestation efforts. Somehow, invisible wires escaped the eyes of even the keenest of them until the first of the pots exploded against shields raised in haste.

“It smells like... sap?” Talan wondered as he lifted his left vambrace. None of his skin had been exposed and Ormin, who had been hit full on, seemed to be alright.

“I mean it’s sticky and itchy but I don’t feel any pain.”

Unfortunately, they could not wash themselves so the front of the column soon took on a glistening appearance. The powerful perfume of sap soon overwhelmed that of cold sweat as regular cries of pain interrupted the procession. Ereon and the healers were running left and right, bringing assistance to every wounded. They had not lost anyone since the spell earlier that day, thank Maranor. It still felt bad.

“Can the Kazarans do ought but children’s tricks?” Corporal Regor complained.

Talan thought that he was happy with children’s tricks.

They stopped at noon for a very short break. The questor was already regretting the lack of water, which was being rationed. The woods could be suffocating with the added tension. A shiver ran through the length of the expedition as they stood back from where they had plopped down. Orders fused.

“You will not go out of formation to satisfy natural needs with less than five men.”

“I don’t need that many people to hold my dick,” one of the soldiers claimed, but the sergeant trotting up the line was unamused.

“You will if you want to stay alive. Sedrin didn’t come back and he’s not the only one.”

“Ah, shit.”

This put a damper on the already plummeting mood. The problem wasn’t just the disappearances, the stench and so on. The problem was that they were on the second day of a ten days trip. At this speed at least.

Talan wasn’t sure that they could do ten days of this.

Every new blossom of changed earth made him pray that it would be the last, but they were always there, lined up with the promise of more traps, more prepared ground. The witch and her flunkies must have spent fucking months turning this entire road into a gauntlet. And they were following it like obedient dogs. It frustrated him but he grit his teeth. The men were looking up to him.

More legs got skewered, more sap covered the armor of the men. Someone walked around a very large tree to take a dump and just... disappeared. Not ten paces away from the edge of the forest. And all that happened in silence. No war cries, no great charges. Just bird songs and the creaks of old wood. It made no sense.

It was almost a relief when they were attacked by a large bird monster. The creature attempted to pick on their backline, but its dive attack ended in a cone of fiery red. Eteia had taken no chance.

“Is monster fowl tasty?” A man asked with a laugh. “Guess we’ll find out!”

They arrived at the next designated campsite as the sun was dipping below the horizon. Talan inspected every square meter of empty ground and they did find a spell construct, which Eteia promptly dispelled. The witch looked down on them, it seemed.

The questor volunteered for night duty but he was denied.

“We will need you well-rested every time we move on. Let those with vigilance hold the line,” Bishop Ereon told him.

Talan thanked the veteran fighter for that nugget of wisdom. No man was able to do everything. That was why order was so important, so that those with the proper ability be used in the best role. He went to sleep with his heart at ease. He was not alone, and never would be.

The entire outer ring of sentries disappeared that night. It happened in a single sweep at the darkest of times. Some skills had to be involved.

Talan breathed in the morning air, bemoaning to himself that the pleasant smell of spring was being overwhelmed by rancid sweat and syrupy sap. There was not enough water to clean oneself. All they could conjure was dedicated to themselves and the wounded.

He and his squad ate a quick breakfast. Thankfully, everyone had recovered enough mana to drink their fill, for now. The night disappearances had certainly impacted the morale, however, and he found himself listening to Corporal Regor’s scolding.

“This is war. Did you just expect the Kazarans to lay down belly up waiting for the slave collars? They know that when we reach the walls, it’s all over for them, so they face us here where they have the advantage. It’s a contest of will. Either we break and fall back, or we don’t. I expected more from people who fought in Regnos. What were you thinking? That this was a holiday?”

The men grumbled, and yet the tongue lashing reminded them of their duties. Talan took the lesson to heart while he fastened his armor. He stretched a bit to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be, and his left vambrace fell down. Ormin started swearing from the next tent.

“What the fuck?”

Talan checked the piece and realized that the strap had been completely eaten through.

“It’s the sap,” he realized as he walked out. Ormin was roaring in anger. Not only was his armor reduced to metal components, but even his sleeping bag was showing expanding holes as well.

“What manner of warfare is that?” he grumbled to himself.

Many soldiers were sharing the same problem. Leather had never been in large supply in the army, not with how durable it was. There was no way to repair all the armor, but Talan would be damned if he let Ormin go to battle in his underpants. He grabbed his cloak and tore a band from it.

“Help me out. Everyone, help out!”

It was shoddy work. The softer cloth didn't fit well in the buckles and they tended to slip, but Talan would be damned if he let soldiers go to war unprepared.

"That will melt as well. Even faster than the leather," a man said.

"Then we will use our spares and when we run out, we will use the tents. They don't have an unlimited supply of sap either," Talan replied with more aggression than necessary. The men were galvanized by his outburst and the most nimble helped with sewing things on.

"Thanks, everyone," Ormin said. "I don't know how to repay you."

"It's fine lad, I'll take comfort in the fact that the cloth on your chin cradled my ass just last week."

Poor Ormin turned red under the subsequent jeers. It was with determination, but slightly unfitting armor, that the men departed.

### The very same morning.

Viv took a sip of tea and breathed out when the decoction warmed her belly, finally allowing her to relax. It was a special brew against menstrual cramps that Solfis had conjured up from somewhere. Sometimes, fate had a strange sense of humor.

She looked out towards the empty road. In a few days, it would be crawling with soldiers. From inside the cave, the woods were a peaceful expanse undulating under a light wind and pleasant sun. From inside the cave, there were no monsters. Only an adorable dragonette with a gold obsession. She finished her tea and leaned forward.

Bones clicked on the stone floor behind her.

**//The Yries are expressing their concerns.**

**//The redleaf sap has not activated yet.**

Excited hoots erupted from the main cavern behind her. It had come as a surprise when the owl-like humanoids had joined the fight, especially considering how isolationist they were. She should not have discounted the most obvious motive.

Vengeance.

They deeply hated the prince for sending them into exile and had absolutely no intention of losing their second home.

“We have to force it before they reach the lake. I will provide cover.”

**//Understood, Your Grace.**

It was time for her to get to work.

The column trudged under heavy boughs laden with flowers and dew. Oppressive, stuffy, the warm humidity clung to the skin, dripped down brows and dampened clothes. Worse, it did not clean the sticky sap that even now still clung stubbornly to the annoyed soldier. The pale yellow substance had turned into an adhering, irritating gel. Talan blinked and forced his hand away from his left arm lest he peeled off sap and skin like an onion layer, with his nails if necessary.

They just had to last until the lake.

At the lake, he could scrub himself clean with a bar of soap.

Talan’s feet faltered when he spotted a white cloth in the distance. He raised his fist and the company stopped, grumbling echoing along the line. Corporals and sergeants ran up and down for what felt like the hundredth time, haranguing the men to maintain discipline. This should not have happened. Prince Lancer’s troops were the cream of the crop of Enoria, not some ruffians. The questor passed a tired hand over his face and cursed. What was it this time?

[Flag of purity of Neriad.]

Didn’t look so bad.

He moved up with Bishop Ereon by his side. The pair walked with their shields raised and their weapons drawn. If the witch attacked, the Bishop would perhaps have the power to repel a single hex. It would have to be enough.

For a second, Talan thought that the soldiers were sleeping. Someone had lined them up in neat rows with their eyes closed and their hands on their chests, but sleeping people moved and had blood moving under their skins. The men here were dead. Someone had simply sewn the severed heads back on and the banner of the god of righteous combat had kept the bodies free of corruption. They had found their lost fighters. All thirty-seven of them.

It was a lot of bodies to look at for two days of travel.



On the tall trees behind the small clearing, someone had painted an accusation in crimson letters. It read:

GREED

“We have to bury them. The men can’t see that,” Ereon said.

“Do we take down the trees as well?” Talan asked with more bitterness than he meant.

“Yes,” the older man said, not unkindly. “Yes, we do.”

It took an hour to clear everything. The men were buried in deep graves dug by the earth casters, with a monument risen through magical means bearing their names. All men were requested to salute in passing, and rumors spread around that they had been found decapitated with their heads in handbaskets, the Hallurian way.

“I heard Lessik from C company claim that they were revenants the servants of Maranor had to put down!”

It bothered Talan that no announcement was made to undo those rumors. Instead, the council let them fester into a deep resentment that seeped through the cracks of damaged armor, giving the men a powerful drive. It was stupid. Wasteful. And it set a dangerous precedent. No cruelty would be averted when dealing with desecrators, almost...

The memory of the witch returned. Was she witch or heiress? It felt strange giving her a title, as if she were more than just a wild caster risen on a tide of chaos. Like it was... deliberate. As deliberate as throwing corpses in the desert to rise as revenants.

The idea wormed its way through Talan’s mind as the expedition walked on, his men unaware of the slight turmoil in his heart. He knew that he would see the expedition through, but he questioned the rationale behind some of the decisions the prince was making. Perhaps this was the price of power. Perhaps one could not unite Enoira with clean hands. He was just the son of a woodworker. What did he know?

He knew that desecration and lies were wrong.

Talan shook his hand and cursed when another pot of sap burst behind him, renewing the heavy scent hanging over the convoy. For fuck sake they were already wearing rags, what more did she want from them?

Another pot crashed nearby. They had reached a rougher ground, with small hills popping up here and there. It was a sign that they were approaching the heart of the woods.

He almost missed the change, but even his saturated nose could not miss the difference. It smelled like... honey?

Talan watched, mesmerized, as a soldier removed a shard from his biceps. There was movement. far to the right. A tree toppled on top of a hill. Something very large was moving back. He latched on the object before it could retreat past the edge of the slope.

[Yries self-propelled ballista. War machine. Very precise. Mana-fuelled frame. Heavy...]

What.

The.

Fuck?

Before he could react, the thing had disappeared. A powerful artillery spell arced overhead, coming from the command wagon. A much smaller, faster one caught it close to the ground and forced it to explode. The detonation leveled several trees while flaming pieces of mana constructs rained down, starting small fires. A massive black mana shield blocked one of the largest blocks.

The casters were dueling. The sight of such power wielded by human minds never ceased to amaze him.

But then... why did they send a pot?

"I don't like it at all. Everyone, get ready. Shields up," he said. His order was repeated by his corporal and soon, the front squads were in formation. Just to be careful.

Something was coming. A low buzz announced its presence, haunting the edge of the trees. There was nothing there. Still nothing. There was something, a red insect darting straight at them.

[Fire wasp]

"Oh SHIT! GET DOWN!"

Talan had no need to warn anyone because the rest of the hives flew out from the trees and the first aggressive insects were already zipping in people's faces with their stingers exposed. Talan crouched.

A massive fire spell scorched the edge of the trees, obliterating entire thickets. The hives that were caught turned to ash.

The flames spread unnaturally among the rest of the swarm, turning the wasps into suicidal, malicious embers. They fell on the assembled soldiers. Three of them hit him.

Talan saw, distinctly saw, the sap ignite on his left vambrace. An amber tongue spread like burning alcohol on a wooden table.

Then the entire vanguard went up in flames with screams of abject terror and a deafening 'woosh'. Soldiers threw themselves on the ground, devoured by an inferno that could not stop, that would not stop. It clung to them like a second skin. Ormin clawed at his eyes and rolled on the ground. The ghastly dance of human torches spread across the line like the wildfire it was, catching more soldiers with every stream of volatile sap. Howls of agony spread in a chorus, covering panicked orders in a dreadful cacophony of fear and suffering. Talan gave up on anything but the searing pain eating at the flesh from his arm. He dropped and used his weight to cover the vambrace. The flames guttered out as he struggled to take the damn things off. Embers danced in the air while the heat suffocated him. In the background, blackened bodies wriggled on a scorched ground. Hell had come to Param.

Talan unclasped the piece of armor just as it reignited and jumped on Ormin immediately. The questor no longer had a cover and the tents were in one of the carriages. He had nothing, nothing but his nails, so he dug the ground like a beast and threw handfuls of dust at the burning man. It felt like sprinkling water on a house fire.

Soon, heavy hands appeared wielding covers. They smothered the fires from everyone, pushing the victims down. The others had come to help. A spell was cast and all the fires winked out in a second, leaving the stigmas of their work behind. Talan was alive. He was not alone. Every breath smelled of charred meat. He was not alone. He had never heard people screaming that way, not even that man back in that skirmish who had tried to push his intestines back inside, only to realize that there no longer was enough inside for it to matter. Talan had no nose. Talan had no ears. Talan had no eyes. He only had his prayers.

"Hey kid. Kid."

Bishop Ereon's dark eyes caught his attention. The man was a rock. The familiar grip on his shoulder grounded Talan despite the horrors he had witnessed. All around, men were in full formation and looking out at the forest beyond the ravaged ribbon of ashy trunks.

"I'm sorry kid but I need you to help with the wounded. Come on."

Talan let Ereon drag him to an improvised infirmary. It was more like rows of men on the ground, moaning.

They had no water.

The questor spent hours repairing lungs and closing sores, watching the blackened skin around reddish muscle tissue form scars just so it could stop weeping transparent liquid. He worked until his eyes drooped and his thoughts fragmented. There was only the wait for a trickle of mana to return so he could call upon his goddess to save one more man. She always answered.

They didn't let him see Ormin. He died later that afternoon.

Funny thing was, Talan may have killed him by securing his armor. The steel protection had turned into a portable furnace.

The irony made him sick.

The attack the prince anticipated never came. The witch had brought fire and left, unwilling to make use of the confusion. Talan knew what it meant. It meant that she wasn't done with them. It meant that she would get them in an even worse state before sending her ragged band of fanatics and mountain tribes soldiers to finish the job. The Enorian army spent an hour staring at trees once again, under the mocking tweets of songbirds and nobody showed up to answer their challenge. It was all a massive fucking joke.

They ran to the campgrounds that night, charging through those black mana walls without hesitation. There could no longer be any delays. The lake, or pond, had to be reached the next day or they would lose even more people. Even now, more and more wounded were covered in shrouds. He couldn't take it.

That night, they camped on a hill. Eteia torched the ground in every direction for a hundred paces using and reusing the fire she had wrought. They could see very far. A troupe of enterprising archers built a guard post and manned it with the promise that nothing would sneak up on them this time. Talan woke up at dawn bleary and exhausted. The tower was gone, top sheared off, edges polished by destructive black mana. Congealed blood marked where the spell had hit the men. He didn't know when it had happened. He didn't care. His throat was parched. His voice was raspy. A headache hounded him on every step of every task, flaring every time someone screamed. He just wanted everything to fucking stop.

They walked fast again. The only good thing was that the sap traps stopped mid-morning and the victims were sent to the back anyway, just in case. The survivors of Talan's usual squad stayed behind to rest but he was front, always front. He would not shirk his duties.

Behind him, men kept walking into those stupid traps. Even those with high finesse failed to dodge, somehow. It was a messed up skill. What kind of path led to that? Nothing good, to be sure.

The forest grew deeper the farther they went. The trees grew into towering giants spreading their leafy limbs over the trespassers, offering shade but also danger. Things both scaled and feathered crawled or flew along their mossy bark. The oppressive silence quieted even the wounded. That, or there were fewer of them. He didn't know.

Talan shed a tear when they reached the lake. The sapphire water lured him with the siren song of a slaked thirst, but the prince expected trouble. Eteia went first and disarmed a circle construct, then men prodded the ground along a corridor, finding more ankle snappers. Talan dreamt of having the witch in front of him. He would grab her skull with both hands and push his thumbs into those cruel green eyes inch by inch until they popped. He watched squads of men spread along the treeline under Eteia's vigilant glare. The first squads of soldiers were given the go ahead to drink while nurses brought buckets to fill with water. Talan was at the back of the first group, but he knew his duty. He helped the nurses first.

“Well done questor,” a sergeant said. “Now let me help while you get your...”

His offer of assistance got interrupted by a hiccup, then another. The comical sight stopped Talan in his tracks.

“Sergeant? Did you drink too fast?” He asked with a half grin.

But the man was not laughing. His eyes bulged, his face paled. He vomited a red torrent on Talan’s pitted breastplate.

The questor watched his crimson-coated hand in disbelief.

She had poisoned the lake?

The entire fucking lake?

ALL OF IT?

Around him, nurses dumped their buckets to help the sick. Apothecaries rushed ahead to offer antidotes to those who had survived. A bald man with a kind expression and a hawkish nose grabbed his shoulder. Lots of people were grabbing his shoulder these days.

“Did you drink anything?”

“No.”

“Alright. I’ll help cleanse the water but for now, I need you to help. Go check for traps near that campfire site while I carry this guy. Go!”

Talan poked the ground with his sword with desperate speed. It all looked like grass to his exhausted eyes. He was so thirsty. So thirsty, he was almost tempted to drink anyway. The nightmare would end then. His eyes widened when his next poke depressed a solid square, and he fell back in fear after hearing a crack. This time, nothing exploded.

An extremely pungent smell assaulted his nostrils, however. The cloying stench was only slightly unpleasant, but its potency left him on the verge of retching.

“What’s this? More poison?” the apothecary asked with a hand on a green vial. Talan breathed deeply to calm his thundering heart, waiting for pain to come. Waiting. Waiting.

Nothing happened. It still smelled strongly but he was no worse for wear, at least for now. He turned to the potion maker to voice it but his gaze caught fluttering white forms moving through the canopy, far in the distance. They were familiar, but the scale was wrong.

“Are those... butterflies?”

# Chapter 84: Confluence of Hatred.

The white shapes bounced up and down the treeline at great speed, faster than they should. Talan was on his feet screaming before he could think about what to say. Gesticulating and pointing led to more people looking. Screams erupted among the lines.

“You have to go! You have to hide!” He told the apothecary.

The bald man nodded and collected his things, then lifted a poisoned man with some difficulty. Lines of archers and spearmen were already forming. A sergeant was asking for the war mage. Talan realized that he didn't have a formation to join so he stayed at the back, helping the wounded move away. At the same time, he was doing his best to inspect one of the flying monsters that were definitely coming their way. The task was almost impossible. He could only catch glimpses before the shapes would disappear back under the canopy.

“Come on, come on, come on.”

He got it. One of the butterflies flew down then up, allowing him to get a visual.

[Pleiada Blaze Drone, extremely dangerous, mobile, volatile...]

Talan gasped as the meaning of ‘volatile’ flooded his synapses, bringing with them the taste of scorched earth. They could not be allowed to come closer. He looked around, found the royal carriage trudging close with Eteia at its top. The war mage was already casting.

“They explode!” he screamed, then a second time. His warning was relayed up. Eteia frowned, traits drawn with concern and the exhaustion of constant vigilance. She raised her hands and called upon power, and it answered.

Red mana flared in a circle above her head, arrayed with exacting precision to bend the world to her will. A fire set the forest aflame on the side of the lake opposite the Enorians, then it spread, and spread, until the view of the butterflies was covered by a roaring inferno. The farthest spearmen groups started to run back to the safety of the wagon line.

Talan could feel the heat from here, like standing in front of an oven.

White shapes emerged from the sides and over. The drones were too spread out. A few archers let out arrows. They might have hit something, Talan would never know.

Eteia screamed and the wall exploded out.

The first of the drones dove on the nearest squad.

The world went white. It also turned upside down. Talan's ears screamed at him while his body fell to the ground, numbed by a powerful jolting sensation unlike anything he had ever felt before. It took all his strength to breathe in air that tasted like heat and ash. For a minute, he could do nothing but gasp. Then, progressively, his vision returned. The bald apothecary was by his side with a bleeding wound on his scalp, which trailed blood down to his simple robes. The man forced a potion between his teeth. He swallowed it down as much by reflex as anything else. His vision cleared and his mind settled an instant later.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

But he knew, and he turned his head to take in the carnage.

Where men had been, now there were small craters. Indistinct pieces of flesh seeped red on the darkened ground here and there. Many soldiers still lay on the ground. The waters of the large pond roiled like a sea. Dust and flaming debris rained down upon the apocalyptic landscape, some disappearing behind the thick wall of smoke leading farther into the forest, or what had been a forest. Nothing was left standing in an avenue wide enough for the entire army to camp in.

"Enttiku, mother of mercy. Spare us," he heard someone whisper.

They had lost the entire vanguard. All forty men who had gone to scout the edge, and it could have been worse. Much worse. Only Eteia and everyone's quick reaction had prevented the beasts from falling over the whole column. It would have been over in an instant, the entire expedition, swallowed by the Deadshield Woods.

"Talan, I need your help," the apothecary said.

Right. Help. Help now. The living came first, like they always did. They still had some wounded. Talan followed the man in a daze as they walked to a pile of intact barrels, the kind that used to contain food. Grim-faced nurses and soldiers were filling them with poisoned water. The bald apothecary grabbed jars of glass containing a black powder and emptied one in each barrel.

"I'll need to make more. Talan, I need you to mix this until your inspect skill returns [activated charcoal water]. Understood?"

The questor was moving a provided ladle before the apothecary was done talking. The dark powder dyed the poisoned liquid with a sinister hue.

"Activated charcoal binds with the poison," the apothecary explained.

"Even a magical one?" Talan asked, then winced. It was not his place to question, or so he had been taught. The wisdom of this statement was wearing thin in his mind.

“Yes, it’s magical activated charcoal, you see?”

Talan nodded and focused on his task. He ignored the soldiers securing the ravaged clearing for the second time. There was only the next barrel until his thirst could no longer take it.

Even the thought that there were body parts bobbing in the water right now failed to distract him from his pain. He had to drink.

“Allow me,” the apothecary said. He picked a cup and drank his fill from a barrel. Talan stared at him, aghast.

“I always put my mouth where my mouth is,” the apothecary explained with a sad smile.

A minute passed and he failed to throw up his stomach lining.

“I want to take a piss but it’s probably unrelated. It’s safe, I think. Alright, everyone, go.”

Talan gulped down greedily. The poison failed to kill him, so he drank again. Meanwhile, the army settled down with their usual efficiency. Slowly but surely, the Enorians cleaned and organized the open ground until they had an encampment worth the name. Talan left Eteia and the bald man making more charcoal. He found his tent by some miracle and crashed down.

It was late afternoon when he woke up. The men sat around fires, with tents in orderly rows. The pond was dark but clean and a large group of soldiers were repurposing containers to hold water. He saw some of the wounded sitting at the edge of the watery expanse, pinkish scar tissue fully exposed. They didn’t look good but they certainly looked better.

A tall barricade now surrounded the camp, probably set up by the caster siege specialists. Nothing too fancy, but the earthworks masked the view from the forest. First thing first though, Talan found his squad, only to realize that they were relaxing. The men were happy to see him finally awake and shared some vegetable soup with him, made thicker with flour. The simple taste settled his mind and he found himself grateful that there was no meat, for once. He eventually left to clean himself by a large barrel. The pond’s water left dark spots on his skin, which he didn’t mind. It felt great not to smell himself every time he moved his arms.

The mood was calmer, now that the men finally felt safe for the first time in days. He was about to return to the squad when a runner called all leaders to the prince’s carriage, which included him as a questor. He heard the men whispering on his way there. Their voices flitted in the unsteady calm of the fading afternoon. ‘Return’, they said, ‘give up’. ‘Not worth it’. He clenched his fist at their cowardice. They didn’t get it. It was a matter of principle, of reputation. If they failed here against Kazar, Enoria would lose its last legitimate heir. The king was broken. The first prince was maimed and his sister dead. All the important northern rebels had perished in the cavalry charge, cut down as they were trapped. If they failed here, Lancer would lose his legitimacy and, with it, the dream of a reunited Enoria. They could not



fail. They could not let the sacrifices that had been made on the trail be in vain. And yet, as he neared the meeting, he found his outrage disappear as quickly as it had come.

The wagon stood immaculate in the center of the base like a bastion of civilization, shining with enchantments. Eteia was not in her spot on top of it right now, probably resting. It comforted Talan to see that order had prevailed, and that the just hierarchy of things still reigned so deep in the Deadshield Woods.

Then he noticed the soldiers in tight ranks facing the closed door and his joy evaporated. It wasn't fair. A leader... should lead from among his men.

He shook his head to chase the errant thought. This was not his belief. He trusted results, and...

Talan clenched his chest and prayed. The favor of Maranor was still there, deep inside his soul. He could waver but he could not fall and he could not show it. That was the deal. Let his betters do their job and he would do his, until he ascended the ranks through merit — or by replacing someone less fortunate.

Talan joined the group and soon the Prince walked out. His regal appearance silenced the crowd and the light of cooking fires shone on the circlet he wore, lending golden hints to the silvery metal.

“Men, I have heard disturbing rumors from the rank, and I am displeased.”

His frown made Talan feel like cowering. He was not at fault, however, and so he stood straight and without guilt.

“Some of our soldiers talk about leaving, returning to the kingdom with our tails between our legs. Shamed. Chastised. Defeated by pitfalls and tree sap. I am telling you now, in case this wasn't clear enough. It will not happen. We have not come here to turn back with our duty unfulfilled, even if the path is long and arduous. Our task is more daunting than expected, yes, and I understand the weight on everyone's shoulders. I really do. However, this weight is the same as we have always carried, for what is at stake is nothing less than the fate of our nation. A nation that has stood since the end of the Old Empire. A nation now on the verge of the abyss!”

The Prince scolded and the mood turned sullen.

“This war will not end by retreating. We are committed now. If we retreat, no one will ever trust any of us again. We will be the laughing stock of Param and a public embarrassment for the crown. More importantly, there are three scores of dead defenders of Enoria whose deaths will have been in vain because our stones withered like old prunes at the first signs of trouble. I will not allow it. We will reach the city and make those separatists sorry they ever thought about defying us.”

Talan could understand the underlying message. Once they reached the town, there would be a reckoning. The prince might even order a hecatomb: one inhabitant in a hundred randomly put to the sword. It was a harsh punishment, but it was within his rights.

Again, a thought wormed itself in his mind. The prince had taken slaves. The prince had broken an agreement. It was... all his fault.

Talan prayed harder.

“You, the officers, are the spine of our army. You will enforce discipline now and until we settle down in Kazar after our ultimate victory. Until the time has come to rest and mourn, you will maintain a steel grip over your charges because I assure you that these woods have swallowed armies before, and they will do so again. That is all. Dismissed!”

The assembly saluted, then dissolved in slow trickles. Few people talked. Talan could not blame them. He felt... empty. The prince's words had not achieved the results he had hoped for. At the same time, he was a questor. He didn't need anyone to remember his duties.

He joined Bishop Ereon for an evening prayer. The older man didn't say anything but he was solid and dependable, and that was enough. Talan had to believe that order would prevail, or it would all have been for nothing. And this couldn't be allowed to happen.

The Yries warchief was maintaining his spear when Viv found him. His large, owl-like eyes remained fixed on his gear. Only the slight twitch of his bristling hair informed Viv that he had perceived her presence. The Yries could feel a lot through their skin. Things like tremors and wind, she'd been told.

Gar-Gar placed the polearm in front of him with religious care, then kneeled back in a position that reminded Viv of Seiza, the Japanese proper seating. He invited her to join with a sweep of his thin arm. She obliged.

“Human warlord. What do you want?”

His Enorian was clipped and heavily accented. Viv realized that she had grown used to his curt sentences. He was not being rude.

“Can I ask you a question?” She started.

“Ask.”

“Why do you fight with us here, in the forest? I know that you could defend your city against most forces now that you have steel and that you have settled. I also know that you don’t like us much. I’m appreciative, make no mistake, I’m just curious.”

The Yries made a strange series of clicks that she had not yet learned to interpret. It was always an experience to maintain eye contact, yet Viv persevered, because the Yries took it as a sign of stability.

They loved their stability.

“Not dislike. ‘Click’. Pity. Fear. Not dislike.”

Gar-Gar gestured at the cavern around them.

“When we live in forest, we live in the trees. When we live in mountain, we live in the caves. You, humans, you dig caves in the forest. You bring wood in the mountains. To make the tunnels larger. Instead of asking the stone.”

He leaned forward. Viv caught a whiff of his musk. It was curiously bird-like.

“You claw the earth to make fields. You cut the forest to make walls. When you run out of space, you find more. You fight and you wage war on the beasts. On us. On yourselves. It is... never enough. You never have enough. You cannot stop. It is beyond you.

“I used to hate it. But it serves no purpose to hate the snow. The cold. They just... are. You just... are. I see it now. When you took Kazar, we sent a young one with you. He witnessed... destruction. He said... that it was glorious. When he pierced the human walls with an Yries tool. I understand now. We cannot live without you... anymore. Not since we arrived in the deadlands. I picked a human. And I will work with this human. You. To keep our city. For vengeance. And for ideas.”

“Ideas?”

“You... are outlander. You see Yries machines and think weapons. We did not think weapons. We do now. And if you turn on us... we still have weapons.”

“I will not turn on you, Gar-Gar,” Viv replied. “I meant what I said. I will not attack people because of what they might do. Only trust will carry us all through the day.”

“You believe now. And maybe you will, later. So long as you do... you have us. Because we want to believe as well. You have our weapons.”

The Yries smiled, and it was not a pleasant sight.

“They are very good weapons, yes?”

Talan woke up to a noisy crash. He rushed out of his tent with fear, fastening his armor as fast as he could in the darkness of the pre-dawn night. Cries of alarm rang through the camp. Then, he heard the buzz.

When the fire wasps came this time, they came from every direction. There were no trees left for Eteia to burn, though she did manage to destroy some of the insects mid-flight. The rest of the hive warriors crashed on the camp in a swarm of embers, setting tarps and supplies ablaze. Two landed on Talan as he was stomping on a nearby fire. His breastplate stopped the first but the second landed on the elbow. The pain sent him to the ground, screaming for a while. The battle turned into a Helockian farce. He could swear he had extinguished the same drying underwear three times.

It took ten minutes for the last wasp to self-immolate. Eteia ran everywhere, catching flames in her fist as if it were paper to collect. No one died this time. No one managed to sleep again either. Once more, they waited for an attack that never came until dawn found them, tired and sooty. They departed mid-morning despite their exhaustion, with Talan once more in the lead. They were fully in the deepest part of the forest now. Small hills and tall trees played strange tricks with his perspective, and the questor remained vigilant, but they came upon few traps and none that contained sap anymore. It appeared that the Kazarans had run out. Not that it mattered. The damage had been done.

Talan adjusted his bracer for the fifth time. The company didn't have nearly enough leather to replace the lost straps, so he had to make do with torn tarp. Many others were in the same situation. Between the sap and the wasps, few tents or cloaks remained intact. Even Bishop Ereon had a hole in his tabard. As for the champion, he had caught all the wasps on his gauntlets.

The prince was intact as well. He had stayed inside during the crisis, which was probably for the best since the opportunity was perfect for an assassin's strike, Talan thought.

Yes, that was for the best.

The day went on, with the landscape changing into more of the same. There were the trees, the occasional bird, and the constant presence of those strange walls of altered earth. Talan had no idea what they were for since nothing had happened. He was relatively sure that they could not contain spells or traps. Perhaps they were an attempt at intimidation, a constant reminder that the witch was out there somewhere, watching. Making ready.

Nothing happened that day besides a monster attack. The beast was quickly dispatched by the champion and Ereon working together, and its carcass was butchered to provide meat for the men that evening. Talan went to bed expecting trouble. He was woken up again, in the darkness, by a horrid whistling sound. Put the armor on. Latch it. Draw sword. Get out. His mind flailed against fatigue when he came out and gathered his exhausted men around him, but this time nothing happened. The noise had come from a hollow ballista bolt. It had only been an elaborate whistle.

"Looks like they ran out of fire wasps as well," one of the soldiers said.

“Good because we were running out of tents.”

Talan reached a certain sense of detachment the next day as they kept going and the ankle-snappers increased in numbers. There were still a lot of wounded, so many that Ereon had to stay with the moving infirmary. Everyone’s mana was running low, which was dangerous, but like the day before, the champion and Bishop Ereon slew the few monsters attracted by the column. The prince even came out with his sword and participated. They made a great show of exposing the carcass of a furry quadrupedal creature, cleanly beheaded. The prince stood by it, sword bloody. Talan was sure that the men appreciated his efforts but, to him, it felt farcical. Just a charade. If the prince wanted to make himself useful on his off time, he only had to visit the infirmary. Talan was sure that the man had more life mana than the average grunt.

A great emptiness filled his chest at that thought and he calmed himself down. Maranor’s faith required respect for power in the pursuit of power. Either he followed the prince or he deemed him unworthy, and thus a target. The goddess tolerated no middle ground. Now was not the right time to reconsider his obedience. Not in the middle of the woods. He would have time to do so in Kazar.

If they ever reached it.

It was the first time that the possibility of failure entered his mind, and he chased it away. The Kazarans were only delaying the inevitable. Even battered and hurt, the army was still close to eight hundred battle-hardened, professional soldiers. They had proven themselves in Regnos and other places. They had trained for years in preparation for the civil war. It wasn’t something that a year of preparation could offset. Never.

Talan’s thoughts grew feverish as the day went on. They were almost past the heart of the woods, arguably the most dangerous leg on the journey. He could already see the trees return to normal proportions. They were so close.

Something cracked on both sides of the road.

The men immediately reacted and so did he. The slope led up and disappeared into a thicket of thin, white-barked trees. He just knew that something was coming from the rumble. Something heavy. One of the nearby bridger sergeants started to yell.

“Shit, don’t stay in formation! Spread out! Bombardment protocol!”

They obeyed with practiced ease and soon, Takan could see why. Enormous, spherical rocks were rolling down on them. The bridgers moved up to meet them. And dodged.

Talan did the same. The siege specialists knew what they were doing. He ran up to the nearest ball and swerved around the quickly accelerating projectile. There were not a lot of them but by Maranor, were they big. As tall as a man. Fortunately, they were all past him now.

“Watch your back!” a bridger told him, and he did.

The soldiers fared rather well. None of them had finesse below the third tier and it showed in the way they ducked and ran. By spreading out, the soldiers avoided running into each other but the danger was not gone yet. The rocks on the opposite slope were now climbing back up through sheer inertia. Some found each other in deafening shocks that sent boulders as large as torsos crashing to the ground. Others found wagons.

By some miracle, all four bridger earth casters were at the top of the formation that day. Quickly raised walls deflected or slowed the impending doom but for others, it was too late. Talan saw a food wagon turn to splinters, its contents smushed on the muddy ground. Then, a horrible thought hit him.

The wounded.

Talan sprinted with everything he had, ignoring the tiny voice in his head that said that he was too late and besides, powerless. The mobile infirmary stood in the middle of the formation. perhaps it had escaped destruction? He moved faster, until he saw a flash of grey light.

The back of the ambush had held much better. As he watched, a fire lance split a boulder in two while the champion swung his two-hander, stopping another completely in its tracks. Ereon had moved forward in an attempt to block the other side. He brandished a mace and screamed the name of the goddess.

For one breathtaking moment, the grey light of Maranor’s power silenced the constant rumbling as the bishop successfully punted the threat away. The tall veteran saw Talan jumping and smiled knowingly, but then the grin faded from his lips. Talan’s mentor gasped dreadfully and arched his back. Talan imagined more than heard a crack, then a blade emerged from Ereon’s mouth, coming from the other side.

The Bishop fell. Talan screamed. He ran. A shadow darted away, cloaked in black. It weaved between running bridgers with such ease that the experienced warriors looked like stumbling children. A voice sounded at Talan’s back, strangely loud in the chaos of the trap. It was princely and very, very cold.

“Do it.”

The slope exploded in front of Talan. The heat pushed him back and the men on it died a fiery death. He saw the shadow fall. He saw it die too. None of the soldiers around survived the blast but it, no, she, almost did, and when her corpse rolled by his side, he stared at a strangely intact face with gaunt yet elegant features. On her burned chest, he could spot the numbers two and six tattooed in black ink.

“Hadal monsters,” the prince said by his side. “So the witch will stop at nothing to delay the inevitable. She would go as far as allying with freaks. Well, I should not be surprised. Men, get that corpse on the spike so that our column may see the face of our foe.”

Talan wanted to see as well, but all his sight was taken by the body of his master, mangled below a scorched stump.

That night, five soldiers attempted to desert. The champion spotted them and the prince had them hanged by the gate for all to see. He talked to everyone of duty, of dying for the cause, of the importance of seeing things through. He spoke of those who had fallen and of their sacrifice, but it was wrong. Sacrifice implied choice. Eteia's spell had given them none. They had been victims. Talan tried to tell himself that their deaths had been necessary but, this time, he failed. Bishop Ereon the brave had not died to kill but to save. His assassination should not have led to collateral damage, even if eliminating a Kazaran elite would save lives in the long run. It was the sort of calculation that treated people as figures on a piece of parchment. it was... unworthy.

The faith in Talan's breast died out like an exhausted candle. He walked through the rings of tents to the infirmary to make himself useful, finding the apothecary there.

"Here to help?" the bald man asked. Talan realized that he could not tell the age of the man. He also realized that he didn't know his name.

"It's Massine. Nice to meet you, Talan."

"I apologize."

"And I understand. You are exhausted. You need rest tonight. Everyone is stable, I give you my word."

"But..."

"No buts. Exhaustion leads to wounds and then where would that leave us? Come on, let's have a cup of klod."

They walked to the edge of the earthworks that were now erected every night despite the tremendous mana cost, and sat by a raised, sharpened log. The smell of ash gave Talan's drink a peculiar taste.

"Are you alright, questor? You look... different."

"Different bad?"

"Yes."

"Having a bit of a crisis of faith right now."

"That is problematic for someone on the path of a warrior priest."

"It is, isn't it? It happens though. Bishop Ereon said that..."

Talan choked on his next words. Massine the apothecary patted his shoulders for the next minute while he cried a bit.

“I’m starting to wonder what’s the point. I promoted order, power, and obedience because I thought that it was the only way for humanity to thrive. Only by being united could we stop the monsters and aberrants. We could join in one glorious union instead of eating each other like rats stuck in a pot. But here we stand, one year after hostilities flared up, and no closer to unity. Worse, we’re actually falling apart. Thirty thousand corpses later and nothing has changed. I tried so hard. So fucking hard. But Ormin died and so did others. It’s all fucking pointless.”

More shoulder patting. For some reason, the gesture was both kind and respectful.

“I’m older than you so I could share my experience on the matter, if it helps. Otherwise, feel free to talk more. I find that it lightens the heart,” Massine said with a steady voice.

“No no, please talk. I don’t want to speak up my mind right now.”

“Very well.”

The older man pondered for a moment, then he started. In the distance, the sun disappeared behind charred trunks.

“I often asked myself this question, you know? As a healer. Why do people die after I tried so hard to save them? Why do they stop breathing when they have so much to live for? What sort of world do we live in when a young couple loses their child to a one-in-a-thousand freak accident while criminals retire unimpeded? I could not find an answer and so I fought, because I was angry.”

The apothecary rubs his calloused fingers together. His delicate hands were pitted with burn marks and scar tissue, though his nails were clean. Talan found an echo of his distress in the man’s bitter smile.

“I fought Enttiku and her grasp. I fought with all my strength and cursed her every day for every person whose eyes I closed for the last time. My potions delayed poisons fit to kill a king. I mended together fragments of bones. It was never enough. Every day, I cursed her just as I prayed to her. I even heard the voice of... you know of whom I speak. It offered enduring flesh but I refused it, because it was not survival at all cost I was seeking, but salvation. Enttiku never answered my provocations. She never chastised me. Every time I prayed I felt... empty afterward, but in a good way. Like a lanced wound drained of its foulness. She drew the fury out of me when I let her.”

He sighed deeply.

“I think I found the way when a man came asking for a merciful death. I tried to refuse him but he wouldn’t budge, and he wouldn’t get angry either. I think I already had my answer, but I needed to take one last step to accept it for myself. It was that man who gave it to me, with



his incurable disease. He told me that death was not a failure. This is important and something I want you to know. Death is not a failure. It is an inevitability, but it is not a failure. When you finish a journey, you do not fail by reaching the destination and the destination of life is its own end. More often than not, that end comes too soon, but in the end, we must all reach it.

“My role as an apothecary is not to fight off death but to provide and improve life, even if sometimes it means ending it. That is why I fight to save a man from a heart attack even if he has only a month left to live. Every new dawn we see, every breath we take is one more beautiful experience we get to have before we take the final journey. Now, I am no theologian, so I cannot tell you what souls do after they cross Enttiku’s gate. Hell, I don’t even know if the experience we gather during our lives matters. I want to believe it does. Every extension of life is something I want to celebrate and if my treatment didn’t work, then too bad, but I will have tried, and I will live without regret. You cannot save everyone, Talan, even those you thought you might have. There is no purpose in thinking what ifs because you were, and still are, only human. Fragile. Prone to mistakes. You mentioned Ormin but you didn’t mention the others, those who still depend on you as their chaplain. You can be the glue that holds them together to face the good, the bad, and the ineluctable.”

Talan looked at the man in a new light because he thought he had an answer, then he frowned humorously.

“You’re not trying to turn me into a priest of Enttiku, are you?”

“All light gods bring something to the table. The order and strength Maranor provides helps to create the stable kingdoms we need to survive, so no, but I guess you got my point anyway.”

“I think I did. I think I was too focused up instead of... around. All that shit is beyond me anyway, but the men I serve with are not. I’ll be there for them. No matter what... no matter what, I will not give up and I will show no fear. No hesitation. If I can give them one more day, I will.”

The apothecary nodded and, this time, his smile was peaceful.

“We all extend lives in our own way. I have potions to brew, my friend. See you later, or see you on the other side.”

“And if there is a bar, I’ll meet you there.”

“It’s a deal.”

Willpower +1

That was encouraging. And he would need it, because the prince wanted to accelerate. With many wagons and stores destroyed, they had to reach Kazar as soon as possible or risk even more attrition. That was it. Do or die.

Somewhere back on the road, Viv climbed down from her horse in front of the savaged remains of Two-Six. The woman's body had been sanctified not to rise again, but that was the only mercy she had been shown.

"I told her not to go," she said.

It felt empty but she had to mention it, because it was not her fault and she was a bit of a coward. It was tactless, however, and she knew it. Viv breathed and settled her soul. It felt strange to control it to some extent, but now was not the time for introspection or prayer. She walked to the bereaved's side.

"I'm sorry, Irao."

"You are," he acknowledged. He was looking at the Hadal woman with an expression that Viv could not read.

"Let's get her down?"

"Yes."

They worked in silence. Viv had brought a shroud and wrapped the body in it. One of Two-Six's legs was missing, blasted clean off. There was spit on her tattered clothes. Once the body was secured, Viv looked at the Hadal leader with some circumspection. The man was so silent that it was difficult to read him, but she thought he might be sad. She would be in his stead. She decided to just give it a go.

"Do you want to go bury her?"

"No, I have a pyre. Follow me."

It amazed Viv that the man had already set it up. It was a nice one, large and built in a tiny clearing that smelled of wild flowers. Irao carefully placed the body on and stopped then.

"I don't know how to do a funeral."

Viv pondered the question for a while before picking an answer she thought would help.

“My dad used to say that funerals were truly for the living, so we can grieve and remember. Just say something meaningful to you. Then... we can say goodbye.”

“She cared for us very much.”

Viv was surprised that Irao would speak so fast, then she was surprised that he would speak so much.

“Our first home is in Kazar. We didn’t have one before. We had hideouts. She said that we had to defend it.”

He paused for a while, so Viv waited.

“I held back because I didn’t want to be used. Sometimes, I find it hard to tell if I want something or if someone wants something and I have to do it for them. The child went forth because she thought she had to defend us. She thought she was alone. That she had to carry the future for all of us. That was why she didn’t fully trust your plan, because she could not trust me to act. Us. Her own family. I think I failed her. I think I see a way to make sure I don’t fail the others, and those who will be born soon.”

He turned to her and his eyes were still yellow and slitted, but they no longer disturbed her. It was just Irao. Her ex roommate. A bit weird and traumatized but ultimately someone who just wanted to live a life of his own choosing.

“I will not murder for you, or for anyone, but I will fight for you. The Hadals will be there in three days when the Enorian army arrives. I will be there too. I think that we will all be there. Everything will be decided then.”

“Thank you, as for me, I wanted to say that Two-Six helped save the kidnapped mountain folks before we took back Kazar. Thanks to her, everyone’s first impression of you guys was positive. She’s been a cornerstone between the Hadals and the rest of us for months and we all owe her a lot.”

Irao nodded, then waited.

“I think, if we’re done, we can light the pyre and say goodbye.”

“Okay.”

They stayed there for a while, then returned to the hidden, temporary trails made with black mana and the Yries machines. With the addition of the Hadals to her ranks, their side of the conflict was fully committed, Viv thought to herself.

“We’re all in.”

“Not yet but soon,” Irao corrected.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing.”

## Chapter 85: Inevitable

*“Every battle is won before it is ever fought.”*

- Sun Tzu

All of Kazar and its surroundings had gathered to see the troops leave. Men, women and children covered the entire plaza in a sea of humanity. They hid every balustrade and adorned every window. The great press of folks stared at Viv, standing before her pulpit, with laser focus. The silence was deafening.

There were almost four thousand people gathered here. Kazarans old and new, refugees and mountain tribes. An Yries detachment waited by one of their converted drills while the Hadals stuck to the roof like strange growths, faces hooded and blades hidden. A squad of heavies formed a superfluous cordon near the town hall entrance where she stood now. Witch-pact marksmen hung back, face veiled over their brand-new uniforms. The white and gold of Neriad reflected the light of the noon sun in the distance, near their temple, with the handful of nobles on their warhorses. Everyone had come.

By her side, the representatives of every faction waited in grim silence for her to begin.

“Right.”

**//Your Grace?**

Viv almost jumped in surprise.

**//I would like to say a few words.**

She opened her mouth. Closed it again.

**//Please.**

**//It is quite important.**

**//We have waited to do this for too long.**

**//We can wait no longer.**

**//And it must come from us, not from you.**

“Solfis?”

**//Please.  
//Trust me.**

“Well, sure, if you insist. Sound enchantment?”

**//That will not be necessary.**

The golem took a few steps forward and when he spoke, his alien, organic snarl filled the entire plaza and the streets beyond. It was loud and very, very clear.

**//People of Kazar, hear me.  
//I, the last defender of Harrak, will speak now.  
//You have seen me many times, but you have seen a golem.  
//I am more than just a normal golem.  
//My name is Solfis.  
//I was made by my master Irlefen in Harrak almost six hundred years ago.  
//And I remember.  
//I remember everything.**

The golem walked softly over the ground, his gaunt frame towering over even the most massive of heavies. He shifted and adjusted his balance in a dance that Viv knew was pure affectation, and yet the show of humanity soothed the gathering. They knew Solfis. They had seen him fight by their side. They had seen him drag creatures that could slaughter whole villages out of the heart of the forest, distributing the boon of meat to the needy. He was no longer an alien being, but an ancient and mysterious protector. A benevolent ancestor.

A local god.

**//Once upon a time, Harrak was a flourishing civilization ranging from the marches of Halluria to the Far Sea.  
//Imperial couples ruled over ten million souls from atop the Great Ziggurat.  
//They ruled with an iron fist, but they ruled justly.  
//It was a nation where the grandson of a roadmender could become a baron and a baron, a slave, on their own merits.  
//Men and women could grasp the stars through skill and effort.  
//Life bloomed from the great forests of the north to the fertile southern plains.  
//The land behind you was covered in orchards and wheat fields as far as the eye could see.  
//While north of here, men and women pulled ore from the belly of the earth so that every laborer could wield iron tools.**

Solfis stopped, spine bent as if overwhelmed by memories. Viv was no longer sure of anything.

**//But Harrak died.  
//I was there, and I remember.  
//All the living fell, the life stolen from them.  
//The land perished.**

**//And the purple blooms of Harrakan roses turned to ash under my fingers.  
//It only took an instant.**

Silence.

**//My master fell from his garden chair.  
//I could not wake him up.  
//I tried everything.**

More silence. People didn't even dare to breathe.

**//I fought the undead.  
//I fought for three hundred years, until the last drop of mana from the last salvaged core could no longer sustain me.  
//I fought over the corpse of this great nation, knowing it would amount to nothing, in the end.  
//I was doomed.  
//And the memories of Irlefen were doomed with me.**

Another long pause.

**//But then, I was found by a young outlander lost in a world of grey.  
//She dragged my core through the desert, over a month.  
//Step by step with the strength of her arms.  
//I believed again.  
//And I was right.  
//Because I found you.**

Solfis straightened and spread his arms with sinister benevolence.

**//It may seem like the nation I served has perished.  
//But I tell you now, Harrak is not a population, or a land.  
//Harrak is an idea.  
//And ideas are immortal.  
//So long as there is one left who carries them.  
//I am Solfis, and I remember everything.  
//And now, you too, remember.  
//You remember the techniques and laws your ancestors developed.  
//But more importantly, you remember the mentality that turned Param into a beacon of civilization.  
//United and powerful.  
//You remember.  
//You will pick up this flame and turn it into a great inferno.  
//You will revive what was once lost.  
//The lands of Harrak will be green again.  
//We will reclaim it from the deadlands.  
//And we will make. It. OURS!**

Kazar roared. The mountain roared. The deep bellow rolled over the hills like a great sonorous tide and with it, it carried the rarest meaning mankind could achieve: unity of purpose.

**//Harrakans, are you ready to reclaim your legacy?**

“Yes!”

**//THEN KNEEL.**

**//Do you swear to become citizens of Harrak, to uphold its laws, and to stand against its foes?**

There was an indistinctive roar of approval from the kneeling crowd. The words varied but the intent was clear.

**//Do you swear to obey your rightful rulers, to fulfill your duties, to rejoice together in times of fortune and stand side by side in times of need?**

**//Do you swear to follow the Heiress to the Throne as she leads you in battle against the invaders?**

The cold claws of inevitability grasped Viv’s chest as thousands of eyes turned to her. She was in the spotlight. She could not move. The crowd was galvanized and primal. They recognized her, the one who had guided them through the desert and brought them back with steel in their fists. They knew who she was, what she had done, what she could still do, and they approved. They howled that approval to her now and the sound of so many throats jolted her like a slap, but she didn’t dare to move. The point of no return had been crossed a long time ago.

**//Then I, Solfis, recognize you as such.**

**//INDUCTION PROTOCOL ENGAGED.**

**//CHANGE ‘KAZARAN’ STATUS TO ‘HARRAKAN CITIZEN’.**

**//CHANGE ‘MOUNTAIN TRIBE’ STATUS TO ‘HARRAKAN CITIZEN’.**

**//CONDITIONS FULFILLED.**

**//CHANGE ACCEPTED.**

**//NEW IMPERIAL SETTLEMENTS RECOGNIZED.**

**//CAPITAL STATUS TRANSFERRED TO KAZAR.**

**//RISE, CITIZENS OF HARRAK.**

Ban met Viv’s eyes as he grabbed a flag, unfolding it with ceremony. It showed a white pyramid inside of a circle over a field of black. It had been planned all along. More flags were raised by soldiers, unfolded from windows. She had seen those flags before in history books, the symbol of a fallen nation now flying again. Funny how things tended to repeat themselves.

**//HARRAK ETERNAL!**

“Harrak Eternal!”

**//CITIZEN, THE CITY IS UNDER THREAT.  
//TO ARMS, HARRAKANS.  
//WE MARCH.**

The newly-minted citizens rushed to their houses to grab their spears and makeshift armors. Every trained militia joined down to the last shoemaker, soon merging with the ordered lines of regulars, then the hooting squads of Yries crossbowmen pushing their war machines. The torrent of people walked in massive, disciplined columns into the Deadshield Woods, and where they tread, the beasts and monsters fled for their lives.

The Enorians crashed into the clearing like waves upon the shore. Talan stood upright and unbending because the others needed to see him that way, but the youngest member of the squad just sat on the grass where he was.

“Stand up Salz, this ain’t a picnic,” the corporal said.

“Sorry sir, just... one moment please.”

It wasn’t technically insubordination so the corporal let it go. They were all exhausted. Ten days through hell, the last three spent going as fast as possible or risk running out of water again. Over sixty fatalities. Dozens of casualties, some of them still unable to fight properly because of debilitating injuries. By some miracle, Massine had kept everyone alive and going after the loss of Ereon, but only barely. A professional army had left Anelton to restore order, but it was a mob that now spread over the open ground in squad-based clumps, exhausted, hurt, dirty, but alive. And they had done it. Kazar was within walking distance. They could get there tonight if they forced it, but the powers-that-be would most likely declare the rest of the afternoon to be a resting time.

“Dinner can’t come soon enough,” someone said

“Don’t let your guard down now. This is the largest camping spot since the fucking butterflies. I would be surprised if there were no traps,” the corporals answered, vigilant.

The earth casters were using their remaining mana sparingly, testing the ground for traps and circles. Who knew what other nasties the witch had in store? Talan surveyed the land. The edge of the forest stood a hundred paces away across a field of wildflowers. The ubiquitous black mana tree-things popped here and there, defacing the land and reminding them of her horrifying presence. To his left, the road went on. The army was still spilling forward like a water leak, blue tabards stained and all weapons out despite the fatigue. They were ready for anything, Talan thought.

The meadow was eerily still. The outer squad advanced with sluggish speed across the grass, testing the ground for pitfalls and finding none. The earth mage kept chucking



charged stones across the land to find hidden circles or magical constructs. Again, nothing. It was far too good to be true. Far too good.

An order to stay put came from behind. Talan agreed wholeheartedly, his vision filled with images of pinpoint bombardments or other shenanigans. They still hadn't seen any of the elite, except the assassin who failed to escape. The witch had something planned, for sure. He looked back and saw the royal carriage entering the valley in all its majesty. Massive and intimidating, it could anchor any formation with its powerful enchantments. The soldiers milled before and after it, wary, unsure of which calamity would be unleashed upon them this time.

Talan almost missed it, when the sculptures melted. He didn't know why he turned back precisely at that moment, only that he didn't trust the forest. His inspection skill guided his eyes with divine providence, searching, finding nothing, until...

[Blue oak sapling]

[Stone]

[New Harrakan ghillie suit]

"What the..."

There was nothing there, nothing but a mess of color and forms that was exactly the same as every other underbush. Talan took one step forward. His squad looked up, alert.

The eldritch walls disintegrated. They fell like piles of sand, as if the alien patterns and pointy appendages had been nothing but a dream. The walls melted and revealed three figures.

There was a Kark woman in the heaviest armor Talan had ever seen. A flanged mass rested on a muscular shoulder while another kept upright a tower shield so massive it could have doubled as a bank door.

The golem deployed in all its gaunt, skeletal horror.

In the middle, the heiress stood. She wore her white robe and a helmet. Her round shield was held protectively against her chest. She pointed a finger down and a transparent shield shone into existence, covering the three under a thick dome. Talan knew what it was. He had seen war mage parties deploy the same protection when they needed cover for their heaviest spells.

The questor took another step. He mumbled a cry but he didn't know what to say. Fifty, maybe more, soldiers watched their bane stand with absolute confidence in the open field, and Talan hated her in that moment, hated her for what she would do to him, because he knew, he saw in the unfeeling pits of her eyes, that they were right where she wanted. She didn't even look at the army. Her only focus was on the royal wagon. Talan and his men didn't even merit a single glance of consideration.

“Call it.”

The Kark woman obeyed the heiress’ order. She brandished a strange tube and a red star ascended with a sound like a whistle. Talan expected it to explode but it didn’t. Instead, it was mirrored. First one, then two, then a dozen other stars rose to the late afternoon sky in a half-circle around the bedraggled, half-deployed Enorian infantry.

And then the woods came alive.

Horns and drums carried orders far and wide to entire lines of combatants emerging from the edge of the trees in every direction he faced. Hooting Yries followed strange mechanical contraptions that flattened entire trees and the green of the forest squirmed with uncounted soldiers. He picked a glistening quarrel tip at random.

[Witch-pact markswoman. Very dangerous. Crossbow expert. Dead-eye. Merciless.]

A mighty artillery spell, a monstrous one, curved over Talan’s head to crash against the wagons’ defenses at an angle. A plume of flame from a tired Eteia roared out but the destructive black was only stopped by a shimmering wall of enchantments. Another followed immediately, aimed lower. It destroyed the wagon’s front right wheel. The heavy carriage tilted forward. Eteia gripped the mage seat with both hands. Talan grabbed Salz and pulled him up. They fell in with other squads, forming a rough battleline. Archers hid behind. Some of them merged into the trees for cover and to give the rest of the army enough room to deploy as quickly as they could. Orders fused. More spells were launched, some of them stone ones that were blocked by a large female Yries in flowing robes. Kazarans in heavy armor brandishing a variety of two-handed weapons gathered far to his right. It was about to start.

“Loose!”

“Hold!”

The thin line of Enorians raised kite and tower shields, blocking most of the incoming punishment. Those were veterans and siege experts, armed with skills aimed at improving their survival. Quarrels screeched across the clearing, joined by arrows arcing overhead and found targets anyway. The soldier to Talan’s left lost half of his neck to a massive bolt. Men yelled on their way down, clutching ghastly wounds. Talan needed more time. The Enorians just needed a couple of minutes for the line to harmonize, for elites and officers to reach their position. Just a couple of minutes and the army would be ready. The prince was already advancing in shining armor, ready to bolster his men.

They would not have minutes.

Talan had wondered why the Kazaran center held no troops. He now realized his mistake. They had troops, they were just hidden in a trench camouflaged by a trick of perspective. The center of the Kazaran formation stood now and the questor almost pinched himself in disbelief. Moans of consternation spread across the ranks.

“This is a joke, right?” Salz asked.

The last successor regiment had died to the last man holding a doomed fortress one hundred and fifty years before. Their techniques had been lost with them, and their ancient gear had been melted down to arm a thousand men. Now, figures from history books kneeled then stood in front of them in armors of black steel. Their many pennants bearing trees and mountains fluttered in the wind, giving them the movement that old drawings had failed to show. Shields linked under serrated harpoons made of solid metal that could only be called spears in the same way a battering ram qualified as a door knocker. Some of those were even runed! A large man with a white braided beard falling to his navel brandished the flag of a long-dead nation.

[Tip of the Spear, extremely dangerous, unique fourth step path of the first battalion, first company commander of the Harrakan heavy phalanx. Leader. Slayer of man. Expert melee combatant...]

“It’s the real fucking deal,” Talan heard himself say.

The cries to join the formation redoubled. Over half of the army was on the clearing now, running, cursing, dying to vicious volleys of quarrels. The return fire was not yet enough to force the Kazarans down. Talan considered that their only saving grace was the obvious inexperience of those that faced them, and it would not be enough, because the heavy infantry was advancing.

They covered most of the center in a thin line two-men thick, but they were advancing faster and faster. The formation went around the witch’s circle as she kept pummeling Eteia, then they closed again and there was nothing in front of Talan but a wall of spiked steel, no longer a unit but a solid, monstrous mass growing ever closer, ever faster. There was one last beautiful moment where the Enorians almost managed to form a full line, where Talan could spot the eyes behind the thick helmets of the soldier charging them. In that fugacious instant, the foe was human and scared, then the steel beast roared and crashed into him.

The sound of the charge was the loudest he had ever heard in his whole life. A hundred church bells ringing could not have matched its ear-shattering fracas. All air left Talan’s lung as he was propelled backward by the formidable impact. Others fell around him, while some squads still stood upright and exchanged blow for blow. The questor took a passing glance at Salz’ body when he stood back up and joined the fray.

A black line, now less cohesive than before. He locked shields with another soldier in blue among the quick exchange of blows and felt his ‘shieldwall’ skill pick up. A spear smashed into his shield just as it was reinforced by mana. Talan felt a sharp pain in his arm but he ignored it. His return sword strike glanced off a heavy helmet with a shriek of tortured metal, and they fought more. Strike. Block. The Harrakan armor was so thick and its owner moved so well that it felt like fighting a training dummy, one that would stab back. It would outlast a thousand cuts.

Talan could see nothing of the battle, only hear that the roar had not stopped yet. The line of heavies took a collective step back and Talan took a deep breath of relief. His arm was lead, stiff and exhausted. Quarrels were still landing in targeted volleys along the line.

“What are our bowmen doing?” He spat, and took in the battlefield.

Far to the right, the warriors in heavy armor were completely rolling the Enorian right.

“SkraaaAAAAACOUGH!”

Talan turned and blinked. The forest was now on fire. Shapes danced, covered in flames. Other, darker shapes moved on to attack the squads still loosing arrow after arrow on their enemies.

A tide of militia moved after the Harrakan elites, taking apart the isolated elements like packs of hounds. The right flank was collapsing under the onslaught of a tall man shredding lines of spears with every blow of his greatsword leading a pack of linebreakers. The Kazarans were not slowing down.

The Enorians were getting broken and swarmed.

Talan knew that his side needed just a little time, just a little more time to recover. A blast of black mana crashed on a red shield for what felt like the dozenth time. The witch was containing a war mage a full step above her. This was madness. No, this was calculated.

They had been engaged at the worst possible time, in the worst possible situation. The extremely aggressive attack capitalized on momentum, the Enorian exhaustion, and the fervor he now felt in every unit of the enemy army. They had been maneuvered like children. By a nobody.

“Left, left, stretch the line!”

Talan heard the voice of the champion and obeyed. The Harrakan heavies reengaged but the questor was already pulled out of the formation and running towards the road and the still trickling soldiers joining the fray. They had to hold. If they were cut off... It would be all over. They could not be split.

Behind, some of the reinforcements came under attack from cloaked figures.

Was anything going well?

“Cavalry! BRAAAAACE!”

Oh for fuck's sake. Talan closed formation with the rest of the men around him, only to realize that he didn't have a spear. Only his sword. In front of them, a wedge of knights on barded steeds was charging, led by two plate-armored men. There were Neriad standards coming shortly after.

Talan placed his arm on the shoulder of the man in front of him. That was all he could do.

He was thrown to the ground for the second time. Screams felt distorted by the ringing in his ears. There was grass under his helmet. Comfortable.

Stand up.

Talan found his sword a little bit to the side. He charged the pair of knights leading the attack, still trampling soldiers left and right. It would be almost impossible to get through the barding, but he had to do something. He still had the strength for a [Sword Thrust] .

“Maranor, grant me the power to uphold your vision!”

Talan pushed his exhausted leg once more, only to see the lead knight fall from his horse. The beast tilted to the side, decapitated in a single strike.

All around, the Enorians were rallying to push back the charging temple guards of Neriad. They would hold on. They had to.

“Rally, men! Push this rabble back!” A voice bellowed, and Talan felt his courage rekindle. He did not respect the prince any longer, but he would follow the crown, not the man wearing it.

The prince’s leadership pushed the men to their limit, but it was still facing a surprisingly organized assault and the line buckled almost immediately.

“Take the cavalry down first,” the champion bellowed as the mounted Kazarans disengaged. As an example, he stepped towards the fallen attacker. The second knight tried to stop him and died for it. The scream of anguish from the man on the ground took Tala by surprise.

“Do not worry, you will join him soon enough,” the champion said, then stopped.

Silence spread across this segment of the field, even as chaos still reigned. Talan turned and gasped. The champion’s massive two-hander was stopped mid-air by a long ivory claw.

**//Kindly leave our nobles alive, Enorian.**

**//They do not grow on trees.**

“You will not stop me, abomination.”

The pair exchanged a few rapid strikes, but it was the champion that was pushed back.

“Strength will not suffice, monster. I will show you the power of the Royal Academy of Enoria.”

**//Yes, fleshbag.**

**//Show me how much swordsmanship has improved since I last saw an arena.**

**//Perhaps you will help me improve my human combat algorithm.**

**//The first such occurrence in three centuries.**

**//SWITCHING TO DUELING MODE.**

There was no time to witness the duel. The prince now stood at the head of the formation with his personal guard, fending off assault from some of the best temple guards Talan had ever seen. He joined the fray once more, trying to ignore the disintegrating army around them. The Kazarans were everywhere. He rushed into the frontline just as a man fell clutching his chest and blocked a follow-up strike from a tall woman with dark braided hair and a missing incisor. The giantess flipped her spear and smacked another man on the helmet. The distraction cost him dearly.

Talan attacked.

He poured every last drop of stamina into a flurry of strikes. It felt like hitting water. The woman dodged everything with liquid grace while her counters hit hard and deep. Talan just had to... buy some time.

His left foot slipped on the ground.

Grey mana shone in the woman's dancing steps. The questor prayed and brought his shield up. He stopped three blows, but the last one sent him careening to the ground.

He turned his head just in time to find the champion miss the golem's torso by a hair. The skeletal creature grabbed the over-extended wrist with a leg and pulled.

Metal shrieked when the creature's claws lodged themselves in the sword-wielder's torso.

**//Disappointing.**

Then the champion's head went flying.

A black mana blast crashed into the prince's guard, killing half a dozen men. Eteia was no longer on the carriage.

They just needed some more time.

Talan stood. He found a fallen flag and raised it, trying to bring back the soldiers running away. He had to protect order. The law never ran. Suddenly, he felt a punch in his chest, then another, then another. He had dropped his shield to hold the flag. Now there were feathery shafts piercing his flesh.

Talan planted the flag on the ground to stay up. Of course, marksmen would target unprotected idiots who stood out. That was fine.

They were out of time.

He was out of time.

It was over.

The temple guard ignored him. Militia surrounded him in a circle with their spears out. Someone said something about yielding, but Talan only smiled. It was too late. He preferred to stand. One of the militia women looked like his sister when she was scolding. They came at him and stabbed, and stabbed, until he could see no longer.

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Viv walked on the blood-soaked fields, aware of the attention focused on her. There had never been a time in her life when she had more keenly felt the weight of expectations. Even the Solfis propaganda speech earlier that day had not conveyed how much people were watching, waiting, and she tried to face this attention with her back straight and her step confident.

Even though the most dominant emotion in her heart now was sheer disbelief.

Everything had worked perfectly.

She had expected a last minute fuckup, some weird event like the Sputnik landing on her men or the Enorians marching through the night to attack at dawn but it didn't happen. Everything had gone exactly according to plan, with minimum casualties and without war crimes.

Well, without any more war crimes.

With so much slaughter around her, it was almost tempting to let bygones be bygones, but as soon as she entertained the idea, she realized that she could not accept it. The enslavement of a whole region for the sake of power could not be forgiven, even when blood had been shed. She would not get in the business of letting vengeful, megalomaniac enemies alive.

It was enough to remember the aftermath of Kazar's reconquest, or the mountain village massacre. War on Param didn't know half-measures. The Geneva convention was nothing but a distant memory. True atrocities had led them here, now. There was no stepping back.

"Bring him."

Her voice carried over the silent assembly. No one spoke, prisoners or victors. They watched with bated breath as Solfis approached with the defeated prince held under an unyielding claw. Lancer was forced to kneel.

Viv put heavy gloves on her hands. Marruk brought her a small cauldron, barely more than a cooking pot. Viv turned and emptied her purse in it. The clinks of gold coins echoed strangely in the unnatural quiet.

“Spare me your games, rebel.”

“Shhhhhh,” Viv said.

Solfis placed a white claw under the captive’s mouth and the prince kept his peace. As for Viv, she enhanced her voice via a sound enchantment, one of Varska’s gifts. She had a show to run.

“As you well know, prince, I am an Outlander. Back where I come from, we have a type of play called the tragedy. Perhaps this will feel familiar. It starts with a great hero, an exceptional person almost perfect in every regard except for one fatal flaw, one sin that cannot be ignored. The Hamartia.”

Viv removed the circlet from her enemy’s brow, then placed it in the cauldron. It was interesting how Genghis Khan could be so culturally impactful even in the most distant places. She signaled Arthur and pointed at the cauldron.

“Squee?”

“Please.”

The dragonette hesitantly blew her fire until the container shone red. The smoke hurt Viv’s skin and eyes though she did not let it show.

“That sin causes an inevitable reversal of fortune, one that can only end one way, and that sublime agony provides the audience with the relief they were craving, the catharsis.”

The gold had melted into a shimmering pool. Viv did not touch the cauldron yet. It would be very heavy and the toxic fumes will make speech impossible.

“Your sin was not greed. Your sin was pride. You could not consider that among all the nameless men and women you crushed on your path to power, enough would stand back up to be more than a mild inconvenience. But we did stand back up, and we banded together, leading us to now. It was pride that caused your fall, but it was greed that hurt us and it is for greed that you will pay. I will grant you all the gold you will ever need, Lancer. Solfis, keep his mouth open.”

“Wait! WAIT! YOU ARE MAD!”

A few Enorian soldiers stood but they were cut down without mercy. Just as Viv expected, the molten metal was heavy, hot, and it burnt her lungs.

The prince screamed for exactly a third of a second.



Viv dropped the cauldron and felt so light that she might fly. Lancer's head hit the ground with a dull thud.

"Now you are sated."

The crowd went wild.

For the first time since leaving the cave of her birth, Arthur felt fear towards her mother. The first terror she had felt of the sight of the human had been caused by the death of her brother. It had been an animalistic emotion for her kin had been a constant danger to her, and he had been disposed of with relative ease. But this one was different. It was a terror of the intellect, and unlike the first one, it was tinged with a deep admiration for the strange human who had raised her and fed her the delicious meat.

Mother had sacrificed gold.

A LOT of gold.

To make a point.

Mother had sacrificed the most precious of shinies for no other purpose than to impress her simple kin, an act of spite so profound and meaningful that the gesture had sent her minions into a frenzy, and dismayed her foes to their very soul. Mother had sacrificed the most coveted of metals to punish. The draconic mind boggled before the unthinkable, and Arthur felt her chest fill with fiery pride. Now THAT was domination. That was power! Truly, mother deserved her cheers now, and Arthur would let the world know that the pinkish one had a scaleless body but a heart like the hardest gem.

"SKRAAAAAA!"

Meanwhile Viv stood with a single drop of sweat dripping down her brow.

Your Intimidation skill has dramatically improved!

Intimidation: Expert 1

Two of your class skills have reached the Expert level. You may now choose personal improvements.

Draconic intimidation is now available.

Lost Heiress 2/10

“What the fuck have I done now?”

## Chapter 86: Loose Ends.

Viv stood in the command tent, idly watching the map in front of her. It was of no use, of course, she could redraw it in her sleep. The strange circumstances had led to a very long, very narrow operation area where the center was as thin as a few men, and on the edges, there be dragons.

Possibly literally.

The pristine work made by Farren was now criss-crossed with lines and notations. Pins decorated it in patterns that everyone else would have considered incomprehensible, but to her, it was so clear she could see it all. The advance bases with their supplies and infirmaries, the secondary roads drawn by Yries machines and would already be regrown by now, all of those danced in her mind in that great ballet of people and tools of war. Every aspect had been perfectly orchestrated to lead them to that one fateful moment where the Enorians would be exhausted, split, with their pants down and Viv would bring the fucking hammer. And she had done it. Her army had descended on Lancer's forces and smashed them to bits in just one blow. Twenty minutes of pure hell. For them.

It was amazing how both small and big it had all been. The numbers she had deployed were chump change in modern warfare. Individual countries had suffered more fatalities in a day

during world war two than she had of troops, period. She was not even a trained officer. This was just winging it, using what she knew of logistics and asymmetrical warfare to turn the attackers into a gibbering wreck of an army. An amateur leading a bunch of retrained farmers, refugees, and healed cripples. It was a footnote of history but for them, and for her, it had been everything.

And they had won.

By her side, Marruk readjusted her grip on her huge flanged mace, a horror that was mercifully free of brain matter. She had kept the broken arrow shafts on it, remnants from the end when the colorless mana shield had finally broken. The Kark used to be thin and guarded. Hounded. Now, a stout and intimidating warrior loomed in plate armor that no earth human could move in, looking forward with grim aloofness. Lorn watched her cautiously with his helmet under his arm, while Ban waited by the entrance with his gauntleted fist held behind his back. Solfis was deployed behind her. No one spoke, yet her newly healed soul perceived through leadership that they were proud and not a little vindicated.

A Hadal opened the flap and stared at her. She nodded.

Irao dragged in his surprise prisoner, and the two women glared at each other for a while. Eteia showed wounded dignity, while Viv merely showed indifference. She placed two hands on the table and refrained from intimidating the woman. There was no need. Irao had her.

“Now what am I going to do with you?” She asked, not expecting an answer.

“If you are going to kill me like the prince, please do so without delay.”

Eteia was a severe-looking woman with the same slightly greenish skin and dark hair as everyone here. Viv would not call her pretty even by the slightly different local standard, but now that she stood there disheveled and defiant, Viv found that she did not harbor any grudge towards the woman. Enough blood had been shed already.

“We will not conduct public execution. You are soldiers and there are members of Neriad’s clergy on both sides?”

“Is that so?” The other woman replied. “And I was taking you for a vengeful person. No pyre to throw me on as revenge for killing the Hadal woman?”

“First, it would be counterproductive to try and burn a red mana specialist. Second, that was up to Irao and he decided to spare you.”

Viv cast a curious glance at the bald leader, his yellow slanted eyes checking corners. There were more people here than he was used to.

“Yes. I spared her.”

The Hadal searched for words and everyone else waited. It wasn't the first time it happened. Waiting for Irao was the new normal in Kazar and Viv liked it that way. Eventually, Irao focused on her again.

"I don't know. I feel like killing is definitive but capturing means I can kill later."

"Well here it's no longer the case. We will not execute soldiers who surrender."

Irao nodded to show he understood. The gesture felt a bit forced. He was still making progress.

"Would you like to leave her with us? See to your people?"

Irao just disappeared, which meant an agreement in Viv's experience. Eteia relaxed her shoulders.

"No manacles, no assassin? You must be very confident."

"Well you haven't started screaming about how I would get my just comeuppance once the glory of Enoria... and so on."

"Indeed," the mage replied, smiling a bit bitterly. Her lack of reaction left Viv curious. It appeared that not everyone had been under the charm of the prince, which was especially surprising coming from the mage since Viv was pretty sure the two bonked.

"Also, Solfis will cut you in twelve before you start materializing a single glyph."

**//I will collect your head.**

"Yes, I understand. No need for threats now."

"But you surprise me," Viv continued, "I expected a more extreme reaction."

Eteia shrugged.

"I am not naive. Lancer used me as a tool and I did the same for him. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to be the only female fourth step war mage in Eteia? I was a living reminder that Enorian women as gentle nurturers was nothing but a convenient lie, while male mages detested being my inferior. Only Lancer hired me after I returned from Helock. I was even considering offering my services to the Kingdom of Baran."

"Why didn't you?"

"Enoria is still my home. You are an Outlander, so I cannot begrudge you the independence you claimed. In return, please consider that I would rather improve my country than abandon it, even if it has treated me... poorly. I tried to help. Lancer would not have been such a bad ruler."

“Not for us.”

“I will not dispute that point. Now, not that I do not enjoy talking with a fellow practitioner, but I have to ask. What do you plan to do with me?”

“We will probably have to release you,” Viv admitted candidly. It earned her an expression of pure shock.

“Is this the truth?”

“I have no need to lie to you. I was told that it is possible to keep a mage contained within a spell.”

“Yes, steel and silverite cages are the most common tools. Manacles exist, but they would not work well on someone with our level of mastery over magic.”

“We do not have such tools and I was told that there was a way to... neutralize you for the next decade.”

“A oath of Neriad?”

“Correct. In the meanwhile, I have a question. What is the best way to get into the Helock academy?”

Eteia gasped. Viv knew that the woman had graduated from there. Eteia's achievements were common knowledge among the more up-to-date refugees.

“I... well of course, but why?”

Viv closed her eyes and remembered the prayer.

It had been... a weird moment.

She had always considered herself an atheist, and the gods here were not exactly the creator god her monotheistic tradition sought, but, shit, they were gods. Like Greek or Roman anthropomorphic ones. Angry. Horny. Petty. And more importantly, powerful enough to hear and answer prayer. She had considered asking Neriad, but he was the god of fucking people up when they deserve it, not the answer guy, and so she had turned her attention to Maradoc. The God of Secrets was technically her patron and she still held his blessing, and so she had asked and... he had answered.

Her mind had been at rest, she had felt her mana create a connection of sort. It had been impossible to return to the in-between, at least for now. Instead, a vision had come to her, one of a city so massive it covered the entire flank of a mountain. The sea. And a whisper.

Helock.

The answer to her survival was in Helock, where the greatest archmages of the continent gathered to teach the next generation of promising casters.

Or so she assumed, because there wasn't a single soul in the damn Harrakan lands (still felt weird to call them that) who had any idea how all of this worked. Even Varska's book had nothing but a grandiose introduction of the Academy. Nothing concrete. It really made her miss the internet.

Fortunately, now she had some moderately dated information.

"I need to get in there, I think."

"You think?"

Marruk shifted ever so slightly but Eteia's wary eyes followed the movements of the mace with sudden and strong interest.

"We are having a polite conversation which suits me well, but in case it wasn't clear, I'm asking the question," Viv calmly stated.

"Yes. Of course," Eteia replied. She waved her hand dismissively.

"I do not mean to hide information, your statement just surprised me. Instinctive casters such as yourself usually shun places of learning. They typically find classical education too restrictive, too focused on rules that mostly exist in the mind of practitioners. But that's your business I suppose."

There was a hint of curiosity in the stern woman's eyes. She really wasn't what Viv had expected.

"Admission to the academy itself depends on the applicant's profile. Mine was funded by a rich, widowed aunt. Others have their tuition paid by the crown. You would probably get admitted pretty cheaply given your unique and interesting profile. You would, however, need to show up there in person unless you can get a sponsor. By the way, you will not easily find one in Enoria."

"I gathered that much."

"Crossing Enoria right now is a fool's errand. Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes."

Solfis had mentioned that she had only one more year before her body started breaking down. It was more than urgent, though she was reasonably certain that there were ways to extend that deadline, if what she had read about alchemy was any indication. Nevertheless, time wasn't on her side.

“Then you should leave soon and make your way north through Enoria. Crossing the border might be a problem since the entire place is in chaos, but if you manage that, you can catch a river ship along the Teidar and reach the city quickly and safely. Then, it is only a matter of talking to an administrator. It would help if you can demonstrate new and original spells but it’s not a requirement. You are a bit old for a regular freshman, so I would suggest enrolling in expert programs. Your black mana mastery will help. Can you do any other color?”

Viv considered her answer carefully. In the end, if Eteia accepted the Oath of Neriad, she would be forbidden from sharing information on Viv. If she didn’t, Solfis would add a new trophy to his expanding and slightly disturbing collection in the tower’s basement. Viv shuddered.

“No. Only black and transparent.”

“Wait... That means... Oh.”

Eteia licked her parched lips, considering.

“How long do you have?”

Ban frowned. So far, he had remained silent, but the latest question raised some serious flags.

“Your Grace?”

Viv sighed. The cat was out of the bag.

“Over a year, according to what I know.”

“Hmm, you feel fine. You must have solid conduits and I am told that it helps. Children with skewed distribution are taught to practice those first. And yes, people in Helock can help you, especially the hospital. Many afflictions stem from mana overload. You just have to get there. I suggest leaving as soon as possible.”

“I know.”

The flap opened again and a heavy entered, saluting crisply. The sound of his fist on the armored chestguard clanked strangely in the confines of the tent.

“The troops are ready for review, Your Grace.”

“Then if you will excuse me,” Viv said. She stood and the rest joined her, including Solfis. The heavy would stay inside to keep an eye on the ‘prisoner’.

Viv came out with her head high and her helmet under an arm to the people-packed clearing. The place was deathly silent. A double row of heavies on both sides stood as rigidly as statues, then came witch-pact marksmen and temple guards in an ever widening circle that only stopped at the other end of the battlefield. The Enorian prisoners sat in a huddle to

the right while the infirmary was now silent on her left, the wounded stabilized. The militia occupied most of the ground in groups that were based more around communities than squads and that was fine.

They looked so damn proud, and they had every right to be.

Viv strutted forward with as much authority as leadership would grant her. The others followed right behind, soon joined by the Yries warlord and stoneweaver. The surviving head noble and Farren were there as well. As Viv made her way through the corridor of armed folks, someone slammed the butt on their spear on the ground. It took less than two seconds for the entire Harrakan military to join. Boom, boom. With every step she took, the ones she had led into battle sent tremor through the earth. It felt... amazing.

Viv strode to the center of the meadow and stopped. When Arthur landed by her side, the spears started to move faster and faster until it was no longer a heavy drum, but a deep rumble that went on like an earthquake. Viv let it go on for a bit, then when she was ready, she lifted an open hand and the noise died down. The clearing was once again silent. Viv cast a basic sound spell. Everyone would hear her today.

“Nine months ago, a group of harried refugees left their lost city for the mountains and the hope that they wouldn’t live in chains. We only had what we could carry with us, and the hope that one day, justice would be done. That little flame of hope was nothing then, a mere ember shining in the dark, but it grew with each passing day of commitment, effort, and sacrifice. Little by little, we fed the flame. With mountain wind and Yries steel, with Hadal blades it grew. Exiles and veterans flocked to our banner to keep the dream alive. It was not easy! But after nine months of constant threat, after Lancer sent his vandals and regulars after us, after he returned with an entire army to lay us to waste. After nine bloody months of ash, sweat, and tears... WE HAVE WON!”

The victors roared their approval. Even the Yries let out a high-pitched, ululating cry that pierced through the clamor. Spears on earth and blades on shields clanged in a deafening chorus until even the distant beasts deeper in the forest could not ignore the terrible din, and none answered the challenge. The proclamation of victory fuelled her leadership until whatever marked her soul bounced back in a feedback loop that left the kneeling prisoners shocked and dizzy. It took a minute to die down, following which Viv resumed her small speech. Her dad had been right. Short and impactful was the best.

“There will be a time to repair and a time to mourn those who paid the ultimate price later. For now, we will return to the city and celebrate our victory. I am proud of all of you. Now, let’s go home.”

\*\*\*



The militia was first to return and that was good since they were the ones who would be preparing the victory feast. Viv gave the authorization to get the good stuff out from the warehouses, then handled the logistics of getting six hundred prisoners to a camp. It was fortunate that she had cleared so much land with ward stones. The Bridgers' hybrid earth mage used what little mana they had recovered to start building temporary buildings and, fortunately, the Enorians still had some tents. Viv made sure that they had what they needed and also made sure that they knew that any revolt attempt would be met swiftly and decisively. It was night when she finally managed to get to the fairgrounds. The party had spilt over the streets and the merriment had reached a paroxysm. Viv didn't make speeches, instead electing to walk from group to group to thank everyone.

The next day, several things happened. First, the Yries fighters left, eager to return to their hidden town. Then many of the soldiers were given leave to return to their families, reducing Viv's standing forces to a mere fraction of what it used to be, which was mostly fine but made the oath part all the more important. Before that, she made a short hop at the bank.

"Yes, of course we can make an arrangement," Tom Manitaradin said with a winning smile. Just as always, the banker had an impeccable hairstyle and the smoothness of a professional salesman, and just as always Arthur made him a bit nervous, which was why Viv always brought the dragonette during her visits. It never failed to amaze Viv how Arthur managed to look aloof and dignified without facial expression and a reptilian body, and yet she looked perfectly at ease in the cozy expanse of the Manipeleso Bank, Kazar branch. Lounging on the couch like a bored femme fatale.

Viv shook her head to chase off the sight of a huge white dragon in a massive board room surrounded by rows of accountants, dispensing late fees and fiery death at her leisure. That would not happen, haha. Totally.

"For the modest fee of five gold talents, I can issue an identification chit worn around the neck that can identify you in any branch of our respectable establishment, whereupon you will be allowed to access any of our services, including withdrawal."

He cast a quick glance at Arthur.

"Please note that the amount of actual, ahem, precious metal varies from one branch to another. Some of our more remote locations may not keep too much in storage. We would normally offer additional security services such as hostage retrieval, but I am not allowed to propose it in countries that are currently at war, and unfortunately, you technically are."

"What happens if I lose it?"

"You would still be registered in our book and would be issued a replacement for another four talents if you can prove your identity to our satisfaction. Do not lose the chit as it is quite costly to make."

"What if someone attempts to pretend to be me?"

For the first time, Tom's smile turned vicious.

“Every year, some try. We take great exception. Similarly, if someone disables you and tries to cash in, we would provide a rescue at a fee to be paid later provided that the offending party is classified as bandits. The private sector kind, not the government kind.”

“So kind of you to elaborate.”

“Yes and as I mentioned, it can only occur if someone impersonates you. If you are kidnapped and you have not subscribed to our protection services, we may not deploy mercenaries to help you. But enough of this. Do you intend to travel with a small party?”

“Solfis assessed that it would give us the best chances at passing through.”

“I agree, and a large escort will not help here. Discretion is the way. Discretion and anonymity. Speaking of which...”

“The blessing that occults my status is still present, but it will not help with my physical appearance or black mana control. I will have to avoid the authorities.”

“Ah yes, but at least it sounds doable. Very well, the chit will allow you entrance to our numerous institutions as well as quite a bit of goodwill. I suggest hiring guides in approved establishments. Just ask the local heads.”

“Will do.”

“Will you be needing anything else before you depart?”

“Nothing you can help me with. Thank you for your time.”

Viv stood and her gaze was somehow caught by the tiny pouch resting against Arthur’s neck. It felt too small. Actually, it felt like it should be moving around but it was somehow always in the middle...

#### Inspection 4/5

[Purse of kindness and avarice: artefact. Indestructible. Spatial distortion (only gold and precious things). This pouch was made with love by the owner’s adoptive mother. It feels good under the claw. This artefact was created with the blessing of an unknown god.]

Just her luck.

Viv decided on what to do about the artefact and settled on nothing. It wasn’t hers to begin with. She returned to her room to find out that the Yries blacksmith had added the symbol of New Harrak to her round shield. The piece of gear had probably become twice as thick as it used to be, as well as a bit imbalanced, but it was also symbolic and so that was fine. It was

a bit like a metal patchwork and it had a pleasant, homemade appearance to her eyes. She attached it to her back for the next piece, one she hoped would go well.

With the remaining half of the heavies and many of the marksmen in tow, they moved to the impromptu prisoner's camps. Viv had not been so naive as to trust them fully, despite their broken spirits, so there were patrolling guards including most of Neriad's guards who considered rebelling after rendition to be a major dick move. The kind they punished mercilessly. The procession stopped before the prisoners as they were in tight formation, in their uniform but without weapons. The Bishop of Neriad came to greet her. He was a tall, dour man, clean-shaven with very dark eyes. Short dark hair clung to his scalp

"Hello, Your Grace. We have not been properly introduced. My name is Erland, and I am here on temple business. As it is, I shall also assist you with the matter of the prisoners. I believe that ten years of inaction are enough?"

"How does this work exactly?"

"The Oath to Neriad is not a 'how does this work' act, but a grand celebration of honor between fighters," the bishop retorted somewhat reproachfully.

Viv was unimpressed. Her lack of reaction prompted the man to huff and continue with his explanation.

"The Oath takes place between captor and captive and requires both parties' absolute agreement or it will not take. The captive swears never to harm the captor's interests in any ways which extends not just to combat, but also information sharing and even camp work. In return, the captive is set free with anything he reasonably needs to rejoin his lines, thus available for the kingdom to fight bandits and monsters, but not their fellow man. If they break the oath, they suffer terrible pain that can result in eventual death if they persist in their error."

"And we can extend it for ten years?"

"Indeed! More than enough time for your little kingdom to either bloom or collapse, don't you think?"

Viv didn't really like the implied preference.

"Is this a ritual or..."

"The willing captives must queue and swear one by one."

"Won't you run out of mana?"

The bishop sighed heavily.

"Of course our merciful god devised it so that it could be performed with no circle and with large numbers. The ritual shall draw from the captive's mana, and will absorb all of it while it

settles. We will be done by the end of the afternoon. Please address the crowd and inform them of your decision while I prepare.”

“Sure thing.”

Viv walked forward under the wary gaze of more than six hundred men who would have done their best to kill her less than a day before. She felt little hostility from them, surprisingly. It appeared that her little display had broken their spirit.

A short incantation and her voice filled the plain. She opened the gates on her intimidation and let the implicit threat of blight and dragonette-enforced annihilation hang in the air like the stench of burnt toast.

“Listen up you lot. Fortunately for you, you were stopped before reaching the city so you did not accomplish anything noteworthy. By rule of war, you are innocent. Rejoice. Now, since we neither have the time nor the inclination to keep that many folks on perfectly arable land, you will be given a choice. Option one, you can take the Oath of Neriad. Your weapons will be returned, you will be given rations for two weeks and you can fuck right off through the forest. Just watch for pit traps because we haven’t removed them yet. Option two, you are put to work rebuilding the tower outpost at the edge of the deadlands to watch for revenants until you take option one or until the king remembers you. Those who choose the oath, line up in a single file, in an orderly fashion, or it will be option three and I’ll send you back home in a handkerchief. Officers, take charge.”

Viv returned to a glaring Erland. The man had just started to kneel.

“I expected you to take a bit longer than that.”

“Then you do not know me well. Take your time, they’re not going anywhere.”

The bishop prayed for fifteen minutes, then addressed the crowd with a benevolent voice that grated her nerves. She tuned him out while he droned on, only paying attention to the oath proper. It was carefully worded to be comprehensive and pretty long. The soldiers repeated the oath sentence by sentence. To her mild surprise, not one of them elected to stay. She thought that some people might be too broken to face the forest again. Apparently, those Enorians were made of sterner stuff. That or the willpower stat helped against PTSD.

Then it was her turn to swear, which was fine.

The procession took hours. After a while, the faces started to blur while she thought about her upcoming trips. She would take Solfis and Marruk. And Arthur, obviously. Horses. She needed disguises, even if they would not hold up to the inspect skill. Varska’s notes mentioned magical items and spells that could block the skill but they were rare and really illegal except for agents of the crown. She didn’t have the means to recreate one. They needed a lot of food and probably a spare horse to carry animal feed and supplies. They needed a better map with a clear destination. She would probably have to avoid Reixa, the nearest large city. The border wasn’t too far. Solfis would most likely help her complete her list.

Only one thing really annoyed her.

There was absolutely no way in hell that everything would go smoothly. It was a done deal that the proverbial would hit the fan at some point of her journey, splattering everyone with unpredictable complications. It would be an absolute mess of a trip. She would consider herself lucky if no baron got toppled at all.

And she had no way to improve her odds, not within a year. It was like jumping head first in a lagoon with twenty percent chances of sharks.

“I just want to go to fucking Helock,” she grumbled to herself between two terrified soldiers.

In the end, it was done. The Enorians had decided to leave unanimously, without any discussion. She expected Kazar’s tourist rating to tank dramatically. Erland smiled at her with clear satisfaction.

“Now that I am done here, it is time for me to handle the second part of my visit here.”

“May I ask what it is?” She asked.

Her sense of alarm increased at the clear signs of suspicion.

“If you must know, I intend to visit the Min Goles mines we recently rediscovered to protect the interests of the church. The local branch master certainly showed some initiative when he led an expedition to find them, although it was reckless, but the treaty signed with the non-humans was a sign of pride that will cost him. He forgot himself with this blatant overreach of authority.”

He leaned forward a bit, the effect ruined by Viv’s tall stature.

“I seem to recall that you were part of the expedition. You do not intend to claim the mines for yourself, do you?”

“I respect my agreements,” Viv replied, unamused. The sarcasm went over the head of the bishop.

“Good. Then, if you will excuse me, I have much to prepare before I can fix the mess my junior colleague created for us all.”

Viv watched him depart and remembered the golem’s wisdom, so many months ago. Farren’s merits would be forgotten, and the fruits of his efforts claimed by the nearest honcho.

He obviously had designs for the Yries.

“Solfis?”

**//Your Grace.**

“I think that we need to tie one last loose end before we depart. I hope you can assist.”

**//It will be my great pleasure.**

## Chapter 87: Gone.

Humans were capable of performing an amazing amount of mental gymnastics for the purpose of belonging, whether they were aware of it or not, Viv thought. She was no exception. When Solfis had made his speech on the plaza, the roars of so many throats had carried her away and she had not stopped to think, to criticize. It was normal. The sort of myth that sent people to war and possibly death could only be embellished. Some of the elements had to be glossed over, like the fact that the empire had not been ‘just’ as Solfis claimed. No empire with slave markets could be just. Freedom and punishment could never be traded on a marketplace. Instead, the Harrakan empire had been fairly dickish to everyone in equal measure. That didn’t send bakers charging into enemy battlelines spears first, however. A beautiful lie could achieve more than a hundred truths.

And that was precisely why it was so important to develop critical thinking, so that one could take a step back before they went too far.

And also to destroy other people’s beautiful lies.

“No, please, do explain why you wish to renegotiate the agreement.”

The bishop smoldered in sullen silence. He had been merely dismissive of Viv before, whom he saw as a fortunate upstart. He was taking her more seriously now, if only as a pest. Since he declined to answer in haughty silence, Viv decided to use that opportunity. It was, her papa believed, never good to remain silent in a political struggle. It was akin to wrestling in a pigsty. You could stand upright in the armor of your dignity but that just meant that others were free to smear shit all over your face.

“Farren managed to land a contract that not just protected the victims of tyranny, but also guaranteed an immediate iron ingot output while it would have taken years to install and develop those facilities. The iron bars are of extremely high quality and purified via brown mana.”

The man was still silent. Viv would not let go

“You know what I think?” she asked, as the temple guard, the bishop, and a witch hanger on made their way deeper into the mines of Min Goles.

“I think you should go back to Kazar because this is NONE OF YOUR CONCERN!” The bishop screamed.

“I think that you’re unhappy that a junior member achieved so much and without input. I think that you have come to break the church’s word.”

“He had no right to negotiate this to begin with!”

“I wonder what the head of the order would think about that?”

“You have no idea about what your betters think, woman.”

“I think we should ask him, then. Ask him if it’s a good idea to evict contract-abiding Yries from their new home just to free a chunk of future potential metal. I wonder what he would have to say about that.”

“He would probably say that a cold mind must serve a warm heart, and that we should never have given up the mine to begin with!”

“The Yries were here first, as I’m sure they’ll tell you.”

“They! Are not! Humans!”

The columns stopped as Bishop Erland spat his words in Viv’s face, who was doing her best not to smile.

“Is that the official stance of the church?”

“I am the official stance of the church right now. If you have any complaints, direct them to the head of the order in Mornyr. Now leave us alone. You will accomplish nothing here.”

“I notice that you didn’t deny the eviction. That’s why you asked the temple guards to come, because you knew that your terms are unacceptable, unfair, and cruel.”

“You are a naive, stupid little girl talking about things you do not understand.”

“I understand eviction and oathbreakers.”

“Stop,” a voice said.

Viv stopped a smirk from blooming on her face while Lorn, the veteran knight, the bearded, grizzled veteran of a veteran company turned and stood before his hierarchical superior.

Some of the Neriad veterans had seen Solfis, Irao, and Solar in action. With those old monsters around, it was pretty easy to forget that Lorn was at the peak of the fourth step, and that he was absolutely not to be fucked with. Viv had never forgotten.

“You said negotiate and I didn’t like it. Now you say evict and I like it even less.”

"I didn't say it. She did."

"Enough with the wordy bullshit."

"You will watch your tongue, captain. I always said that the frontier fostered lack of discipline. Do not force me to take measures."

Viv watched the pair glare at each other, and the bishop progressively relaxed when Lorn failed to act. Viv thought the bishop was a complete dumbass, and only the most obtuse cretin could fail to see that the experienced fighter was two fingers away from giving his obnoxious superior a nice serving of knuckles. When Lorn finally spoke, it was through gritted teeth.

"Company... about face!"

Like a single man, the entire corps of temple guards pivoted a hundred and eighty degrees, showing the bishop quite a collection of metal-clad asses.

"What are... What is the meaning of this?" Erland sputtered, disbelief clear on his traits.

"I hereby claim the moral exemption. Neriad as my witness, your orders go against the values of the temple as I see them."

"You are to escort me! Nothing more!"

"Your objective is immoral and, under the provision, I refuse to entertain it."

"This is nothing short of insubordination, Lorn! You have lost your mind. Who is next in command?"

"That would be me sir," Koro said from the front.

"You are to take command of the column, effective immediately."

"Fine by me! I claim the whatever it is the captain said. I ain't no backstabbing bitch. Company, forwarddddddd march!"

"You would leave me here?" The bishop asked with some disbelief as Viv turned as well.

"You are free to follow us," Lorn answered dispassionately. "I do not care either way."

The temple guard plus Viv departed, leaving the bishop behind with the four soldiers that had protected him since Enoria. The outlander truly expected Erland to follow. It was, by far, the most rational decision.

"Fine, you rebels. Fine! I'll do it myself then."



Viv smiled to herself. Lorn slowed down to walk by her side.

“Your plan all along, I assume?” He asked.

“One of the better outcomes. He caught me off-guard.”

“Neriad might not like it, and you had his favor.”

Viv looked the man in the eyes and unfolded her soul to make sure he could feel the sincerity in her words. The conviction.

“The Yries have respected the letter and spirit of our alliance all this time and I will not abandon them for the sake of convenience. Same for the Hadals, you, or anyone on my side. I doubt that this displeases Neriad, and even if it did, I would protect them anyway. As for undermining the bishop’s authority, righteous combat doesn’t mean stupid combat. I will not hurt civilians, I will take care of prisoners, but for everyone else... it’s open season.”

Lorn nodded slowly, though she didn’t know if it was acceptance or agreement. It was kind of fun to see the gears grind in his mind and his face turn into a mask of horror.

“Your Grace... where is Solfis?”

“I am willing to swear that I have no idea.”

\*\*\*

“Back! Back! Sir, you have to go!”

Erland stumbled into a side corridor and smashed his staff against the ground. One of those strange mole monsters was ejected and one of his surviving guards stabbed it, but the blade got stuck into the creature’s thick hide despite the power of the blow. Another man slipped on sand that had not been here a moment before. Erland touched a wound, closing it. If only the Kazarans had stayed... Those tunnels were supposed to be secured! How had the monsters gotten there?

“Sir, you have to go!”

Erland was a healer. He could keep the men going but he could not stop them from getting dragged into a snarling mass of fangs and claws.

“Go!”

Erland was pushed. He turned and ran. There was nothing he could do to save those people.

This should not have happened.

He had a mission, a purpose. The iron mines were wasted under the fingers of an orphan upstart like Farren. The stupid boy had already squandered part of it to non-humans before exploitation had even started. Erland's cause was just. Just! So why had it come to this?

His strides carried him forward and away from the combat, though he could hear the clicks of pursuing claws. Erland might not be a fighter but he knew how to run for a long time.

He tripped.

The ground was hard and dusty. It was also normally flat. Something had slammed into his tibia and it hurt like hell. Shivering, he brandished his staff and called for light. A golden halo expanded all around, showing grey rock walls and little else.

"I know you are here, servant of evil! Who do you serve? Efestar? Octas? Justice will come for you."

Nothing replied as the claws on stone raced towards him. He had to try and survive.

And then, something grabbed his staff with titanic strength. It tore the weapon from his grasp with casual ease. The source of the golden light disappeared towards the ceiling, and from there, a familiar voice echoed.

**//THERE ARE NO SCHEMING AGENTS HERE.  
//NO COMPETING GODS.  
//THERE ARE ONLY THE BEASTS.  
//THE DARKNESS.  
//AND ME.**

The pack caught up to him.

\*\*\*

The time had come to work on herself, so to speak. The interface granted by Nous had only one purpose: to help people understand and use the magic of the world to their advantage. It was more of a help than a requirement since her steady progress had come from hard work and practice, not from staring at numbers. It was still a useful tool she had neglected over the past month for obvious reasons. Now that Enoria's blow had been deflected and she was on her way to a lonely trip, she would have to rely on her own abilities again. Her focus would be on self-improvement.

Current status:

- Mana channels (mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

- Draconic Surrogate Mother

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 27.6%

Her attunement had grown very little despite practice. Viv assumed that it had something to do with not spending time in the deadlands anymore. Perhaps casting more colorless spells also had an influence. In any case, she would probably have more than a year although this was no reason to dally. She had no doubt that her last months of life would be extremely painful if she didn't find a solution soon.

Physical		Mental	
Power	17	Focus	38
Finesse	21	Acuity	38
Endurance	24	Willpower	38

Her power and endurance had progressed a bit. Her strength was still extremely low compared to any other fighter in her retinue. Even with magic on her side, humans from earth could just cross the veil and beat her at arm wrestling, which was fine. She would have the time to lift weights later if she felt like it. There was only so much time in a day and she got most of her work out through those katas Solfis had taught her anyway. Her mental stats were another thing altogether.

Kazar and its surroundings had managed to train, gather, feed, house, and equip a large army despite a minimal administrative staff for a simple reason: stats. If someone came to Viv and asked her to organize a twenty days expedition through the mountains, she could do it in half an hour. She could calculate how much food, animal feed, and how many blankets were required in seconds and she could recall by heart where everything was stored. Stats had turned Viv into a one-woman staff and that was even without counting those whose path helped with project management. They didn't even have to calculate. They just knew.

World magic applied differently to those who relied on their physics, and the results were tangible even outside of battle. Gogen could lift a full wardrobe to dust under it, something that never failed to make Viv's brain explode. The heavies could train longer and harder than any earth forces and the wounds they accumulated recovered fast as well. All those sprains and fractures resolved themselves in ways that years of physical therapy could not achieve. It was all very bullshit, but in her favor.

Where her mental stats shone the most, was when it related to magic. Glyphs and their use required a tremendous amount of brainpower. Several complex concepts had to be held in her mind at the same time, then linked together through sheer effort and directed to the physical world. It was a thoroughly impossible task for any normal human. Even a glimpse at

what she held in her mind would have made the old Viv bleed her brain through her ears. Beyond that complexity hid a wonder that still left Viv speechless at times. The dance of ideas felt like touching the divine, especially after a round of meditative dance.

More impactful was how every multiple of ten represented a new landmark in one's development. It was probably why progress became slow after a point. The numerical increase might be low, but each stage made one closer to godlike powers. Reaching thirty had allowed Viv to split her attention between several glyphs at once, given her the mental stamina to keep several in their minds long enough to cast, and accelerated her thought process until she could materialize a shield faster than she could blink. She was curious to see what the next threshold would bring. But that would take some more time. Her interest now was on the 'skills' part of the interface.

"Do skills work like spells, somehow?"

**//In a manner of speaking.**

Solfis was working on the trophy he had collected from the Enorian 'Champion'. He would soon add it to his growing collection at the top of the tower. People did not talk about Solfis' room. Even Viv didn't want to visit.

**//Scholars have drawn a parallel between skills like shield wall and green mana fortification.**

**//Some claim that mages receive mana mastery instead of defensive and offensive skill, granting them more flexibility.**

**//And that essentially, spells are ad hoc skills.**

**//However, skills and spells have one major difference.**

"Glyphs?"

**//Correct.**

**//Skills are closer to the way monsters and beasts use mana.**

**//With the exception of those capable of true casting, like dragons.**

"Squee!"

**//While... She-Who-Feasts-On-Squirrels-And-Gets-Much-Gold shall soon cast using the language of the world.**

**//Thus giving it intent.**

**//Other monsters take a more intuitive path to using mana.**

**//While faster and easier to grasp, it remains limited to clear constraints.**

**//My algorithms estimate that the theory of Joras the Elder, a researcher and archmage of the last dynasty, might be the most accurate.**

**//He surmised that intent molds magic, and that clearer intent can be achieved with clearer communication.**

**//Therefore, everyone who employs even the tiniest amount of mana technically casts, and those that speak the language of the world do it with the most proficiency.**

“Ok fair enough. Makes sense to me. Then why do skills differ at expert level?”

**//They differ before, Your Grace.**

**//Harrakan longsword technique can make its user fast and precise, or powerful and unrelenting.**

**//It varies from user to user.**

**//The interface simplifies a complex and ultimately variable reality to help sentients navigate this world.**

**//Let me give you an example.**

**//When you are angry, or desire annihilation with all your heart, related spells come easier and with more power.**

**//It happens to everyone, in a way.**

**//A shield protects someone who desires to be protected with more efficacy.**

**//The interface cannot reflect the randomized aspects of life.**

**//It does, however, reflect a generality.**

**//For example, Eteia was and is more powerful and capable than you.**

“Yeah.”

**//Her interface would demonstrate this fact.**

**//Regarding skills, two of them have reached Expert level, which is normal at your age but considerable given the circumstances.**

**//Those who dedicate themselves to their craft can usually personalize their first expert skill.**

**//It would normally be mana mastery.**

**//In your case, your most practiced skills are dancing and scaring people.**

“Hey!”

**//It only proves your pragmatism, Your Grace.**

**//You needed balance and social skills immediately.**

**//And so you practiced those.**

**//The journey will be a good opportunity to practice mana control.**

**//Especially through uncolored spells.**

**//It can only help you with admission.**

**//But first, let us focus on the present.**

**//Your skills.**

“Right.”

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 5
Survival	Intermediate 2	Householding	Apprentice 8
Hand to hand	Apprentice 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9

combat			
Small blades	Beginner 7		

Of those, only athletics had increased by one. If you didn't put in the effort, you didn't progress. Simple as that. Viv wasn't disappointed, though she was tempted to improve polymath in Helock if time allowed.

Class skills			
Meditative trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Beginner 8
Arcane constructs	Beginner 8	Danger sense	Intermediate 1
Leadership	Intermediate 2	Intimidation	Expert 1
Acuity reflex	Beginner 9		

Those were the ones that showed some progress, although not much. The issue was that she had attempted nothing new beyond the empowering circle she had used in the last battle. In order to progress on the path of the caster, one had to get out of their comfort zone, try new things, challenge themselves. Then they had to apply their new-found techniques in real life. Viv had simply shelved experimentation and her relatively slow progress reflected that.

Now it was time to see about those improvements.

Two of your skills have reached the expert level. You may pick the way in which you wish your skill to develop. The available options reflect your abilities and the marks on your soul. Only one option can be picked. Skill options do not have drawbacks.

Viv started with meditation. It felt less problematic.

Ritualistic trance: you will find it easier to complete long spells and to work with others. The path of those who prefer working with circles.

Yeah that wasn't really her. Perhaps a time would come when she would have to coordinate with other casters in some grand endeavors, but she didn't see that happening in the foreseeable future. It felt like an increase that would benefit casters working on long-term constructs like walls and golems, not someone throwing fantasy artillery shells in people's faces. Next.

Battle meditation: the tranquility you have achieved better extends to crisis situations, grounding you more in times of pressure.

That could be useful, though that felt redundant. She was already hard to faze.

Deep thought: the veil between human perception and the beyond is notoriously hard to breach. This path will help you find your way with more ease.

It was the state she had achieved when Neriad had healed her soul, and she felt that it would be important in the future. However, it was not important right now and that specific path was not necessary either. She could achieve her results without picking it, especially because she had been shown how to do it once. It was as the interface indicated. It would not close any door, just help her achieve a specific result more easily. She said as much.

**//Paths with significant drawbacks tend to be rare.**

**//I have recorded rumors that further advances can lead to specialization.**

**//However, this is not common knowledge.**

**//I can only hypothesize.**

**//In the meanwhile, I suggest taking battle meditation.**

“Wouldn’t Ritualistic trance help once in Helock?”

**//Yes, and it would make you popular to work with.**

**//However, you have to reach Helock first.**

**//I have a question, Your Grace.**

“Yes?”

**//Do you sincerely expect to live a peaceful life after arriving at the academy?**

The golem’s eyes were annoyingly judgemental. There was a hint of false pity as well.

“Yeah yeah. Alright.”

You have selected Battle Meditation.

Just like usual, she didn’t feel particularly different. She supposed that she would have to be in a crisis. That was bound to happen. Now, for intimidation.

Court mage intimidation: you have conducted schemes to suitable ends, achieved much and caused the death of many. Your intimidation will make your victims aware that through power or guile, you will get your ways, and that it would be wise not to be in yours.

Nice and balanced. She liked it.

Warrior queen intimidation: you have powerful magic and a (very small) nation at your back. Every threat you make bears the mark of a sovereign. Your victims will perceive that there is more than meets the eye and that offending you means offending a great many people.

That was even better, but there was an issue. Anyone she threatened would be able to guess what she was. She said as much to Solfis.

**//Stop stalling, Your Grace.**

“Fine! Fine...”

Draconic Intimidation: you have accomplished what only one other living person has done: thoroughly impressed a member of the most powerful race on Nyil. Victims of your intimidation will know that nothing is impossible for you. No throne, no walls will protect them if they try to stop you. It is by far the most powerful of all choices and will also work on weaker monsters.

“It does sound tempting.”

**//Your Grace, we both know what you will pick.**

**//Stop. Stalling.**

Viv chose.

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!”

She had never seen Arthur so excited.

\*\*\*

“You want me to rule in your stead?” The handsome man asked, lounging in his chair.



By his side, his wife reclined with predatory grace. She glared at Viv under half-lidded eyes in a way that exuded superiority, possibly considering those who lived here as hicks. Viv wanted to shear off the arrogant twit's fingers.

"There is little need to rule, but I need oversight. A strong presence to embody power while I am gone. This is what a viceroy would do."

"Is that necessary?"

Viv sighed and sloshed the flowery infusion in her cup. It was too hot to drink.

"The institutions in place should function, in theory. I established a council with clearly defined roles and powers. Some of the positions change frequently via elections, providing enough mobility to guarantee that power struggles occur within the different factions. I believe, and Solfis agrees, that the system is healthy, but no institutions, no matter how healthy, can survive the rise of a demagogue if things go wrong."

"Hmmm. What's a demagogue?"

Viv sighed. Param didn't have classes on politics as a general rule.

"It's someone who appeals to the desires and fears of people to get power instead of reason. Those people aim to get, then stay at the top rather than ruling wisely. They are the worst threat to the current government model we're using, which is close to a constitutional monarchy."

"Whatever you say. You want me to keep everyone in line and look good, right?"

"Gather people around you. Be the symbol of what Harrak could be."

"Alright. Normally I would refuse, but I owe you for my arm, so I will hold the fort while you are gone. And train your line breakers. I'll do it until you return. I want to ask. Why me?"

"Several reasons," Viv replied. She had expected the question. "You didn't seek a higher status while you're here and those who do not seek power tend to avoid its corruption. You are also well-known, charismatic, handsome, and really deadly. Such a combination garners respect."

Solar shrugged. The simple gesture caught Viv's eyes as his muscles rolled under a thin shirt. It wasn't a bad sight.

"Maybe I am."

"Solfis believes you are, so you are. In any case, your role is to prevent people from going too far. I'd wager that you'll be good at that."

Solar moved forward. He placed his hands on his knees and Viv felt pressure from becoming the point of interest of the man in front of her. Even then, she could tell that he was holding back.

“What if I replace you in the eyes of the people? What then?”

Viv swallowed with some difficulty even though she knew what to answer.

“It will happen, at least a little bit. I can’t just leave everyone and expect my status not to change at least a little. And I don’t mind. I just don’t want all we have achieved to collapse as soon as I’m away.”

“Interesting. I have served quite a few people who would see their land burn around them rather than give it up.”

“A foolish notion. If someone replaces me, I’ll just replace them when I return. Much easier than picking up the pieces.”

Solar chuckled, and so did his wife.

“I’ll keep an eye on your baby kingdom ‘Your Grace’. You can go find your cure without worry.”

\*\*\*

Anelton had not changed much since the last time Viv had seen it, before Lancer’s attack. The sacked town still had the appearance of a corpse, only one that had gone under the hand of a mortician. The gates had been summarily repaired while chimney smoke from some of the better buildings hinted at either new colonists or desperate pillagers. In any case, Viv would avoid the place. It would be the height of retardation to show her mug at the border.

The outlander hesitated for a fraction of a second. She had never been farther east than this place. It was new land from here on, a Terra Incognita that would be hostile to her, but she would not let that deter her. She had made sure everything would survive her departure. She had said her goodbyes. A new sheet of metal showing a crown had been added to the patchwork roundshield by an emotional blacksmith during a massive farewell party. The time had come to go on.

Viv looked back. Her little expedition had four horses total, including two pack horses to help forward. They would have to buy more stuff on the road and that was fine. Probably.

“Ready everyone?”

**//Always.**

“I hope we meet another Kark exile...”

“Squee!”

“Then, errr, to adventure!”

Viv prayed to Maradoc, God of Travelers, for a safe journey. In the confines of his domain, the god laughed and laughed and laughed.

## Chapter 88: In Enoria

Traveling through the Enorian spring was the closest Viv had felt to being on Earth since landing on this weird planet. Fields of flowers and copses of trees shone a vibrant green on either side of the dirt road. Sometimes, they came across an abandoned field or the ossified remains of a stone building that could have been an abandoned shepherd's retreat, and she almost expected to crest a hill and find an asphalt road and a board announcing Carmaux or Marvejols in twenty kilometers. Frequent hills blocked the view, which should have set her on edge but just gave the setting a more intimate feel. The illusion lasted for a blissful ten minutes at most, then something came to break the immersion.

Strange, colorful dragonflies or butterflies with strange wing patterns reminded her of where she was. Or the white frame of a hunting Arthur would swerve in the distance. Or Marruk would turn to inspect something and she would go from funny LARPer to actual alien. Funnily enough, this did little to mar Viv's mood. She was free of responsibility for the first time in six months. Half a year of constant pressure, decisions, and efforts now finally over. Harrak was in good hands, she believed. Solar had been very obvious about not wanting the job, which made him the best candidate. It was just her, the others, and the road. Even the weather was on their side.

They camped the first night in an abandoned farmstead. The solid compound had only been left very recently, and they found many tools and pots of low value neatly stacked in a shed. Viv surmised that someone had moved away because of the civil war out of concern for their safety. Given what she had seen in Anelton, it felt reasonable enough.

“Yes. I saw that as well,” Marruk confirmed. “In good times, people expand in good spots for villages. But in bad times they contract. People go hungry then. They throw stones and send their dogs.”

She frowned.

“Some of the new villages survive, others are lost or abandoned.”

**//A mark of poor planning.**

**//Harrakans have and must plan their expansion properly.**

**//A population cannot be wasted building a village on a Frilled Roc migration path.**

**//Truly, the barbarians have returned to their ways.**

**//They will have to be taught again.**

“Not by us and not any time soon,” Viv replied. She had much on her plate.

Viv spent her evening listening to Solfis reading a magical theory book from his data bank, discovering in passing that ancient scholars did not consider clarity as particularly desirable when exposing their theories. It still gave her some ideas on the next step of her training. So far, she had tossed balls of mana with symbols on it, but apparently it was possible to combine several ‘layers’ to make complex spells with various effects. She was intrigued, but it was hard to do, and harder still when alone.

They left early in the morning after a breakfast of meat skewers and tubers, courtesy of Arthur and Marruk, respectively. They came across their first village around noon and Viv realized her mistake.

She should have taken a fifth member, a face, someone smooth, because they were too memorable.

Solfis could not buy fresh bread for obvious reasons, same for Arthur. Marruk would attract too much attention this close to Kazar. As for Viv, she had auburn hair while everyone’s was black, and unique green eyes. It was possible to change one’s appearance through magic but that was a life mana domain and thus closed to her. She should have found a way to dye her hair. She should have brought a fifth person, a man. That was a mistake on her part. As it was, they had to avoid the village.

**//A good thing, Your Grace.**

**//That way, you are not tempted.**

“I am tempted by fresh bread!”

**//We still have a significant amount of travel biscuits.**

**//Plus the roots and meat your companions find.**

“Yeah yeah.”

That evening, they failed to find a house so they set camp under a particularly large pine tree. The fallen needles were softer than expected and Viv woke up smelling like corporate toilets, which was actually an improvement. They found a well later that day and used it to refresh themselves. They also came across a small convoy.

Viv had not come across any lone travelers so far, which reinforced her belief that people around were not complete idiots. The convoy must have had some sort of scout because they detected her presence before she could see them, though she knew of their presence thanks to Arthur. She was asked to stand at a respectable distance across a clearing by a

bunch of nervous hunters with bows, which Viv was fine with. The convoy itself looked rather cheap. It was mostly villagers on their makeshift carriages accompanied by the town's guards, carrying food and bales of wool. The few women present wore long skirts and braided hair that popped out of shawls. Conservative stuff. Viv and her companions were studiously ignored.

"Wartime measures?" She asked.

**//They must expect bandits, Your Grace.**

"I would think that the prince cleaned the place on his way here."

As soon as she said that, she knew her opinion was stupid.

"There are always more bandits when an army just fell apart," Marruk said.

**//Especially if government rules are stringent.**

"You sound disapproving, Solfis. I thought you would prefer stringent rules."

**//A path of salvation must be offered so the surviving meatbags may redeem themselves.**

**//Otherwise, the victor must deploy light cavalry and hounds.**

**//And exterminate the resistance.**

**//I disapprove of half measures.**

"I shouldn't have asked."

**//I am ever happy to offer you a chance to learn, Your Grace.**

**//In any case, we should expect bandits.**

On the third day, they found a suspicious tree across the path while they were moving through a large patch of wood. Viv took one good look and almost groaned.

"Isn't this too obvious?"

"I agree," Marruk said, then her face froze and Viv's sight was suddenly blocked by thick steel. There was a ping.

"Archers!" the Kark said. Viv had felt the danger as well. She dismounted quickly and placed her roundshield in front of her. There was a man standing in the distance. She had not seen him. His expression was one of pure terror. Other ruffians in stained gambesons and dirty shirts were rushing her now.

"No! Wait! Run!" The man said. "It's her! The Great Black Whore!"

The handful of outlaws slipped on the gravelly earth in an attempt to reverse course, cries of dismay echoing through the empty woods. The archer was already fleeing.

**//Your Grace.**

“I know. Purge net!”

They didn’t run fast enough.

Black mana was not the most flexible but it sure worked at what it did. Killing, to begin with. Cutting down trees into logs worked as well. If that whole evil imperialistic overlord schtick didn’t pan out, Viv could always start a sawmill. Didn’t even need the mill.

“I think that should do it?” she asked Marruk. The Kark frowned disapprovingly.

“One more layer.”

“We have dragonfire.”

“One more layer!”

“Fiiiiiiine.”

All bodies had to be disposed of or risk rising as revenants, and Viv didn’t have Neriad’s powers to give peace. The god had sent a tinge of sadness after she had prayed for forgiveness, but it looked like conflict between members were rather common and so she wasn’t excommunicated yet. In any case, she was not part of his clergy. They had to burn the corpses. Viv took comfort in the belief that the lice would burn as well.

“Squee?” Arthur finally asked from the stump on which she throned.

“One more layer.”

*Work*

*Faster*

*Want*

*Hunt*

*Explore*

*Observe*

“You could always help, you know?”

*Help*

*With fire!*

“Yes, yes, one moment.”

They soon had a pyre going. It smelled disturbingly meaty.

“Five silver talents, a hundred iron ones. They were probably waiting to save enough so they could start over somewhere else,” Marruk observed.

Viv split the money between herself and Marruk. Arthur didn't get anything on account of having done nothing at all! The rest were battered weapons, filthy pieces of cloth and wine Viv wouldn't have used to clean her windows. Slim pickings.

“Maybe we'll get luckier next time,” Marruk said,

“I hope there isn't a next time! Wait. Marruk. Did you ever hunt outlaws to steal their stuff?”

“Well. It's not stealing if they're outlaws, right? It's, errr, liberating. Outlaws are not protected by law, by definition.”

Viv was starting to think that the Kark's trip through human lands had been a bit bloodier than she let on.

Whatever.

The trip went on until Viv finally came to miss her comfy bed and regular breakfasts after another week on the saddle. It had rained for a full day when they had finally moved north to avoid the major hub of Reixa, a city where everyone likely knew who she was. She had used a colorless shield to stay dry which was, she had to admit, completely awesome, but the cold and humidity could not be fended off that easily. The relative absence of signs and posts meant that finding their way was delicate without stopping at any of the many farming villages now dotting the plains. Thankfully, Marruk was talented at finding direction, skilled as well. And easy to get along with, which mattered when even the handful of monsters ran away rather than provide an amusing diversion. Viv breathed with relief when they arrived at the border town of Koltis, which sat happily at the crossing between northern and southern Enoria. The many villages on the way had been spared most of the horrors of war, and laborers of all ages busied themselves in the fields, plowing and seeding for this year's harvest. Songs filled the air.

“Looks like they've been left untouched, just like Farren said,” Viv commented as she put on her 'incognito' cloak which was dark blue and velvety with a silver brooch.

“There are few people who would mess with the town. It's not worth angering so many churches.”

The troop transports that ended in the deadlands paused in Koltis, and most of the churches had a strong presence here, with the guards that came with it. It was when they came across a caravan of 'merchants' that Viv guessed the second part of the city's function.

"Smugglers," she commented.

"Not even hiding," Marruk added, "means that it's safer to look like smugglers and they're more afraid of bandits than guards."

**//Frontier towns between two countries that do not trade officially tend to attract this sort.**

**//As well as spies and other operatives.**

"I don't think we can avoid going there. We're out of supplies. We should not linger, though."

**//Agreed.**

**//We must save my reserves for as long as possible.**

**//There will be no easy opportunity to recharge me.**

The roads were packed for the first time ever. People in simple garb were bringing flocks of the large egg-making birds Viv had seen in Kazar, but also cornudons and other animals Viv had never seen before and that looked like oversized rams. A group of children ran by them, laughing all the way. Koltis came into view soon after.

The town sat atop a lone hillock in the middle of a flat valley, with a brook flowing lazily in the distance. Walls surrounded a village of tall houses, while an actual castle dominated the view. Viv could spot the shine of steel and siege engines from here so the reason why people left the place alone was not just because of its influence. Nobody paid the party any mind, especially with Arthur flown somewhere else for the day. The lack of danger made the dragonette positively greedy, and she hunted with diligence. The gates were opened and a line had formed by its side. Viv considered stopping but Marruk shook her head.

"We look rich so we must act the part. No self-respecting caster would queue with peasants, even a wild one, and we have horses to boot."

They moved on to the short queue, ending behind a carriage of respectable size bearing the symbol of a black gate. Viv recognized a dignitary of Enttiku, the God of Death. They were let in immediately.

"You guys merchants?" a guard asked. He spoke with a lazy voice and was using his polearm as a walking stick, but Viv was not fooled. The man had keen eyes and he was inspecting them. She pulled in her soul. No need to cause a scene. It didn't look like this place liked scenes, or asking names for that matter.

"No, we're travelers," Viv replied.

"You with anyone?" he asked, and Viv suspected that the question was loaded.



“No, just passing through,” and because the man frowned just a bit, she added more to be safe.

“We were hoping to find the local branch of the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange.”

“You got a chit?”

Viv obliged, foraging in her cleavage to find the damn pendant. The doorman relaxed when he saw proof.

“Standing rate is half a silver per rider. No fees on horses or luggage for bank guests. It’s your first time here?”

“Yes.”

“The bank is in the royal square. Can’t miss it. Just follow the main road until you see the statue of a twat on a horse, and I’m not saying anything but don’t try to sell anything without approval or you’ll catch a steel-based stomach-ache, mage or not.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Viv paid the silver talent. The guard waved her in without another word and she soon realized that they had come during market day.

Koltis was old, or at least it hadn’t burnt down in a long time. All the standing houses were at least three-stories tall and they loomed over the main road like crones over a cradle, dark and pitted by age. Conical roofs designed to ward off snow only increased the vertiginous feeling brought not by height, but by the suffocating narrow paths packed with a crying, laughing, haggling humanity. Stalls and carpets covered every spare finger of available space that wouldn’t result in active trampling. Viv was compelled to slow down to a crawl. Men and women with dangerous eyes watched her pass from windows and balconies. It smelled very strongly of perfume and sweat, of fresh pastries and piss. The heady scent overwhelmed her after so many days outside. Reflexively, she made sure that all of her pockets and saddles were closed, not that she expected to compete with people of the thief path. The slow pace gave her the time to see what people were hawking and the variety was something to behold. There were toys, small enchanted stones that produced a variety of effects, knives, umbrellas, and simple tools. The farther they went, and the more elaborate the goods were. A blacksmith was offering a discount on training blades, unadorned and heavier to build muscle. A handful of jewelers sold pendants and rings under the paranoid gaze of bodyguards. Viv could see and feel mana from a lot of those, some of those she didn’t recognize.

“Defensive rings, milady?” the daring salesman asked, seeing her interest. “A compass ring? A cold seed ring for your lover?”

Viv gave the man a half-lidded smile. Truth be told, compass and no-kids-no-STDs rings sounded quite useful but she could not hide her eyes or hair color from up close. Not worth it. Not stopping for anything.

They arrived at the square after far too much time. It was less crowded and guards had multiplied, the official ones that is. There had been plenty of thugs. No one stopped her from going in. She supposed that the expensive cloaks, spare horses and obvious hired muscle gave off the right vibe. The bank looked suspiciously like the one back in Kazar including the small columns and austere exterior. The only concession to the town's esthetic was the use of dark tiles that decorated every roof in town. A dark-skinned young man in a pristine white doublet grabbed their beasts and bowed, inviting them in without a word. Viv left a folded Solfis in his special saddle and walked in through reinforced gates.

The interior of the bank was an exact copy of the one she had visited in those last days before the departure down to the wood used for the welcome counter. It was the same warm tones, the same dim light and understated charm. It even smelled of wax and wood like its Kazaran counterpart. The only difference was the size, as the Koltis office was significantly larger. Several coffee tables occupied the open space leading farther inside, surrounded by chairs and separated by wood screens to afford several groups their privacy. They were currently empty. A dark-skinned guard in shiny mail with a white tabard took a step forward with a genial smile. He has a straight sword by his side, sheathed for now.

"Welcome to the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange, Koltis branch. May I ask your business?"

"I wish to inquire about guides. My final destination is Helock."

"I assume that you are already one of our valued customers. May I see your chit?"

Viv grabbed the pendant from her neck, but the guards stopped once he was close enough to see under the cloak's hood. He retracted his hand.

"That will not be necessary, after all. Mr Manipeleso has been expecting you. Please, follow me. Your mounts will be taken care of."

Without waiting for an answer, the guard made a sign to his partner who started the complex task of securing the gate behind her. It seemed to involve a large amount of locks and enchantments. A beautiful woman stood and bowed as she passed her by. Just like the guards, she had the dark skin of a northerner.

Viv followed a set of corridors to another reception room in warm tones, lit by lanterns giving a warm light. High windows gave a modicum of daylight as well. She half-collapsed in an elegant chair made of curved woods and a soft pillow. Marruk did not relax, but took her position by the door. A moment later, the desk woman knocked and brought a floral infusion with a set of cups and sliced fruits. She was soon followed by a burly pair of soldiers carrying a folded, silent Solfis. Viv had a sip of the infusion and liked it, exchanging a smile with the woman who had remained. It only took a couple more minutes before the master of the place arrived. By then, Viv had removed her cloak, leaving her exotic traits fully on display.

"The Calamity herself. It is such an honor to welcome you in my humble abode," the man said with a winning grin, one Viv could not help but return.

“My name is Zan Manipeleso, head of the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange, Koltis branch. We have much to discuss.”

Her host had a perfectly trimmed beard and a shaved skull. He was very handsome in a patriarch kind of way, a bit old for her taste but impressive nonetheless. A white robe covered his muscular chest, much broader than she would expect from a man of finance, and his hands showed the scars she had seen in Marruk and other professional fighters. Keen eyes surveyed her but his smile felt genuine, wrinkling crows feet. Viv noticed the grey on his temple as well, enhancing the feeling of respectability he exuded.

“The pleasure is mine,” she replied amicably, “although the fact that you expected me is a concern in itself.”

“Oh, do not worry about this. Tom Manitaradin has given us an account of the recent events, as you can imagine. Your arrival here was expected provided that nothing went wrong on the way.”

“Ahem.”

“And nothing has, it seems. How exciting. Right, before we begin, let me cut to the chase. Your arrival has necessarily been noticed by local cartels, especially because your eyes and hair are quite recognizable by those who pay attention. We will evacuate you via our secret route tonight so that you can flee north. I apologize in advance for the upset if you expected to relax and visit the place, but I fear that any delay would give our opportunistic friends the time to lay a proper siege, or to try and kidnap an employee, perhaps. Greed often blocks the path of self-preservation. In the meanwhile, please give us a list of supplies you would like to acquire and I will send runners to purchase them for you, for a very modest fee.”

Viv frowned at that, but to her surprise it was Marruk who intervened.

“What you pay with the fee will be offset by what the northerners save through bargaining,” the Kark reluctantly admitted. “They are very good at negotiation.”

“Quite, Mistress Marruk.”

“Hold on, I understand that the ‘loyalists’ would want my head, but I thought this was neutral territory?”

“It most certainly is. However, Koltis’ sovereign after Count Serril is profit and we have received news a couple of weeks ago that concerned you. It appears that Constable Toreno has taken a keen interest in your person.”

Viv blinked.

“I have no idea who this is.”

Zan’s smile widened, then the man chuckled, which turned into a full belly laugh that lasted for a couple of seconds and left Viv a bit baffled.

“Ah, forgive me this outburst. Constable Toreno has taken over the royalist faction. By the way, using loyalist clearly identifies you as a southerner, which you should avoid doing so close to the frontier. The neutral terms would be royalist, as I mentioned, and separatist. Using the term rebel is regarded as a major faux-pas among certain circles. It amuses me that you would not know the identity of the man pushing so hard to save his side.”

“Why is he interested in me, then?”

“I am not certain but I can surmise that it relates either to the brazen execution of the de facto crown prince, or to your mysterious ability to heal what was considered as beyond help.”

Viv realized that she had not considered how momentous her regrowth spell construct could be. She should have.

“Constable Tarano has offered a thousand gold talents for your capture alive, or a hundred and fifty for information that could lead to it.”

Viv swallowed not to spit the content of her cup. That was... enough to buy one's own barony.

“Neriad's, errr, unmentionables. Really?”

“Quite so. You can understand the urgency of the situation.”

“I'm surprised I wasn't shot down in the streets.”

Zan's eyes twinkled in the intimate light.

“I think you can answer this question yourself. It is said that you matched Eteia in a duel.”

“Briefly.”

“Then you can understand that even the most addled bounty hunters know that they cannot collect if they're dead. Besides, dear Tarano made it abundantly clear that your corpse would get no reward beyond a noose. It takes quite a bit of planning to take down a caster of your talent without killing her, and even more when they have your instincts... and entourage. Nevertheless, some will try soon enough. That is why we will make sure you are out before it happens.”

Viv blocked the benevolent aura coming from her gracious host for a moment so she could ask the real question.

“Not that I am not grateful, but what do you get out of this?”

“Ah, yes, the motives.”

If the man was offended by his question, he gave no signs of it.

“First, the smuggling cartels always maintain a delicate balance between two secret wars. I deem it a bit too soon for the next one to start so competitive violence would be inadvisable right now. By removing you from the city, I put a lid on an untimely eruption of violence. If you cannot believe anything else, believe this. Second, the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange has taken a keen interest in your performance. We do so love an underdog. Not to mention the enticing prospect of reclaiming the deadlands, which would, as I am sure you are aware, require a large amount of capital to jump start. Third, our noble institution is present in every nation of this continent including Halluria because of our reputation. For us, reputation is everything...”

Zan’s elegant companion interrupted him with a few whispers in their tongue. The mighty banker sighed deeply, and for an instant the mask fell to reveal intense regret. It disappeared again so fast that Viv thought she might have imagined it.

“Speaking of which, I have a regrettable business to attend. Please, consider it a token of our commitment.”

The original pair of guards came in without apparent prompt. They carried between them the very same attendant who had collected Viv’s horses back outside only a few minutes ago. Perspiration beaded on his skin and he looked terrified.

“Uncle, I...”

“Shhhh,” Zan said without mirth. “My dear Rel, we tolerate a bit of theft and some insider trading in our recruits, if only so they expect it from their subordinates, but we have one golden rule. One rule that we never, ever break. Which one?”

“I...”

“Which one, Rel?” the powerful man hissed between clenched teeth.

“Protect client confidentiality.”

“That is correct. Nol, which one?”

“The bloody knives, sir.”

“Rel, not only are you without honor, but you are also without brains. Everyone in town worth a damn already knows she’s here. This secret is worth nothing.”

“I am sorry, uncle.”

“Yes, my boy. So I am.”

It happened very quickly. The banker’s large, scarred hand closed around his subordinate’s throat like a vice and twisted. The younger man barely had the time to gasp before the

telltale crack of snapped bones silenced him forever. His body fell like a puppet with its strings cut in the waiting arms of the guards, who pulled him away. He was still gasping for a breath that would never come when the door closed behind them.

A part of Viv thought that it was a nice touch to remove poor Rel before he could stink up the room with his loosened sphincters. She took a sip of tea.

Another part was screaming in her head. That was fine too.

Marruk rumbled something in Kark. It was obviously not very diplomatic because the man froze in his tracks and the atmosphere grew heavy indeed. Viv belatedly remembered to use her fucking skill.

[Death dealer, extremely dangerous, one who conducts business on the edge of a blade. Close quarter combat specialist, slayer of men, slayer of Kark, smart, merciless. Very fast]

Viv turned to Marruk, whose hand hovered over the handle of her nasty flanged mace.

“Could you please not?”

**//I agree with the Heiress, long may she live.**

**//Please return to the main objective.**

Solfis' voice helped the banker calm down. Viv hadn't dared using her intimidation because she felt like Zan knew he would die and was considering gutting Marruk anyway.

“Yes... As Miss Marruk said, the hungry dogs do tend to devour each other.”

He gave her a venomous smile and the stout Kark reddened with embarrassment.

“Sorry about this,” Viv said on behalf of the proud woman. She knew that Marruk had been rude but on the other hand the banker's people and Marruk's tribe had been at war for a long time and things had gone genocidal. It was like asking a Jewish soldier to be patient with Nazis or something, Viv gave herself a Godwin point and a scolding for that shit comparison and wisely decided to move on.

“I understand. Now, if you will excuse me, I must see to tonight's preparations. Lan will assist you with everything you need.”

The large man left in awkward silence. The elegant woman, Lan, stood and clapped her hands once in a preppy gesture that dispelled some of the mood.

“I am sure you are tired from your journey and you have a long night in front of you. I have taken the liberty of preparing the guest quarters where you can relax and bathe in preparation for your departure.”

“That sounds great. Please, lead the way,” Viv replied genially.

They walked deeper into the complex with the pair of guards still carrying Solfis. It felt weird to Viv but she supposed that no one in their right mind would want to watch him unfold. Except her, of course.

“So, I wanted to ask if it’s not trouble, Lan. I cannot help but notice that Mr. Manipeleso shares his name with the bank. Is this a common occurrence?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Zan Manipeleso belongs to the main branch of the family. In fact, he is related to the current head. They are second cousins, I believe. Mr. Manitaradin whom you met belongs to a secondary branch, although, if he were to compete for leadership, he could be accepted in the main one with sufficient merits.”

Viv asked a few more questions which led to a lengthy explanation. Apparently, the family was actually a clan and they owned the bank fully. She got the impression that competition to become boss was extremely fierce, but that they were united when it came to outsider interference. Lan finished answering while Marruk was moving inside the guest quarter they would be using, which was spacious and had two beds.

“Please give me a list of supplies you would like purchased at your soonest convenience. The cost will be deducted from your balance plus a finder’s fee that depends on the haggler’s skill.”

“Hm, truth be told, not sure of what this city can offer.”

“I will be happy to assist an outlander, Miss Viviane.”

It took some time, but Viv finally got a comprehensive package that included food as expected, but also a variety of enchanted objects that Kazar couldn’t produce due a lack of qualified workforce. The enchanters they had acquired had focused exclusively on weaponry.

Viv’s logic was that she could paste anything as long as she was conscious, so she had to work on staying in that state. She purchased a ring that would vibrate and ‘poke’ her if she was ever poisoned as well as a set of wide-spectrum antidotes, as well as a magical helmet. Those would set her back a solid twelve gold talents, which was what a knight captain earned in a year (before taxes). The helmet was cool though. It looked like what Achilles would wear in a Hollywood remake of the Iliad but without the massive crest. It was also dark grey and had the welcome feature of limiting incoming light. A side effect of that enchantment was that her iris looked black instead of green as long as she kept it on her head. There were also soaps and a hair dye she used just after her bath. Her hair was long enough to reach her shoulders now, so even the helmet wouldn’t cover it properly. A compass joined the collection, and then came the difficult choice of buying magical prophylactics.

She didn’t intend to bonk anyone during her trip.

But well, better be prepared just in case.

“If you use it, you must keep it on for at least three days afterward. A week is safer,” Lan told her during an embarrassing conversation. Eventually, she was ready and went to bed for a nap. She woke up at nightfall and had a light dinner with a sulking Marruk.

“Sorry about earlier,” the Kark mumbled.

“I understand your reaction... Just...”

“I know. It was stupid and served no purpose.”

Viv thought that the matter was close, but when a soldier came to tell her that the time had come, Viv thought the Kark would smash his head in.

The newcomer was not one of the guards she had seen earlier, but a man wearing dark leather armor enchanted to the gills. He had long dreads decorated with ribbons and other trinkets Viv found curious but she didn't comment. A variety of knives hung from a bandoleer across his chest. The design of his armor was rather specific and reminded Viv of her old scout armor, the one she had found in Harrak. He seemed to sense the tension and retreated after delivering his message.

“What was that about?” Viv asked as they finished dressing.

“He is a Dark Blade. You will forgive me if I react to the uniform his associates wore the night they murdered my mother in front of me.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh. Let's get out of here before I do something everyone will regret.”

The pair followed the Dark Blade out of their room and then down a flight of stairs leading to a passage so long Viv felt like they ought to have left the city already. They emerged later in a barn and Viv realized that she was, in fact, out of the city. Four different horses awaited with Solfis and their usual saddles, as well as six Dark Blades on light mounts. The fields outside were empty but Nyil's moon shone clearly on the forest in the distance and the white dragonette landing with an excited squeak. They left at a gallop.

“I just want to get to Helock,” Viv whispered under her breath. “Nothing more.”

Behind them, unseen men yelled in alarm.

## Chapter 89. The Pull of Fate.



Viv rode on the back of a galloping horse, cursing every moment she had spent thinking pony girls were uncool. If she had learned to ride better, she wouldn't be feeling like a potato bag strapped to a roller coaster right now. At least, she took solace in the fact that Marruk had it even worse.

"Damn. Stupid. Beast! Gah."

It was cultural. Probably. The pair clung to their saddles on the mad dash to a large dirt road lining the forest that surrounded the farmland. Once there, they turned north at breakneck speed and Viv finally caught a glimpse of their pursuers.

So here on Param, there were people who could rival a sprinting horse. She saw men in civilian clothes racing over the growing cereals on an intercept course. A woman with a pixie cut lifted a shortbow but she hesitated. The fastest runners got close enough that she could see the white of their eyes. They probably wouldn't be able to sustain that speed indefinitely. The horse had slowed down to turn, but now they were accelerating again.

For a brief moment, the two sides took each other's measure. Viv knew hired muscle when she saw it. Many of them wore colored shawls, armbands, sometimes even whole dyed shirts, a luxury Kazarans had no way to afford. They were a colorful, eclectic group of city cutthroats from different bands, eyes shining under the moonlight like a pack of jackals. She inspected them calmly and felt no fear.

Viv let the pursuers know what she would do if they got any closer. There was a certain reluctance in her to kill again, but it would not extend past their attempt to get her. She opened her soul and gave this piece of information to them freely, without artifice.

The air suddenly smelled of ashes and roasted meat.

They faltered.

The men and women froze in their tracks, cowed. Viv spared them one last glance and galloped away.

The Dark Blades guarding her sheathed their throwing knives without comment. The group fell silent. Behind them, the towers of Koltis' keep disappeared behind the odd trees. They were leaving this strip of farmland behind on their way out. Soon, the forest surrounded them on all sides again, and the visibility decreased, but they didn't stop. The horses and the dark blades apparently knew where they were going, though Viv was blind as a bat right now. After less than ten minutes, they slowed down dramatically.

"Trap," a dark blade whispered before Viv could ask what gave. No sooner had he said so that Viv felt mana burst in front of her.

The forest always had a familiar blend of brown mana with a life and black background. A rush of brown warned her of the impending attack before it even launched. Her training and experience took over.

“Nope.”

The shield expanded past the dark blades as they yelled warning. It hit something, which exploded mid-air. Shrapnel snapped against the ground and nearby trunks with loud thuds. Viv spread black mana on the ground to nullify traps, though she felt nothing, and for a good reason. The path in front of them stopped as a wall rose to block their way. Viv felt the locus of power causing the spell somewhat to the left of the road. She didn't hesitate.

“Purge.”

The thickened version of her simple spell speared through the wall and into the person behind. She heard a gasp. The magic weakened. Her instincts screamed at her of danger in the darkness. She felt projectiles coming at her more accurately than ever before. Two to her left, and back. She sent large shields after them.

“This way!”

The horses barely ever slowed before they changed course, diving into a gap between trees to the left. A branch slapped Viv in the face. She couldn't see anything. There were noises, and screams. Snaps. She huddled and held to the bridle with all her might.

#### Acuity Reflex: Intermediate 1

A net shredded a projectile coming at her from behind until pieces of it clanged uselessly against her roundshield. Another pull of magic warned her of an enemy at their back. She spread black mana in the air. A roar of wind shredded the bushes behind her, showering her in rocks and splinters but failing to harm her. She pointed at the ground behind and channeled change into the earth. Alien columns rose up. A tree toppled, roots displaced by the aggressive movement. Cries of dismay echoed as their pursuers faced the eldritch walls. Viv's group angled left, back towards the road which they reached a moment later. Viv could see again. She pulled a piece of something from her helmet-covered neck. It was a ball of something cut in two.

“Bolas. They want you alive,” Marruk said. She had another one wrapped around her mace.

“Well, tough luck for them.”

“Hush,” a dark blade said. Viv frowned but didn't comment. The man was right. They had to keep moving.

For an hour, the horses rode at great speed. They came across many villages, all of them surrounded by wooden palisades. Once, they even scared a patrol of guards who scrambled to get out of the way. Only after the land grew wild again did the dark blades slow down to a slow canter.

“Those were not gangers,” the leader said.

“Oh really?” Marruk retorted, unrolling another bola from her mace. She tossed the thing to the side with anger.

“No, they were bounty hunters. Emlyg the Undying’s crew,” the man continued with dripping annoyance. “They are pretty known around those parts. Professionals with a witch pair, brother and sister. A brown and a grey, respectively.”

“Just the sister then,” Viv replied. The dark blade stared at her with widened eyes.

“You killed one?”

“Unless they can endure a fist-wide hole in their bodies, they are at least disabled.”

The leader hummed under his breath, but he was clearly not happy.

“They might be less willing to take you intact, then.”

“I hope you don’t expect me to peacefully surrender to a faction whose prince I publicly executed.”

“I do not do politics. My goal is to see you out alive and well. Emlyg the Undying is known for his extremely high endurance. Some say it is in the fifth or even sixth tier. He never gives up. He doesn’t even need to sleep anymore.”

“Let’s keep going then.”

Viv looked up, but didn’t see Arthur. They kept going at a good pace on the same road as it moved through light forests and isolated hamlets. They only slowed at dawn, when Viv faced an unpleasant view.

The next village had been large at some point. It had sat on a recess near a pond. A single cabin overlooked the placid waters with a lone canoe half-sunk near the shore. Now, the palissade looked like the teeth of an old hag, whatever was left of it. Burnt husks rotted away behind the crumbling defenses, with many suspicious dark spots staining the ground and logs. Someone had written ‘Fate of the Rebels’ in large letters on the cracked gates using an undetermined ink. Ropes still hung from some of the trees. The silence was deafening. Not even insects buzzed. Dark mana was thick and cloying there, reminding Viv of the edge of the Deadlands, but its presence felt new and raw. It permeated whatever little life there still was and smelled like worms and flies.

“Ristin. Royalists got to them last autumn,” the leader explained. “We don’t have time to —”

**//Contact.**

Before anyone could react, one of the blades collapsed forward in his saddle, gurgling. A feathered shaft emerged from his neck.

“Go! GO!”

Viv didn't have to be asked twice. The issue with danger sense was that it didn't extend to her allies. She couldn't protect anyone but herself.

“How the fuck?” Viv mumbled.

“He must have followed us,” Marruk said. “It came from the trees.”

“What, on foot?”

“Yeah. People with high endurance can do that.”

Viv realized that she was dealing with a persistence hunter. He would probably just wait until they were exhausted to go in for the kill.

“Shouldn't we track him instead?” she asked.

“We don't have time. His men must be following behind!” The leader answered.

Dammit.

“Solfis, can you track him?”

**//Yes.**

**//However, I suggest waiting until we inevitably make camp to do so.**

**//Otherwise, the energy expenditure to rejoin you would be too high.**

Viv wanted to say that people were dying, but those were banker assassins and so not really her problem. The golem would probably see them as expendable as well.

They kept going until noon, but by then it was clear that the horses wouldn't last much longer.

“There is an inn a little farther. We can rest for a few hours,” the leader finally said.

“We can?” Viv asked with some doubt.

“Remember, those are royalists who asked for your head. We are in separatist territory.”

“Whatever you say.”

**//The tracker will avoid enclosed space.**

**//But we will be ambushed on our way out.**

“The horses need a break,” the dark blade said in a tone that brooked no compromise.

Viv realized that the man had just lost a subordinate and was probably also more experienced than her in tracking, so she decided to cut him some slack. Marruk didn't share this opinion though.

"One word from you and we split from those assholes."

"Let's see how things turn out. We don't know enough," Viv replied.

The possibility that they might backstab her crossed her mind. It could be that Zan wanted her killed quietly by the roadside rather than in the city with all the consequences it entailed. Thankfully, she had Solfis. If it ever happened, they would try to poison her. Better check that poison ring she got and see if it was any good.

The road widened onto an artificial clearing made by extremely determined loggers and she got a first glimpse of the 'inn'. It should have been obvious that anything remote and isolated would be fortified to the wazoo. Their haven-to-be was a grey stone castle with crenelated high walls and a tower that matched Fort Sky in sheer height. She could spot a courtyard beyond a half-open door two handspans thick. There were axe marks on its surface. A grumpy old man with a longbow glared at them as they approached and spat to the side, which Viv found very rude.

"What do you lot want?"

"Shelter and breakfast."

"You ain't there to kill a man, by any chance? I know what those uniforms mean, 'dark blades'."

"Shelter and breakfast. That's it."

"See that it stays true or I'll shove steel up your arse, see if I don't."

Viv and the others had to dismount to get through. The courtyard was clean and well-maintained by a young man with fearful eyes. There were horses in the stable, Viv noticed, though she didn't know how to take it. No guards that she could see. Perhaps the travelers were meant to defend the place themselves.

The blade leader threw an iron talent at the boy and, with a last gaze cast out, walked in the main building which was at the base of the tower. Viv walked in the narrow door and almost bumped into his back. Marruk was right behind her.

Viv let her eyes adjust to the semi-darkness and witnessed a rather tense situation. Inside, there was a common room with a bar at the back that was exactly what she would have expected from a fantasy movie right down to the wooden mugs. A hairy man with a face like he ran into walls for fun stood, frozen in the middle of applying sauce on something out of sight. The three surviving blades had fanned out on the straw-covered ground, dominating a room filled with a team of men and women in gambeson and chainmail who were looking

back with obvious concern. They seemed Enorian to Viv, so locals. She wondered what was wrong and got her answer immediately.

The leader of the group was an old woman with braided gray hair and an impressive quarterstaff on her back. She had her hand on the round table in front of her, where a map was deployed with a couple of pins. A reward poster lay on the side. It showed Viv's likeness to a breathtaking level of precision. Someone had drawn her face at a three quarters angle, grim and a little tired. Although the portrait was in black and white, there was no mistaking her, and the tavern's current occupants made it clear they knew who she was. Brown, bloodshot eyes traveled from one blade to another. They avoided her with comical intensity. They were like kids caught in the middle of some mischief and just as smooth. The fiercest warriors among them licked their lips and made for their weapons. It was kind of entertaining. Or it would have been, but Viv was tired and she had no time for that sort of shit.

"None of that now," she said, and the bounty hunters froze. A moment later, Marruk stepped in, huge flanged mace on display.

She felt red mana focusing on one of the men, a solid fighter with a thin blade. She let the draconic intimidation flow and he stopped. No one moved.

"Let's get the obvious out of the way. You know who I am. I know what you do. Try anything, and I'll kill you where you stand."

"Stand down, everyone," the older woman said in a soft voice. "What do you propose, witch Bibiane?"

It was amazing how quickly she could think, these days.

"We will swap our horses for yours," she said before turning to the dark blade leader for confirmation. The man nodded.

"Theirs are mountain breeds. Fresh. More stamina. Almost the same price."

"I'm not leaving Thunder to some two-bits shaman," a man spat behind.

"Jay. Shut up," the old woman said. Her subordinate relented.

"You will also swear that you forfeit the bounty," Viv finished. She could ask more but desperate people tended to do stupid things. Desperate, angry people were even worse.

"On Enttiku," the blade leader added.

The old woman licked her lips but she nodded soon after.

"You serious, boss?" the red caster asked. It was more bravado than anything, Viv thought. He was just saving face.

“Yeah. Bad luck to come upon them here, is all. And that’s a third step war caster, in case that wasn’t obvious, you dimwits. Fine. We’ll swear.”

“I’m not swearing anything!” The man about to lose his horse said. He stood up. Viv saw him grab a spear and lashed out. A thin line of destructive mana speared forward. The rebellious one jumped in fright but nothing happened, except that his weapon fell in two separate pieces.

“Next time it’s your throat,” Viv commented laconically. She hadn’t moved.

“But Thunder…”

“Maybe we can reach an arrangement…” the blade leader said.

Viv sighed and pulled the intimidating aura back.

“I’ll let you handle the details. I’ll be outside, I need a moment.”

“You should find a room and sleep for an hour or two, then we will keep going. Emlyg will be after us but if we can lose his team, we will stand a better chance of handling him while he’s alone.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Viv walked out with an overprotective Marruk around, then had her carry Solfis to a bedroom with a tiny window and Spartan furniture. The blades were being stupid. If they were stopping now then Emlyg would be around to make sure they stayed put. Now was the perfect time to find and kill him. Suspicion filled her heart. The blades could not be trusted.

**//Your Grace?**

“Can you assess the quality of a poison ring from its engraving?”

**//Yes, Your Grace.**

**//And from the material.**

**//I can also monitor your health if I am close enough.**

**//Although, it is not entirely reliable.**

**//And would not function with fast-acting poisons.**

“What about this one?”

She removed her skinsuit to reveal a finger, which took time and forced her to bare a shoulder.

**//Excellent quality.**

**//It should have cost more than what Zan demanded of it.**

“Hmm.”

Curious, but welcome.

“What about the blades? I find stopping here strange. And they should be going after Emylg.”

**//Their behavior is in line with bodyguards.  
//Their first priority is to keep you alive and moving, not going after your enemies.  
//Forcing Emylg the Undying to distance himself from the rest of his men before tracking him down is logical.  
//They just assume that I cannot help.**

“But you can?”

**//Of course.  
//I am a strike golem, not a guardian.  
//I am not designed for protection.  
//I am designed for threat disposal.**

“Then let’s eliminate the threat.”

Viv walked to the window and whistled. She heard a whoosh of displaced air, then a serpentine face nudged itself through the opening, looking for breakfast. Viv provided the tasty jerky and a fresh egg.

“Any humans outside, hunting for us?”

Yes.

*One male.*

*Good cloak.*

*I steal the technique/glyphs/concept.*

*Sneaky dragon!*

“Can you show Solfis where he is?”

*Hunt?*

“Yep.”

*Hunt!*

Viv let the two go first, Solfis sliding through an opening a child would have had trouble crossing. He was like a cat but marginally less psychopathic. She made herself some warm klod and sipped it before exiting her room. A dark blade stood at attention in front of it, which



did little to comfort her now that paranoia had set in. They moved out with Marruk, and the man protested once she entered the courtyard.

“It isn’t safe.”

“Then follow me and make sure I am.”

Viv walked out of the door, ignoring the grumbling of the guard above. Something about frivolous casters and safety concerns. He choked on his protests when a blood-curdling scream rang through the meadow. Soon after, a man raced across the open field. He was on fire.

It sounded quite painful.

Viv mercy-killed him with a net through the head before approaching the smoldering corpse. Arthur landed with a victorious squeal while Solfis walked lazily from the edge of the forest a moment later. She took the time to inspect the dead. He was covered with scars, some of them apparently ritualistic in nature. A few of his old wounds should have been fatal. Even his scalp was just a sea of red tissue. None of his preparation had helped him survive the ordeal.

“So, just Emlyg then?” She asked the corpse.

**//He was amazingly durable for someone on this step.  
//Although, it backfired.**

“I would think that a guy like him would have pain tolerance in the high tiers.

**//Dragon fire ignores a lot of skills.**

“Squeeee!”

*I win.*

“That you did.”

*I snuck up.*

*Sneaky dragon!*

“Wonder if it will work when you’re house-sized.”

*When house-sized.*

*No need to sneak!*

“True.”

*Sneak anyway.*

“Alright, let’s get back. I want to be on the road before we create too many grudges.”

**//I have a proposal that will prevent grudges from occurring.**

“It’s leaving no survivors and it doesn’t always work.”

**//Spoilsport.**

They returned to the inn with Marruk dragging the body by its feet. The scared stable boy was done transferring her belongings to the new horses. They were smaller, studier beasts with thicker hair. The sentry hailed them.

“You a necromancer?”

“No, this is a golem.”

“Yeah. Alright. Dark blades wouldn’t tolerate a necro anyway. Just keep that thing away from me.”

**//Leave your bow where it is and I won’t have to come up and say hi.**

Draconic intimidation: Expert 2

Ah, whatever. The dark blades’ leader saw the body and berated Viv for going out by herself, following which they left in a hurry. Viv munched on a breakfast roll that tasted pretty fresh, waiting for the poison ring to warm up. It never did. They kept going until noon and reached a crevice running between two patches of forest. The path was barely wide enough for a small carriage.

“It looks like a perfect place for an ambush,” Viv said.

“That’s because it is one and we already have guests,” the leader replied.

“I sense danger,” Marruk added.

**//I detect hidden ropes fifty paces into the passage.**

Arthur landed.

*Sneaky men!*

“Yeah, ok, ok, I get it. Go around or go through?” Viv asked, out of patience. She had slept three hours in two days and didn’t have everyone else’s high endurance.

“Since we have reached this point... I have a proposal.”

Viv glared.

“There are bounty hunters after you and quite a few of them. You must have been recognized in Koltis. The smugglers employ mages capable of sendings, so now everyone knows where you’re going.”

“What do you propose?”

“A diversion. I will disguise myself as you and trigger the ambush. We will draw the pursuers.”

“And they will buy it?”

“I am an infiltrator, outlander. I could act like you and your own mother wouldn’t know.”

Viv huffed.

“Will they buy it if I appear without Solfis or Marruk?”

“Overestimating an opponent is just as foolish as underestimating one. They have your portrait, not a detailed plan of your traveling arrangements. I saw it on the table.”

“How do they have a portrait anyway?”

“Did you hide in Kazar every time troops walked through?”

Viv remembered a meeting in person with an Enorian officer and cursed. It looked like the man had gotten the last word after all.

“Right. Not important. We split, then what?”

The man pointed to the side of the road. A dry riverbed angled to their left. It was filled with rocks and branches.

“You take four horses and go that way. Follow the riverbed for as long as you can and keep heading north. Eventually, you’ll reach the edge of Lake Hydon, which marks the limit between northern Enoria and Kark territory. Then it’s just a matter of finding a ship to bring you downstream to Helock.”

“Yeah...”

She really just wanted to get to Helock. Just that.

“We are close to the Northern Deadshield Woods. So long as you keep out of the way and avoid villages, you will be fine.”

Viv recalled that no one had bothered her until she got into Koltis. Then the proverb had hit the fan.

“Alright. Maybe. We’ll do that.”

“Don’t slow down until tonight and if you find a river, use it to hide your tracks.”

“Fine.”

The blade leader nodded once.

“Now give me your cloak.”

“What? Why?”

“So I can impersonate you, Outlander. I have lost a friend and now I may lose more protecting you because I was ordered to do so. Please do not test my patience any further.”

“Fine, fine. And good luck to you.”

“And the same to you, outlander. May Enttiku watch over your path.”

Kind of weird to wish someone the attention of the God of Death but it didn’t feel malicious and who the fuck cared anyway? Viv dismounted and guided her mountain horse through the difficult terrain of the riverbed. They heard an explosion behind but never stopped. They kept going until nightfall.

“There is a large pine here. We can probably sleep under it.”

That night, they set camp in silence and slept immediately after setting alarms. They departed at dawn, still groggy. The happiness of the earlier days of travel had disappeared now that Viv knew she was actively hunted. Every shadow carried danger. They crossed a small path and she had to look both ways before crossing instead of just following it like a normal traveler. Marruk even stopped to hide their tracks.

They traveled like that for two days, making slow progress. Eventually, they found and followed a small trail going in the right direction, barely more than a beast path. In the late afternoon, they heard a shout in the distance. Someone was loudly calling for help.

“I just want to get to Helock,” Viv mumbled, “Nothing more. No pursuit. No mad dash. No distraction.”

But she hurried anyway. The horses trotted onto an overgrown clearing where the burnt husk of a farm rested. A man was desperately climbing a dead tree, screaming for help as he went and for good reasons. A monster had decided to turn him into lunch. It was, to Viv’s dismay, a giant spider. Huge. Hairy. Many-eyed and many-legged. It deftly jumped aside to avoid a heavy stone.

“Jesus.”

**//A forest spider, Your Grace.**

**//They live in large colonies.**

“Please no. Purge net!”

The first attack went a little wide because of the icky factor messing with Viv's aim. The second went wide as well because the sight of severed, giant legs bleeding yellow ichor had sent Viv in panic despite her high willpower. The third one missed because the spider was jumping on her with the speed and grace of a cheetah on steroids. The last one missed again because Marruk had slammed the flying spider down with a ghastly crack of broken chitin.

“Nooooo...” Viv lamented to herself. The man crashed down the tree as soon as he spotted his saviors. He was young and suntanned with a solid build and a wide face, which gave him a slight caveman feel, although his eyes shone with intelligence.

“Oh, you are sent by Enttiku himself, great ones. Please, please help us! Our village is under attack! No one will answer our call! I beseech you, if you do not help us then we are all doomed.”

Viv spared one glance at the pulped giant tarantula, bent forward and screamed into her mount's mane.

She just wanted to get to Helock.

## Chapter 90: SPIDERS!

“No, out of the question. I'm not here to assist foresters with their pest problems. Spiders happen in the forest. It's normal.”

“Please, great one, I see you are a mage! Sardanal himself placed you on the path.”

“Solfis, isn't Neriad the one who rescues people?”

**//The god of plentiful harvests is a good choice when your life depends on it.**

“People... are DYING!” The man screamed.

Viv glared, annoyed that someone would focus her attention on the fate of innocent people in order to appeal to her conscience because it was sort of working and that pissed her off. Her rescuer compounded the insult by falling to his knees, face-planting an instant later.

“Forgive me... Please, great ones. The spiders are coming. We will all die trying to run away.”

“You are no one to me. Your fate and that of your family is of no consequence. I’m trying to get somewhere. People die everywhere all the time on this cosmic death trap anyway.”

“Hmm, Viv?” Marruk interrupted.

Viv prayed that she would not be called on her hypocrisy.

“You are even more direct than usual. Are you fine?”

“Yes! Well, no, but that’s unrelated to the problem at hand which is that his problem is not my problem and that I’m currently running for my life.”

“More like hiding.”

“Same thing!”

“It’s not because you are scared of spiders, yes?”

Viv met Marruk’s unyielding eyes, offended grace versus placid indifference. The Kark must have received glaring lessons from Solfis himself because she was just her stoic self. Viv could have replaced her with her door-shield and gotten more reaction.

“I do not fear spiders. I just find them extra ickyaaaAAARG ARTHUR PUT THAT DOWN.”

The dragonette was eating a cut-off leg, crunching the chitinous shell with gusto to get at the muscly marrow within.

“Squee?”

“It’s a spider!”

“Forest spiders are a delicacy. We just need a large pot, butter, citrinelle, and permonn liquor,” the Kark said, practically drooling.

“I thought you didn’t enjoy meat so much?”

“Spiders are different. They taste nutty.”

“Nut yourself.”

**//Your Grace, please consider this dim-witted barbarian bumpkin’s request.**

Viv gasped in outrage at the golem's folded form. Two yellow lights showed ominously over the saddle.

"Et tu, brute? You dare betray me in my hour of need? You have never cared for anyone as long as my safety was at risk, and now you want me to go against spiders?"

Solfis answered in old imperial as a change, Usually, he spoke Enorian to allow Marruk to follow.

**//Your Grace, the truth is that we are lost.**

**//We need local help, or risk entering the Deadshield Woods by accident.**

"Who do you mean, I thought we were really far from them?"

**//Kazar is at the south of the Harrakan heartlands.**

**//We have gone east past the woods, then north along them.**

**//They extend the entire width of the continent, only stopping at the edge of the Kark steppes.**

**//According to my calculations, we have gone north and slightly west, especially since leaving Koltis.**

**//We could be near the edge and not realize it until it is too late.**

"Get lost, you mean?"

**//The risk is present.**

**//Additionally, bounty hunters might wait for us at crossroads or on major arteries.**

**//Our best chance would be to use a local forester to bypass them while avoiding the edge of the woods.**

"This guy isn't offering help, he wants us to fight spiders."

**//Then ask.**

**//A desperate person will promise anything.**

**//Make sure you obtain an oath on a god to keep your presence secret.**

**//Finally, if you decide to refuse his request against my wish, you must kill him.**

"Because of secrecy?"

**//Yes.**

**//You would refuse him and your head is very valuable.**

**//He would be too dangerous to leave alive.**

**//Oaths made under physical duress have less weight, sometimes none at all.**

"Oh, very well."

Switching to Enorian, Viv addressed the forester who looked on with equal parts hope and fear. The man himself was rather young under all that grime, twenty at most. He had the

usual skin tone under an attempt at a beard and tousled hair. His clothes were rough-spun and held together by strings yet close-fitting and well-made. She realized that there was a bow on his shoulders, but the animal-skin quiver was empty. He was very thin and really muscular at the same time, but those were the muscles of distance-runners. He studied her in return, although his gaze was scared and tentative.

“What’s your name, boy?” Viv asked with blatant dishonesty.

“Ardek, milady. I’m a hunter for the village.”

[Wild-path hunter, one who specializes in crafting their own equipment from the prey they fell themselves. Not very dangerous. Short-range and trap specialist. Stealthy. Beast-slayer.]

Nothing too unexpected.

“What village?”

“Errr it ain’t got a proper name milady. Was made five years ago.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Counting the dogs ma’am?”

“No. Wait, do you have many dogs? For hunting, perhaps?”

Viv’s hope of a large quadrupedal horde between herself and anything remotely arachnoid buoyed in her heart.

“No, ma’am.”

The man withered under her furious glare.

“Then why... Ugh, nevermind. How many?”

“About one hundred and thirty!” the man said with much pride, then more defensively “I can count. I know my numbers.”

“Tell me of your spider problem Mr. Numbers.”

“I ain’t got a proper last name milady. Not yet. Alderman said I could if I got three kids who survive past thirteen. But anyway, yes, the spiders. We got them sometimes at the edge of the forest, scouts for some Deadshield colonies. But recently there’s been more sightings, and also old One-Leg went missing checking his snares and when we went searching he’d been dragged and the harrens were gone. And also old Lidy’s cornudon gave black milk and Simple Willy who drank some got the runs till he died and they say he bled through every hole, beg your pardon. Tall Romus got his family behind the palissade, said there were chittering things in the night that got his dog. And when I left to ask for a royal hunter, damn things saw me! They surrounded the village, I’m telling you.”



Viv sighed.

Spiders.

“Is there anyone here who knows his way around the land? I mean not just half a day of march, I mean north.”

“I do milady, went as far as Lake Hydon to sell furs last winter and I know the way because of my path. I can always return to a place I been to, see? I can get you there. I mean...”

“In return for my help, I got it. How about food. You guys have some?”

“For you of course. We got some fields, though it’s too early in the year but we got meat and giant pine bread and dried stuff from last year. Not a rich fare mind you but you can have enough to make your tummy burst, I tell you. More if you don’t eat the spiders.”

Ardek licked his lips with as much panic and covetousness as a graduate interviewing for his dream job.

“We don’t get much money though...”

“I’ll be magnanimous. If you give us supplies to justify the trip and a guide to Lake Hydon, I’ll look into the spider issue. Kill them until they decide to leave the village alone. You must also swear an oath to secrecy, not just you but the entire village.”

“Very magani-mouse of you milady, very very. Yes, I swear on Enttiku that I will not reveal your presence outside of the village, ever. Thank you, milady, thank you.”

Viv froze in her tracks while Marruk removed a relatively intact leg from the spider carcass. Had she just agreed to kill spiders? Arg. She should have given it more thought!

“Let’s be on our way then! Please follow me, it’s this way. Won’t take long!”

“I hate everything with four legs and a lot of things with two. Ugh. Hope I don’t regret it.”

**//It is the best option, Your Grace.**

**//Did you know that spider flesh is very nutritious and rich in brown mana?”**

“I will force you to recite the Baranses pledge of allegiance on loop.”

**//UPDATING DIETARY ADVICE GUIDELINES.**

**//My apologies, Your Grace.**

“Let’s just go. Marruk... you take point.”

The woods grew deeper and darker when Ardek retraced his steps. He would sometimes go and remove a silex arrow from a dead spider as large as a French Bulldog, which he would place in a haversack with a guilty backward glance. Viv was reminded of the Temple of Doom movie when a fat man sucked the flesh off a giant bug with naked delight. Honestly, that was ten times worse than the heart thing. She shivered.

“Did you have a bad experience with spiders, Viv?” Marruk finally asked.

The outlander was about to reply when her danger sense screamed and she threw a reflex bolt up and to her left, where it caught a large, furry body mid-air. She threw a powerful net again just to be on the safe side. The thing was sliced into three distinctive parts.

Marruk jumped from her horse and blocked the body before gravity could smash it into Viv’s face, but a spinning piece of thorax sent its contents into Viv’s face. The witch removed the end of a long, quivering tube from her forehead. Ichor dripped down her face.

“NOW I’M HAVING A BAD EXPERIENCE NOW NOW NOW AARRRRRRGGGGG.”

The others checked the carcass, leaving the witch to jump in circles to calm herself down. She sat on a stump a little later and rested her face against her knees.

“Viv?” Marruk asked a bit later.

“What?” A muffled voice replied.

“Hmmm Ardek wants to take the carcass but Arthur already ate the eyes and I was wondering if you wanted to lay claim to it or... Right, I’ll errr, handle it myself.”

“Why do they fly?”

**//Technically, they jump, milady.**

**//Adult forest spiders can reach up to twenty-five paces, more if they jump from trees.**

**//They land face thorax first to stun their prey, biting them shortly after.**

“Whyyyyyy?”

“She’s not listening.”

Viv felt tears for the first time in forever. Why did it have to be jumping spiders? What has she done to deserve — ok that wasn’t something she was willing to explore. Maybe she

deserved spiders but still, why make them a thing? Was the planet really out to get everyone?

“Viv, we need to get moving.”

She forced herself to move because there could be more spiders. The woods were not dense here, it was more copses and meadows, but the trees were old and quite tall as well. She was in the open and the spiders could fly. Had to get indoors.

They kept moving. Viv was amazed that the mountain horses had not panicked yet, instead following the humans placidly through arachnid guts. The group walked for another ten minutes before they saw smoke on the horizon, and soon the palissade of the unknown village came into view. The gates were opened.

The unknown place was an interesting mix and by interesting, Viv meant that an anthropologist would get their freak on. As someone who enjoyed the wilderness through the lense of a five star hotel's window, she had never seen the appeal of living with the inhabitants but this time there would be no avoiding it. The houses were hovels of twisted trunks and mud under thatched roofs. The weird small ostriches raced alongside children over the muddy ground. It smelled like shit, detritus, and woodsmoke. Despite the miserable appearance, Viv could not help but admire the care given to the place. The smell itself came from neatly placed compost piles next to planks adorned with primitive glyphs. The houses would be warm, she could tell, with the smoke emerging from puffing chimneys. People had essentially taken great care to do the best with shit material.

It was the same with the people. They were a lean, determined sort wearing rough-spun tunics and skins of poor but clean make. No one had been idle when Viv got in.

Of course, everyone stopped moving when she came in. She could buy everything they had five times over with the clothes she was wearing, ten times with her enchanted dagger, including themselves. Never had she so keenly felt the class difference being a talented caster entailed.

The locals gathered in a loose half circle. An old, tall man with a long grey beard and large shoulders came rushing, stopping a few feet away with terror in his eyes. Viv dismounted calmly while others joined him. There was an aging woman who felt faintly of life mana, a tall guy with a rather handsome face and the only armor she could see, and finally a bowman with what looked like his son. They just huddled together like she was going to announce it was children-cooking day and she required a tribute. Ardek didn't help. He was just waiting for her to act.

She took the opportunity to inspect a bit. It was a good habit to develop. The villagers had things like [Forest mother] or [Wilderness farmer] classes that looked highly specialized to survive around here. The main exceptions were the notables.

[Alderman, not very dangerous, one whose path focuses on leading a small community. Leader of men, decent melee combatant, administrator.]

[Wise woman, not very dangerous, one whose path is dedicated to teaching and healing. Life mana user, large skill set, apothecary.]

[Light Infantry Veteran: not very dangerous, a warrior trained in formation fighting and a variety of weapons. Close quarter combat adept, high survivability, fearless, killer.]

[Big game hunter: Dangerous, one who trains with the bow to pierce the skin of monsters, ranged specialist, dead eye, decent melee combatant.]

Well here was to hoping this was a very mild infestation because things didn't look good.

"Greetings," she finally said once everyone was settled. A smile and a light touch of leadership helped grease the wheels of diplomacy.

"I was told by Ardek here that you require help fending off spiders. I am willing to help under certain conditions."

"Name them," the old man with a beard said.

Viv listed what she wanted, basically an oath from everyone on Enttiku who apparently took that sort of thing seriously, food for a while, and a guide. The Alderman stuttered his question with obvious disbelief.

"That... is all? I do not wish to be disrespectful, milady. This is a very generous offer."

Viv shrugged.

"You do not have much to give anyway. This will do."

"And, forgive me but... we do not wish to submit to any dark god."

He shrank under Viv's glare until she realized that with the artificially black hair, robe, and ominous helmet, she looked kinda evil herself. Not to mention a bored Arthur currently curled around her shoulders.

"The only gods I follow are Maradoc and Neriad. And Nous, maybe? I've already killed dark servants and I'm not on good terms with their masters."

"Oh. That is a relief. Then yes, we accept this more than generous offer milady. Ahem. So, what should we swear?"

"My golem will give the exact wording."

**//The first thing you will do is kneel.**

Solfis had them repeat a short yet comprehensive oath that Viv felt smart in the way it was subjective, so no one could really use loopholes because they knew they were fucking with

her and that was covered by the oath. The notables sent the villagers back to whatever they were doing and reconvened in a low house with a pretty long table.

Viv was pretty sure the locals didn't have to kneel. Solfis was just being himself.

It appeared that the villagers had taken a page off the mountain folks' book by digging their houses. They had used a large amount of stones cleverly arranged to make best use of the natural shapes without having to carve them. It was more spacious than anticipated and surprisingly well-isolated. Viv's opinion of the villagers increased. They had the kind of get-shit-done mentality she immediately respected.

"Right, so..." the Alderman said, looking a bit lost.

"First, a round of introduction, then you expose the problem, tell me what you know of the spiders, what you have done so far, and what you have planned on doing."

"Right. Yes."

The introductions went quickly because the locals were mercifully shy. The alderman gave a name Viv didn't care about because he was already labeled as 'alderman'. The wise woman went by Old Liddy and she could do everything and teach it, from pottery to hunting to midwifing. Tall Romus was the veteran and he knew how to fight, but he was missing a proper spear and shield. All he had was a bow and knife. He had been trying to join a hunter path when the proverbial hit the eight-legged fan. The last man was called Kordek and he was Ardek's mentor. Strangely, the two were not related.

Viv introduced herself and Arthur, telling everyone to respect the 'drake'. Marruk introduced herself. Viv tried to explain what Solfis was but soon realized that the villagers had no notion or frame of reference to understand what a golem was. They'd simply never heard of one. To them, the ancient machine was just 'Helockian sorcery' or some such and they just took everything she said at face value, which was rather convenient. Then came the time to expose the problem. Everyone started talking at once.

"Slow down, slow down," the alderman said, "we're not savages. Everyone will get their turn! Kordek, you start."

"No respect for your elders!" the wise woman spat, but the hunter was already droning on with an empty gaze.

"They got me wife and daughters. Had to leave with my son but they didn't believe me, oh no. They didn't, but now it's too late and they're coming and they will turn our inside to slush and slurp it out with their big nasty —"

"Alright alright I get it. Less imagination and more facts please!" Viv interrupted.

"What the old man's saying is that he was attacked first," Romus said. "He lived on the outskirts. To our shame, we thought it was an isolated attack. It's not rare for us to cross paths with colony scouts. Most of the time, we leave each other alone but you never know

with monsters. They can get weirdly territorial. Except, it's more than just marauding soldiers now. I left my house just yesterday. They're sniffing around."

"Is it normal for... colonies to move?" Viv inquired. The bestiary had not gone into much detail on forest spiders and she got the impression that they were usually reclusive.

"No. They really like dense woods so if they expand, they should do so towards the Deadshield."

"There's dark sorcery at work, I tell ya! All you little shits think I'm loony but I tell you it's a curse that got me Daisy. She was all fine, giving me milk and calf every year then suddenly her milk turns black and she falls dead? Foul witchery!"

Viv grunted noncommittally. She had zero experience investigating foul witchery, wouldn't even know where to start. Where was the inquisition when you needed it? Alala.

"Any idea on the numbers?"

Answers ranged from 'at least six if it's actually just a patrol' coming from the alderman, up to 'enough to end civilisation' coming from Kordek who was quickly getting on Viv's nerves.

"What have you done so far?"

"We cut trees around the palissade down so the beasts couldn't use them to jump on the defenders."

"We made spears but they use silex. Won't help much. The people can fend off a beastling tribe but this is different. Every spider is worth a decent fighter, and they work really well in groups."

"I saw one of those things jump. Could a militia square fend them off?"

"I am sorry, milady..."

"Just a no will do. So the villagers will be useless. In that case, it would be best to have everyone take cover in a house if we are attacked. Then we form a circle and hold. Right?"

**//This appears like the optimal solution with the current tools we have.**

**//Additionally, I wish to offer guidance.**

This was Solfis' way to announce he had something he didn't want to share in public.

"Right. I was considering scouting but if they're coming to us it's all the better. I'll have a look outside while we have the best light and check the defenses. In the meanwhile, please arm everyone and tell them to be ready to retreat to... What's the best place?"

"My house," the alderman said, "here. I also have a cellar. The miller next door has some storage room as well. We'll go there and hold if anything happens."

"I have antidotes that are almost ready," the wise woman added. "It will help with bites."

"I will help her get them," the hunter said.

"Your expertise..." the alderman started, but the hunter would not have it. He shook his head.

"I will help her. The antidote provides hope. It is needed to save the village. My son will come as well."

"Very well."

"Alright then let's go," Viv said.

Truth be told, there wasn't much to see once back outside. The early afternoon shone nicely through a light cloud cover. Villagers gathered and prepared just in case. Some went to gather supplies while others sharpened stakes with small knives, something that must have taken quite a bit of power. They would be fucking useless against the giant spiders and their thick chitine but what did she know? Maybe it would slow them down.

Parts of the palissade were made accessible by wood scaffoldings cleverly built with frayed ropes made of some sort of plant. They were next to the gates, of which there were two sets on opposite sides of the village. Viv looked out to see fields loaded with growing greens and cereals. The villagers had made the best out of the available space. The closest trees had been cut down, just like the alderman said so they had good vision.

Viv didn't see anything but she knew those fucking arachnids were out there, chittering and quadruple-glaring with all their eyes. Ugh.

**//Your Grace, the death of the cornudon by poison is extremely concerning.**  
**//Forest spiders do not possess intelligence.**  
**//Although it could be a coincidence...**

"Wait," Viv said, "What was that?"

**//Your Grace?**

The outlander had felt a burst of life mana that felt abnormally strong. It was wrong. Far too powerful to be alchemy-related. She climbed down, trusting her guts on this one.

**//I will accompany you.**  
**//Marruk, can you keep an eye out?**

"Will do. Alright, I don't like this. Everyone, get ready just in case."

Viv easily found the wise woman's cottage since it was the only one with an herb garden. It was locked, which immediately told her that something fucky had occurred.

**//Allow me.**

Solfis smashed the door open and leaned in, which gave Viv more than enough space to see exactly what was going on.

The hunter was leaning over the ravaged corpse of the woman, having peeled off the skin and muscles to expose the organs. Or at least, Viv thought it was the hunter from the clothes it still wore but its face was now a malformed, cancerous bulb of insectile horror with compound eyes and a huge proboscis. White larvae dripped from its obscene end onto the carcass below. The man's son stood impassively by its side.

Viv sent a purge net before her mind was even done reconciling with the nightmare before her. The creature was nimble but the net was designed to counter that. Black wires of pure destruction cut the creature in two at the torso. The son took a step forward and spontaneously exploded in a shower of small black spiders, spoilt meat, and pus.

"WERFER!" Viv half-screamed and half-sobbed.

The blast erased part of the horde from existence, but the rest spread across the walls while the severed torso used powerful clawed hands to drag itself to the hut's only beam, moving forward like a demented chimpanzee. It left a trail of entrails in its wake.

Solfis gently dragged back the paralyzed witch. Viv finally turned and ran at the threshold, expressing her feelings on the matter with a long babble of stringed insults. She jumped on the closest dragonette and picked her up bodily.

"Squee?"

"FUCK THIS, FUCK ALL THAT SHIT. ARTHUR! FLAMES!"

Arthur lived for the books, scratches, and setting stuff on fire therefore she obliged immediately. A long spear of superheated magical napalm torched the house in a mere instant. The crispy half of the spider hybrid fell through the wall of heat in a mess of blackened tissue. The few villagers not on their way screamed and panicked.

Meanwhile, Viv was breathing very hard.

**//Your Grace.**

"Hold on. Sneaky Coaky Lemon Squeezy!"

A coating of dark mana gave Viv the appearance of wearing an evil, spiky armor. She released Arthur before giving it the meaning of annihilation. Not one single spider would get to touch her naked skin. Nope! She refused.

"Yeah, what?"



**//I must apologize for leading you here.**  
**//It seems that my prediction algorithms always fail while in your presence.**  
**//It appears we are contending with a Herald of Octas, the Spider Queen.**  
**//Also called The Destroyer.**  
**//The enemy of civilization.**  
**//They will not stop until everyone in the town is dead.**

“I just wanted to get to Helock...”

## Chapter 91 BIG SPIDERS! AAAAH!

“We’re under attack!” Marruk bellowed from the wall, where Viv had left her.

“Gods dammit.”

The witch ran and swore, pushing aside the last scrambling villagers making their ways to safety. She saw Ardek the young hunter and Romus the veteran shoot arrow after arrow at something out of sight. The alderman stood nearby, hands clutched around a quarterstaff. Those were the three people in the village who wouldn’t be completely useless. Viv grumbled against everything and everyone on her way up to see what the men were shooting at. She regretted it immediately.

It was... a lot of things. The setting sun cast a red glow on a chattering mass of chitinous flesh, a tide of eight-legged vermin covering the grass and fields in a divine plague. Creatures of all sizes swarmed over the earth and each other on their way to the palissade. In Viv’s eyes, there was no more land, just a sea of legs and thoraxes crashing down on her.

She kind of broke down.

“Aaaaaaaaah ARTHUR! Burn it all! Burn it to the ground! Werfer!”

Dark spells flew across the clearing, mowing down the largest beasts and digging furrows in the tilled earth. An entire section of the swarm disappeared behind the largest blight Viv had ever conjured. The hiss of disintegration soon drowned the clicks of poison-dipped mandibles. Viv went wild and torched the plain with black flame. She even started to draw from her reserves in the knife-focus. At no point had she stopped screaming.

“I will invent the rocket and the rocket fuel and fissile material and I will cleanse this entire fucking patch of greenery out of creation until nothing remains but glassy craters! I will give that den of arachnids the Brazil treatment. I will log the shit out of every acre and use the wood to make toilet paper dispensers for every house on this god-forsaken shitball of a planet. I will ban spiders. Spiders are illegal. Arthur! Napalm this back into the hell it should never have crawled out of!”

“SKRAAAAAA!”

“Leave nothing standing! Yes! Burn it all! Burn it all down aaaaahahahahahah! Let skies run black and the land be charcoal!”

**//Your Grace, they are retreating.**

“We need more things to burn!”

**//Your Grace, please calm down.**

“I will calm down when the crispy shield woods —”

**//Now.**

**//We have company.**

The sight of a lone figure in the distance forced Viv to stop indulging in dramatics, even if she felt those were warranted. Black mana devastation and dragonfire scarred the land in great black wounds devoid of any life. The smoke from the dying heat masked parts of the forest and rose to the heavens beyond, but a light breeze had parted enough to show a lithe, definitely female figure swathed in elegant clothes standing in the distance. Spider silk shrouded the trees around her in gossamer swathes like drapes from a palatial canopy. She walked calmly forward and the ground parted before her steps, no, not ground, spiders. As the last rays of the sun hit her, Viv saw that they had found their herald.

From feet to neck, the woman appeared human under a rich green dress. Above, however, the elegant frame gave way to a nightmarish jaw that split her face in two, like a certain movie monster that hunted marines for sports. They twitched erratically every second or so. The rest of the head was mostly unchanged, save for an additional set of dark eyes on the forehead. Viv found that it was rather fucked up and wondered how she would recognize uranium so she could mine it effectively.

“Look what fell into my lap.”

The herald’s voice surprised Viv. She sounded much closer than she really was, a sign of good magical control. As far she knew, Octas was a force of destruction, the wildest of all dark gods. And yet, the herald spoke in a refined alto that would delight an entire cabaret. The greater reaction came from Viv’s companions, however.

“Is that... Leria? Korek’s wife?” The alderman whispered.

“It cannot be...” Romus added. All three villagers showed various expressions of distress. As for Viv, she was curious. She also wanted the herald to keep walking toward her.

“Who are you and what do you want?”

“You already know the answer to those questions, little outlander.”

“You know me?”

“I know of you. My mistress knows many secrets, even some your benefactor hid in his dusty vaults. She sees that you seek to resurrect that which has died, and we object. You cannot fight entropy, girl. Harrak is gone, and soon, you will join it. We will send your reanimated corpse on its way for your friends to find. I might even give it a present.”

The thing hissed. It was a bit far but Viv thought she saw maggot dripping from the nightmarish maw.

“What does the village have to do with it?”

“Silly girl, what do you have to do with the village? It was to be my offering, a mark of my commitment. But now it holds a prize that will grant me many rewards. Even now, I feel my power grow to answer yours. I will see you soon.”

Viv launched the bolt spell she had built up at the herald, but she dodged it with preternatural speed. Great chitinous limbs popped from her back and planted themselves on the ground, sending their load out of the way of the projectile. The herald’s body bobbed between them like a gorged rotten fruit. Viv’s instincts screamed, but before she could react, Marruk pushed her aside and Solfis pinched a spider from the air. Viv saw red marks on a black body and shivered.

**//A red hiver.**

**//It should not be here.**

“First blows averted. We shall see who goes the distance.”

When Viv looked up from the tarentula-sized corpse dripping white ichor on the ground, the woman was gone.

“Solfis, I almost forgot but can you go kill the thing?”

**//The creature was covered by an invisible network of silk at all times.**

**//It is prepared and defended against me.**

“... What do you mean?”

**//Octas must have shared information on me.**

**//This is a mage killer frame.**

**//I can resist spells but not god-infused sticky silk.**

**//I can perceive details through most magical illusion, but this creature does not use its own mana to hide itself.**

**//It is currently receiving a large amount of energy directly from Octas.**

**//It might prove too much.**

**//I will have to ambush it.**

“You mean that thing can defeat you?”

**//I have no recourse against the silk and net it can produce.  
//We need to lure it in and ambush it.  
//It will be difficult.**

“We killed a prince.”

**//We face a god.  
//Octas is directly intervening to make sure you die.**

“What the fuck?”

**//This is a great honor, Your Grace.  
//It means that you stand for civilization.  
//It must be your revival of Harrakan culture, bathed in blood and glory.**

“Or maybe I’m the sucker making mana-absorbing obelisks free of charge.”

**//A proper ruler does not neglect any aspect of proper governance.**

“So...” a voice interrupted. It was the alderman. Marruk was leaning against the palissade, squishing small spiders as they crossed over it while Romus and Ardek watched a happy Arthur with undisguised terror.

“Who are you exactly?”

**//You ask a lot of questions for someone who swore an oath to secrecy.**

“Well, yes, your lordship, or whatever it is you preferred to be called... but I already swore so it makes no difference, does it?”

Solfis took a second to reply, which was a second more than what he usually took.

**//If you call me your lordship from now on, I may consent to it.**

“Enough of this, we need to check on the other villagers. They could be in danger.”

“Lildy set enchantments around my house,” the alderman said.

“Yeah and she’s dead. Let’s go.”

“Lildy is dead?”

Viv did not wait, she jumped down followed by Arthur. The dragonette looked a bit tired but it was the postprandial serotonin discharge kind of tired, and her crimson eyes stared at the distant fire with half-lidded pleasure. They took three steps before Solfis roared a warning and a wave of small spiders jumped at them from behind houses. Viv did not hesitate.”

“Easy Peasy Sneaky Cloaky.”

She needed a shorter incantation. One that didn't induce cringe.

The spiders jumped on her legs, trying to reach her face and she realized that she did not need to have covered her face as they were annihilated as soon as they landed. It let her see how Arthur handled the mass. The dragonling lifted herself with a flap of her wings, then beat them once. Waves of grey mana burst from them in Viv's mana vision, pure and perfectly formed. The shockwave both killed the small creatures and gathered them in a neat pile. The witch was forced to avert her eyes so she would not be forced to witness the following insanity.

*Thanks*

*For*

*Meal*

"There.... therecouldbedustinthat!"

Her hasty protest got ignored in favor of a large protein intake.

"I hate everything."

**//Well done, Your Grace.**

**//No dangerous specimens so far.**

"Enough delay!"

*Snack*

"I don't want to hear it, let's go."

They moved throughout the empty village, squishing spiders with every step. Most of those were harmless to humans, barely more than what she could find in a temperate forest on earth. Sometimes, Solfis stomped forward and plucked a wriggling specimen from the mass. As for Viv, she was practically dancing a constant gig to prevent the things from clinging to her boots.

The strange procession made their way to the central house, which was currently besieged by another tide. Light still emerged from behind closed shutters, so Viv had hope. A large patch of vermin detached itself from the rest as soon as she stepped closer.

**//They appear to be aimed for you, Your Grace.**

**//Fortunately, Octas' will can only carry so far in simple specimens.**

"I feel fucking lucky, yeah."

This time, Viv traced a circle in the dirt with her dagger and charged it with a minimum of destructive mana. The spiders would walk on it and die, turned to dust in an instant. It was yet another small drain on her rather depleted reserves. More of the spiders found them, a constant trickle crawling their way in a wriggling carpet. Solfis moved to pluck some of the most dangerous creatures while the villagers found fresh torches they used with more enthusiasm than effectiveness. At least, it provided some light. Viv found the darkness unnerving.

It took a good ten minutes before the mass of spiders had gone from movie prop to just a nasty nest. As soon as a threshold was reached, the annoying things just moved aside rather than just erasing their numbers in a suicidal last charge on her circle. It meant that there were always spiders.

The alderman knocked on the sealed door, squishing a pair of orb weavers as he did. Another three had to be wiped off his face before a voice asked who was there. It took some negotiation before the villagers opened the way, and Viv finally breathed a sigh of relief when they finally entered the well-lit home. It was too hot, it stank, but right now it was relatively spiderless and that was all she could hope for.

The villagers had stopped the spiders from getting in by guarding the doors and windows with their shoes out, which explained the smushed stains and the general feet smell. They welcomed the news that they were besieged by dark forces with consternation, but they rejoiced once the alderman sold them Viv as some sort of grand secret archmage and the group left everyone in prayer while they retired upstairs. The alderman distributed some infusion from a sealed container and Viv only checked it once for spiders before she took a sip. it was warm and reinvigorating with a slightly bitter aftertaste.

“Please tell me what happened to Lildy,” the man politely asked.

Viv recounted the discovery and arson, leading to quite a few curses.

“That Leria has lost it, curse the day her mother gave her life. She has always been a bitch, but I didn’t think she would be a murderer too.”

**//Tell me about her.**

“Solfis? You? Profiling?”

**//I now have to conduct the assassination of a godly vessel.**

**//Some research is required.**

**//Octas servants are tricky.**

**//This one’s profile is suboptimal, which will help us.**

“What do you mean?”

**//The most effective servants of Octas are violent criminals, typically murderers and arsonists.**

**//People who revel in violence and destruction.**

“That’s not Leria at all,” Romus said. He passed a hand through his trimmed beard.

“She’s arrogant, impatient. She never belonged here. Resented everyone but preferred insults over genuine attacks.”

“Kordek bought a lot of land. He would have become rich in ten years if things had gone well. Could have retired to Losserec-on-the-Lake and lived comfortably until he died fat and white of hair,” the alderman explained.

It sounded like a life goal. Losserec was the capital city of Northern Enoria. The lake was Lake Hydron, a large freshwater body, Viv remembered from her map. They would reach it if everything went well.

“Leria thought she was some sort of great lady. Kordek had to hire old Griswel to take care of things around the house because his missus wouldn’t,” Ardek added, then he blushed when the two older adults glared.

“Apologies milady,” the alderman continued. “We don’t got good manners here, hope you forgive us.”

“That’s fine, but you were saying?”

“Right. Leria was cross about living here. She is the youngest daughter of a rich merchant. Kordek invested the money wisely but she could not wait to get back her living standards.”

“She has a high opinion of herself,” Romus added.

“Not dumb but thinks she’s Sardanal’s gift to mankind. Prettiest and smartest person who knows best on everything all the time,” the alderman added.

“Oh so it’s multiversal then.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Alright Solis, how does this help.”

**//Impatience.**

**//As I mentioned, Leria’s profile is suboptimal.**

**//The Spider Queen’s gift would have taken over quite quickly, they still may.**

**//Leria succumbed because she could not wait.**

**//We must exploit this specific flaw.**

**//Force her to attack.**

“Wouldn’t she attack no matter what?”

**//Heralds typically ambush and harass their prey, sacrificing a great many monsters and beasts to wear them down.**

**//They will attack without stopping and finish with one last assault.**

**//They do this strategy every time.**

**//Because... it works.**

**//Octas can control and direct many monsters, especially spiders.**

**//That makes her the most dangerous dark god.**

“Why did you even settle near a colony then?” Viv asked the alderman.

“There are many colonies, milady. Especially near the edge of the forest. It’s inevitable. And before you ask, no we could not burn it down. We only have a handful of people who could face forest spiders and live.”

**//It is safer to ignore a colony and risk an attack than engaging and getting one.**

**//At least for the subjects of a backward, uncaring government.**

“Ok whatever it’s too late anyway. So, to summarize, we face a herald who has access to lots of monsters, lots of spiders, and will throw them at us until she attacks with all she has. Correct?”

**//Indeed.**

Only Solfis nodded. Everyone else looked stunned or desperate. Even the unshakable Marruk stared at the pockmarked door between them, probably wondering if she should have cut and run after the prince affair. Viv could not really blame the poor thing. She was probably just staying out of a sense of duty.

“Alright, so we need to annoy her into attacking sooner. How should we do that?”

**//By resisting.**

“Vague.”

**//You are the one with the flexible mind, Your Grace.**

“Fair. So what can we expect that we would have to resist?”

**//Regular attacks and insects making a nuisance of themselves.**

**//The purpose will be to prevent you from sleeping.**

**//I will help with this.**

**//Although it will be extremely energy-intensive.**

“We were supposed to keep your energy reserve high for emergencies.

**//This is an emergency.**

**//My apologies, your Grace.**

**//I advised this course of action.**



“Ah whatever, with how things have been going, we would have been caught in the open by the spiders and then got lost in the Deadshield Woods anyway. So, how about fortifications?”

**//We could not hold them.**

“How about a circle then? To help against the inevitable assault.”

**//That would be helpful, yes.**

“We could act as sentries?” Romus suggested. He looked really eager to help.

**//Anyone who stands outside is dead meat.**

**//Even Marruk would have trouble.**

**//You fleshbags would just become spider food.**

“They can guard the inside and keep the two houses spider free?”

**//This would help with a restful sleep.**

**//I will patrol tonight.**

**//But someone needs to stay in your room to make sure that no red hivers come to visit.**

“What’s a red hiver anyway?”

**//Their bites destroy the victim’s nervous system.**

**//Following which they will lay their eggs inside of the paralyzed creature’s abdomen.**

**//It is unclear if the incubator dies from exposure, choking, or being eaten alive first.**

“I regret asking.”

“I, well, we can ask the women, but I got vigilance,” Romus explained.

Silence spread across the room and Viv got the distinct impression that the man’s offer was inappropriate. At least, the other villagers’ horrified faces seemed to indicate it.

**//As shocking as the idea of a commoner looking over the sleeping heiress is, I agree.**

**//We must sacrifice propriety for safety.**

**//Romus knows better than to try anything.**

**//Do you not, fleshbag?**

“I would never get out of line with our savior!” The man exclaimed, crimson.

Viv decided that she had a good feeling about the lad.

“Fine by me. We can alternate with Marruk.”

“I need to sleep as well. You’ll need someone to cover your back.”

“Alright then, we have the beginning of a plan. Solfis is night shift, Marruk and I are day shift. The villagers keep the two houses spider-free and safe. We set up a circle and use it as a base to defend against the final assault. Anything else?”

*She-Who-Feasts-On-Squirrels-And-Gets-Much-Gold takes day shift too!*

“Oh yes, thank you.”

*Becomes She-Who-Feasts-On-Spiders.*

“Please gods no.”

*Tasty!*

*Eight times tasty!*

“Oh no.”

*Legs eight times tasty too! Less squishy.*

“OH NO! Seriously, is everyone here eating spiders!?”

Viv felt the room.

“Forget I asked. Enough of this, bring me food and let me sleep.”

Solfis left to hunt by night, which worried Viv. Not that anything could take down the old bastard, but more about energy reserves. Recharging him by hand was time-consuming and extremely inefficient. She could not be expected to fight and do it at the same time, which meant that they were on a timer, kind of.

The villager’s hospitality proved to be much better than Viv expected. The alderman left her his room and gave Marruk a guest bed. A couple of craftsmen came and caulked the windows shut with resin, which gave Viv flammable ideas. The food she got was simple but earthy: freshly made bread that tasted of pine nuts, a porridge with bits of meat and spring greens, and a quarter of fruit in syrup. They also had a herbal infusion that was slightly bitter and reminded her of green tea. It had a calming effect. Eventually, Romus knocked and moved in.

Viv studied him a bit. He was rather handsome in a forrester kind of way, like the second wheel in a B-series romance. She didn’t like much that he was so subdued, with his back stooped and his eyes downcast. She understood where it came from though.

Viv had made sure she was relatively approachable in Kazar, and still people saluted her with reverence. She lived in a feudal society now, one that was not just backed by cultural norms and having food diverted to the nobility but by actual paths on top of it. Even the most hard-working militiaman would struggle to beat a knight to a standstill. Their path diverted the world's magic to survivability while knights were the expensive high-impact profile, she thought. The Enorians seemed to have a true class consciousness. With this in mind, it was no wonder the poor villager felt so out of sorts. He was the gardener standing in the Victorian lady's boudoir. Absolutely scandalous.

"Can I have some water to clean myself or is it too impractical?" She finally asked. They had rationed water so she hadn't bathed properly in three days and it was getting more than a little uncomfortable.

"I can have a bath drawn, milady. We have an underground cistern."

"Would that be fine?"

"Anything for you, milady."

"Then yes. I'd love a bath."

Fuck it, she could die tomorrow eaten alive by spiders. Gotta live a little.

The tall veteran left and returned with an actual tub, property of the alderman, it seemed. Viv was not really surprised. As far as she could tell, Enorians were pretty clean overall. Polite villagers succeeded each other bringing buckets of water and drapes to use as partitions. A few used red mana to heat the bath until it was lukewarm which was fine enough for Viv. The witch disrobed out of sight and the girls took her skinsuit and robe to wash. The bath was cool but blessedly clean, and she felt alive again. Meanwhile, Romus waited on the other side in embarrassed silence.

Now that Viv was clean, safe, and relaxed, she considered her options.

"Are you married, Romus?"

"Yes, milady."

Well that was that. She might have entertained the thought of something if he had been single but she wasn't going to wreck the house. From Romus' sweaty face, it was clear that he was terrified. She decided to deflect before the poor lad got an aneurysm.

"That's good, family is important."

"Yes, milady."

Still sweating. She had to remind herself that he might not be the most receptive to subtexts.

"I'm not going to ask you to do anything for me, if that's what you're afraid of."

"Of course not, milady. I would never think that, that is to say, I would not dare think I am worthy."

The relief was palpable. Viv felt guilty now. Worst thing is, he probably would have tried to pleasure her if she had requested it. She chased that idea away from her thoughts, disgusted at herself for even thinking it. The influence that came with power scared her. It felt too unchecked to her modern mind.

"But I do know how to massage feet, milady. I was taught by a lady from Vizim while I was serving on the wall. If it pleases you!"

Viv glared suspiciously, yet on Romus' face she saw nothing but the scared, guileless expression of a man out of his depth and unsure of how to be helpful.

"Just the feet?"

"That is all I was taught milady. She was an exiled mage, enjoyed having men serve her but she would only lie with women. Strange customs, haha."

"Indeed..."

"She, ah, requested aides. I was one of those she taught. Really strange person but amazingly powerful mage."

"Well, you can tell me about it while you massage me, it sounds like an interesting story."

The veteran looked at his own hands but Viv interrupted him before disaster could ensue.

"Do NOT spit on them, use oil from my bag instead. There. Good. Now what is this about a wall?"

Romus worked on her feet from ankle to toes with a level of expertise a professional spa would have trouble matching. Viv was sure he had a skill. He never hesitated in his gestures, and as he moved, his voice grew more assured.

"It's the northern wall, the most recent of all. Have you heard about it?"

"Varska, that is, my mentor mentioned it but only in passing."

"Helockian? Sorry, not my business. Ahem, yes three walls. The Deadlands one, the Hallurian one, and the Northern wall. So the Deadland walls is mostly the temple and the Hallurian one is manned by Baranese troops, but the last one's the most recent and it's a bit of a mixed bag. Foes are beastling armies and monsters. Folks from everywhere come to man it. My brigade and I were 'volunteered' there in exchange for Maradoc-knows-what. We were assigned this exiled Vizim princess. Must have lost one of their complicated power games. Weird people, those Vizimans. From across the sea. Like you, probably."

“How long did you stay on the wall?”

“Five years. I became a veteran there and met my wife in Glastia, the frontier city. The wall separates the Northern cities plains from both the Kark steppes and the dense forests. No longer the Deadshield woods, you see? Those are warm, wet forests. Can’t breathe properly in there. You step in and you’re soaked.”

Sounded like jungles to Viv. She let Romus patter on, the sound strangely soothing. Once started, the man never stopped. He had seen plenty of beastlings, including shamans climbing the walls with their hordes of followers and monsters. From her perspective, beastling battles had been seen from above and been more of a game of chess. Prioritize the right target, time spells, and everything would be fine. From his perspective though, it was a brutal and merciless business. It stank, it was bloody, and although each beastling was no match for even a recruit, there were so many of them. Add to this that even the shittiest mending potion cost three months wages and every stone throw, every bite could lead to disaster.

“And they scream when they die. It sounds like children, you know? Just like them...”

Viv only heard the cacophony of battle and the roars of mighty spells. It could have been her if circumstances had been slightly different and she had been less gifted with magic. Or perhaps not. Perhaps she would have turned into a revenant within an hour in the ruins of Harrak, puking black blood until her last whisper in that throne room. Cold, naked, and alone.

“One night, we lost the entire outer perimeter in one battle.”

Viv pushed the ‘what ifs’ away from her mind before they could ruin the mood. Once Romus was done, he took position in a corner of the room and watched on. Outside, there were spiders but here it was warm and comfortable. The house smelled vaguely of pine and old wood. Arthur came to cuddle and she fell asleep in a bed for the first time since her flight from Koltis.

The morning brought a hearty breakfast among tired villagers. She had decided to join them and got the honored guest treatment. The children had taken to smushing spiders with great enthusiasm and there was a growing pile of chironous corpses by the entrance, which was kept clear at all times. As soon as she was ready, Viv placed herself firmly in front of the door and pushed.

In vain, the thing was stuck. She watched with horror as white threads blocked the opening. Then, suddenly, the door opened wide with a sound like a torn shirt. Solfis appeared in all his glory. He looked undamaged.

Behind him, the town square was filled with vertical branches stuck in the ground, now bearing at least a dozen severed arachnid heads. Some of the grisly trophies were the size of bowling balls. They still dripped transparent ichor. A neat stack of legs rose to her waist.

Immediately, more tiny spiders crawled in, beaten back by shoe-wielding kids screaming warcries. Viv was too distracted by the rest of the sight, however. From roof to wall then from wall to wells and crates, every piece of wood, every open space, all of it was covered in a dense, white layer of webs so it felt that every inch of village was enshrouded. Not a single spot of color remained besides Solfis' eyes and his victims.

"Oh fuck that. Fuck. That. ARTHUR!"

"Squeel!"

"Please do not burn the village, milady!" Someone yelled behind, but Viv's mind was taken over by the burning fires of purification. The village, nay, the entire forest must be purged of this evil.

Arthur spit the tiniest flame and it made an expanding hole in the cottonous webbing. In fact, it did not stop expanding, like a droplet of oil expanding over a watery surface. Viv found the show aesthetically pleasing. Arthur thought the same because she spat a bit more. Not much, just a few embers to jump start the process. In a matter of seconds, the unholy layer was peeled off to reveal green grass and brown dirt underneath. It was neat.

"Yes, yes, disappear! Haaaahahaha!"

**//Your Grace.**

"Oh sorry, got carried away. What's going on?"

**//You must take over the defense of the base.**

**//Although we cannot hold the village, the spell circle and houses must be kept clear.**

**//I prepared a suitable position.**

"The one surrounded by forest spiders heads?"

**//Precisely.**

**//But there are stragglers that will undoubtedly stop your efforts.**

**//I will enter passive mode to conserve energy.**

**//I will be able to direct your efforts.**

"I'll handle the stragglers," Marruk said as she left in turn, shouldering her flanged mace.

**//Follow my prompts.**

They went to work with the peculiar smell of burning spider nests in the background. Sometimes, the expanding flame revealed a ball of spiders which then proceeded to scramble and disperse. Arthur treated the whole experience like an open buffet, to Viv's unending disgust. It was like that Lion King scene all over again.

Viv did her best to make a circle on the unequal ground. It was made more difficult by the many spiders moving around. Her cloak spell protected her feet and therefore the rest of her, but the vermin went for her hand every time she bent down.

“Would you need help?”

Viv looked up to see Romus and the hunter, looking around with their bows out.

“Well. Maybe? Can you set a fire around the circle to prevent the spiders from coming? Maybe with that resin you mentioned? I need spiders off my back. And do you have anyone who can manipulate earth?”

It only took two minutes for half of the village to come out, everyone dancing to squish the odd spider. The villagers had been unknowns to Viv, barely a parameter she had to take into account. She had seen very little of them, but now they came to help with a level of coordination and motivation she found inspiring. Under the alderman’s direction, men and women flattened the circle of packed earth using basic magic while teenagers rushed from grass tuft to grass tuft, pulling them out with practiced speed. She ended up with a perfect circle so smooth a road roller could not have done better. A circle of flaming resin came after, then again after that, the villagers were digging a trench they intended to fill with embers. Fires were started. The children were keeping an eye out for larger or weirder spiders just in case. Things were moving fast.

Viv was done with the outer shield layer when the unexpected happened. So far, Marruk and Arthur had been going over the village, methodically killing the larger things that had crept in and that the golem had not considered worth the energy expense. Suddenly, Arthur let out a terrified shriek and fell down. Something glued her wings shut. She crashed on the ground with a piteous shriek.

“Oh no you don’t” Viv screamed. Already Marruk had rushed over the captive dragonette who appeared to have no wounds except the one on her pride.

**//We have incoming, Your Grace.**

Viv raced forward. She could hear the heavy thuds announcing the approach of something ponderous, but she was finally free of her constant disgust and fear. It had been replaced by an old and comfortable companion: white hot rage.

## Chapter 92: besieged

Viv’s rage did not evaporate when something heavy smashed through the palissade, but it did take a hit when she saw the culprit.

[Siege Tarantula]

“Holy shit.”

The creature plowing ponderously through the fence was a massive beast with large fluffy legs ringed black and white, and a head apparently designed for ramming into things. Large, chitinous plates covered most of the sturdy body particularly towards the front. Viv charged a few bolts and let out, fully expecting the creature to be followed by a horde, yet it was not the case. The monster had come alone.

The spells landed on the armored plates, pitting them and nothing more. It barely penetrated at all.

It was, by far, the most durable thing she had ever faced.

The spider bore down on Arthur and its objective was made clear. It was here to finish the job. Thin the line. Viv focused and called a massive blast. The ball of energy lifted over her right shoulder, collecting runes as she added them and meaning. She needed to get through. She had to. Arthur was still struggling to free herself though she did have some success. Viv was too slow, too weak to help. Eliminate the threat first. Meanwhile, Marruk was sprinting back with Solfis on her back. At the last moment, she turned and put her shield on the ground.

The large spider was on them. Viv was distracted by the absurd sight of Marruk trying to stop the arachnid equivalent of an elephant on steroids. It was brave. It was stupid. It didn't work very well.

The spider put its face down, stabbed two scythe-like pedipalps into the shield, then lifted. Viv was pretty sure the maneuver could uproot a baobab. Marruk was a solid girl and a powerful combatant, but she was not a baobab. The attack sent her flying in the air. Literally spinning for a few seconds before she crashed into a house out of sight.

“Fuck. Blast!”

The powerful artillery spell hissed through the air. The tarantula did not try to evade. Instead, it rotated on itself and presented a thick black leg.

The artillery spell went through it anyway.

Undaunted, the siege beast started moving back, presenting its armored side and legs to Viv, who was more eager to help Arthur move faster. The dragonette had finally resorted to setting herself on fire. It had burnt through her prison and left her flesh unmarred. The tarantula completed its exit before Viv could launch another spell.

She really had to finish that circle.

More importantly, she had to find her Kark.



“Marruk? Marruk! Are you okay?”

Stupid, stupid. Of course she wasn't fine.

Viv hesitated, but a noise distracted her. The tarantula had left only to return as it created another massive breach in the palissade.

“You fucker!”

Nevermind that. She had to handle that first. Woman and dragonette sprinted forward, Viv spooling up another artillery spell. She stopped by the edge of the perimeter and made ready, but the thunderous noise of trunk-sized legs went away.

Hesitating, she looked through the freshly made hole. The siege tarantula was in full retreat. Immediately, her instinct screamed at her. She raised a shield, but was pushed aside at the last moment instead. Only the lack of danger sense saved the unknown person from an annihilating death. The sound of metal impacting metal silenced Viv's curses.

It was Marruk. Marruk had pushed her aside. She appeared fine.

“How are you still walking?” Viv asked.

“I pathed up!”

“What?”

“I pathed up. I'm fourth step! I'm a Pillar of Kark.”

“Wow that's amazing! But, errr, are we in danger?”

**//The foe has retreated.**

**//For now.**

Viv saw that her valiant bodyguard had two organic-looking daggers embedded in her shield. The nasty things shone an ominous red in the shade of the wood wall.

“What the hell is that?”

**//Fangs of Octas.**

**//Assassination tools.**

**//The Herald can most likely generate them at will.**

**//She was waiting for you outside.**

“Damn, trying to trap me like that?”

**//I estimate that she was hoping you would attempt to finish off the siege tarantula.**

“I estimate that this entire planet should be blasted from orbit for the crime of having ‘siege tarantulas’ among the available species.”

**//Nevertheless, she will make regular attempts on your life.**

“I can protect you better! The Pillar path is quite strong in one-on-one combat. I can face multiple enemies, monster or men! It is a defensive path.”

“Right, fourth step is a huge deal. We should celebrate!”

**//Yes, but later.**

Marruk looked on, crestfallen.

“He’s right. We face destruction. There will be time later. Oh, and we must make mushroom beignets. It’s the tradition.”

“We should ask the villagers.”

“Yes. That would be... nice.”

\*\*\*

Viv returned to circle building, and Marruk, to brooding. Viv had not expected that from the stalwart Kark, but it seemed that hitting this important threshold really depressed her. Viv was pretty sure it had something to do with her past, but when probed, the proud warrior deflected.

“There will be time for talks later. I cannot let my guard down.”

Viv finished her circle and realized that it was considerably more exposed now. However, there was no direct line of sight to the outside and so Solfis decided that it was safe enough for now.

The circle was good and would help her kill siege tarantulas if they returned. Solfis thought fangs might go through, however.

**//A standard circle will take too much energy.**

**//We must remain close.**

**//I think we can no longer patrol while you are exposed.**

“I could go back while you patrol?”

**//That would work.**

**//Make sure that you are surrounded by villagers.**  
**//Octas has a limited amount of control over her lesser servants.**  
**//Red hivers will go for softer targets whenever possible.**

“I’ll make sure to keep the kids on the outer ring then since they’re the least valuable defenders,” Viv joked.

Marruk blanched.

**//I wish you were serious.**  
**//But you fleshbags have some strange affection for creatures you can always make more of.**

“You’ll understand when you become a dad.”

**//I find this scenario unlikely.**

“I was joking Marruk, please don’t cry.”

“Squee.”

“Yes, I am sorry for suggesting putting your followers’ in harm’s way, oh great forest wyrm.”

“Squee.”

\*\*\*

After the child shield incident, the village settled into a routine. Viv would occasionally move to separate houses on supplies-retrieval operations and once to burn a cocoon the herald had prepared for them.

**//The herald sacrificed many spiders to feed one.**  
**//It would have popped out of the house when we have our backs turned.**  
**//We are doing well fighting her off so far.**

Meanwhile, the rest of the villagers kept busy. They decided to fortify the place around the two houses they were holing up, Viv suspected, out of cabin fever.

There was one fatality, an older man who had volunteered to work on the outside was set up by a species they had never seen, one that appeared transparent so its inner organs showed. A few casualties followed, but they had saved a couple of antidotes and no one else died.

Despite the death, an aura of optimism filled the main room that night. Villagers used their mana for lights and prayer, gathering around the shrines of the light gods. The altars were

little more than carved statues, yet Viv felt presence across the room. She stopped before the shrine of Neriad on her way to her quarters.

It felt weird to pray. She had prayed before since her private Catholic school encouraged the practice, but it had always felt silly. Wasteful. It left her cold and awkward. Not here though. She kneeled and prayed. Soon, Romus and Marruk joined her.

Viv did not talk to the god, this time, but she felt the tiniest drain on her mana, then it replenished faster from the day's work. More importantly, she felt warm.

Neriad was there.

Of course, Viv was not following a religious path so she could not just suddenly receive divine powers, but the god of righteous conflict let her know he was paying attention. It helped to remember that they were not forgotten out there in the spidery boonies. Others knew of her plight. They cared, and it mattered.

After she was done, she retired to her room with Marruk for a quiet evening meal. She used her ring to check for poison and found nothing. Romus checked the room for intrusion and found nothing. It appeared to be safe enough. She finally relaxed.

"So, want to talk about it?" Viv asked.

"What?" Marruk replied, more guarded than unusual.

Unfortunately, they didn't have mushrooms for her special dish.

"Today's a big day for you. I wish we could celebrate like you deserve and we will, but I didn't expect you to grow so despondent."

"You and your big words."

"Fine. You're sad."

"Yes, I'm sad."

Viv saw the Kark was getting defensive and decided to drop the whole thing.

"Fine, I didn't mean to pressure you."

"No wait. Wait."

A deep sigh shook Marruk's mighty frame. She deflated under her armor and picked at her porridge.

"A fourth step is named by the tribe. It's a big occasion and a cause for celebrations for everyone. If I were back on the steppes, I would be one of the youngest named fighters in recent history. For the tribe, I mean. It would make my family proud. What's left of it anyway."

Viv remembered that Marruk's mom had been killed by dark blades. The Kark still harbored a deep resentment towards anyone even remotely connected to the Pure League and its expansionist assholes.

"So what's the tradition? Food?"

"Yes, food. Buttery mushroom pastries and root alcohol. I would make a demonstration of my skills once sober and a second time drunk, then tell glorious stories. Guests are supposed to woo and waa with as much passion as they can. In return, one of the stories has to be embarrassing. Usually, everyone woos the hardest there. Even better if there is a scar. One of my uncles showed his ass to the village elders so they could see exactly where the deepgrass snake had bit him. He was a legend. Until he died in battle."

Marruk's good mood evaporated. Viv felt useless.

"We lose too many people too quickly. And I left. I think I made the right choice even now. I could have stayed and then what? Marry another tribe's princeling for three pakars and a sack of flour? Pumped out more kids and see them return on their shields? It's all fucked there. But... But."

"You miss them."

"Yeah."

The red-faced woman looked up and her gaze met Viv's with a singular intensity.

"Make no mistake you're a good warchief, Veev. There isn't a man I have regretted killing under your banner yet, and that's saying something. But you're not Kark. It's not your fault."

"I can understand enjoying the current company and still missing the past one, Marruk."

"Yeah. I guess you really can."

"So I know that I can't replace your family or your childhood friends. That's okay."

"Yeah."

They fell into companionable silence while finishing the meal. Marruk was not done, however. Viv could tell. She was just ruminating on something.

"I wonder what they would do if I returned now, with steel and new ideas on warfare."

"I mean, that's the plan, no? I am trying not to die but once I'm stable, we can go there? Or you could go by yourself. You know enough already."

"It is bad luck to plan for three years in advance with an enemy at the gates. Calls Enttiku's eye upon you."

“I’m sure she’s bored by now.”

Marruk munched on a piece of bread.

“Guess you’re right. I feel like I’m avoiding the question. I’m just scared of returning and being banned the same day. Or everyone is dead. It happens.”

“It won’t. Don’t think like that.”

“Yeah yeah. I’m feeling... better. Thank you.”

“No problem Marruk, Kark Pillar.”

“Hah! Got a nice ring to it. Now I can buy myself a husband and he would have to cook mushroom beignets for me...”

The Kark’s eyes grew dreamy while her skin took a slight blush.

“And massage my back.”

“Do Kark women often buy husbands?”

“No, almost always the contrary. But I am rich in iron. I can do whatever I want.”

Marruk gave a vicious smile. Romus, behind her, was sweating quite heavily. Viv remembered that Enorian education presented women as naturally caregiving and gentle. Apparently, a taste of the real deal was making the veteran uncomfortable. Viviane could only assume his wife did not openly talk about purchasing a masseur. Ah well.

Viv fell asleep quickly and without a bath this time. The day had been tiring between the circle and the constant vigilance. Even the small forays in neighboring homes had taxed her with the cloaky boots and occasional werfer spells. Curiously, she wasn’t terrified of the herald. It just felt like being on the frontline, not facing a literal goddess. Anyway, so far so good, which made it even worse when she was woken up in the middle of the night by Solfis.

“Ngh? What are you doing here?”

**//A siege tarantula is coming.**

**//Energy optimization supersedes your need to sleep.**

“Huh?”

**//I need you to kill it, Your Grace.**

“Huh, sure.”

Endurance +1

That was fine then. Viv put on her armor as fast as she could and went out less than a minute later, thank fuck for finesse and army training. Outside, everything was dark. A cloud cover hid Nyil's moon. Viv had Solfis drag her up to the roof.

**//Not the circle, Your Grace?**

"I want to catch the thing off guard. Do you believe the Herald can detect us?"

**//Unknown.**

Viv grumbled against darkness and whispered a request to Arthur. The dragonette was still a bit miffed about having her wings stuck and had taken to burning nets with gusto. The witch settled to wait there on the straw and mud surface, ignoring the spiders she knew were crawling around. Marruk had to stay down on account of being too heavy.

**//New net detected.**

**//Your Grace, I believe that the Herald is already within the walls.**

"But camouflaged?"

**//Yes.**

**//I can spot her approximate position.**

**//Once close, I should be able to detect her.**

"Alright. We light up and you get her?"

**//Mission parameters accepted.**

"I'll just wait until the siege thing gets close enough."

**//I am ready.**

Slowly, Viv's eyes accustomed to the darkness. It was not a city night, with lamps and lights at regular intervals, no. It was not even wilderness night with the unblemished sea of stars casting their meek radiance upon the earth. It was darker than the inside of a raven's ass. Viv could barely see shapes. A naked clown could have twerked half a meter away from her face and the only way she could have guessed would have been that it smelled funny. Thankfully, siege tarantulas weighed tons and even the greatest care could not completely erase the thuds of beam-sized legs landing on the turf. Somewhere, there was a crack. All sounds stopped.

Viv wasn't sure what had broken but it didn't matter. It took a full minute before the humongous beast started moving again.

Meaning that it was inside.

Slowly, carefully, Viv started to spool mana around her, taking great care to keep her own core under control. She could not afford to let the Herald know of her position.

**//The camouflage the Herald uses goes both ways.**

**//You are doing fine, Your Grace.**

Viv breathed in and out slowly, adding more runes to her artillery spell including a few she had trained for but never used in a combat situation. Time to see if it would work. She was almost done when the thud grew close and another thing broke.

*Fire?*

Viv grabbed the connection and sent a garbled 'wait' to Arthur. She was almost there. Just a 'bind' rune and... there it was.

*Light it up.*

"Squee!"

Fire roared, catching the resin laid in the trenches and starting a ring of flames around the circle she had prepared but not used so far. The angry glow burst out to reveal dark shapes silhouetted against the black of the night. One of them was very, very large.

**//COMMENCING COMBAT OPERATIONS.**

"Aimed blast!" Viv roared.

The spell launched with a hiss, as usual, but this time the pull she had on the projectile was much stronger. It was also much more difficult to control, but not impossible. Mana flooded her conduits and mind in silent encouragement, guiding her. The ball arced over the tarantula's armored head.

"Down."

Viv reinforced the meaning by pulling with everything she had, even gesturing with two fingers for added focus. The spell plunged.

It caught the tarantula in the neck.

Now, the neck itself was decently armored but it was mostly armored front and not up, something Viv had assumed from the fact that the tarantula still managed to move with the equivalent of tank plating glued to its fleshy bits. Magic could only carry monsters so far before Sir Isaac Newton came knocking. Except for dragons. In any case, the artillery did what it was wont to do. There was a crack. There was a ghastly sound of disintegrating



muscles and nerves, and the large beast collapsed on itself, legs twitching horrifyingly with every pulse of dying synapses.

Viv breathed out.

Then she remembered the other shapes. Below her, Marruk was fighting a nimble specimen while villagers shoved arrow after arrow at attackers. Viv had no idea why the fuck they had left the sanctuary of the fortress and it was too late to stop them. She jumped down and used a burst of light provided by Arthur to slay a giant horror before it could plant its fangs in a lean man fighting with two stone hatchets. Suddenly, most of the spiders left to a corner of the city. Had they won?

A rumble shook the ground. Projectiles impacted wood out of sight. Viv had no idea what was going on, but it sounded bad.

Solfis returned as everyone headed back inside.

**//Target lost.**

**//The Herald managed to escape.**

“Wow, that is surprising.”

**//Yes, the Herald expected me.**

**//Scenario analysis would show that she underestimated my combat abilities and response time.**

**//I did wound her and I also killed another siege tarantula.**

**//I also eliminated a number of acid spitters she had positioned across the perimeter.**

**//Unfortunately, this frame is not adapted for our current task.**

**//My energy reserves are currently at 32% as well.**

**//My apologies for this failure.**

“That’s low.”

**//Our enemy cannot assess how long it will take for me to be nonfunctional.**

**//I also assess that the Herald has burnt through a lot of the forest spiders’ nest resources already.**

**//As foreseen, she is impatient.**

Viv nodded, eager to go back to bed. It was good that the Herald was burning through resources instead of letting the humans stew in their own fear.

\*\*\*

The reason why the villagers had left became obvious as soon as she entered the fortified retreat, however. The spiders had breached it. Two families had been slaughtered after one of the outside walls had come down. The corpse of some sort of burrowing beast was stuck

halfway through the wall, head pulverized by a mace impact. With the five men killed in the most recent battle, it brought the number of dead to twenty-four. That was a lot in a village of a hundred and thirty souls. And that was just two days.

Solfis identified that one of tonight's victims was filled with Noxites. Those specific spiders crawled in the ear canals of humans while they slept and planted eggs, resulting in a ghastly death. It was burnt immediately.

A kid had been dragged out sometime during the battle. Twenty-five.

Now, Viv knew that war was hell and that she had, in her time, resorted to some dubious means to stop the Enorian invasion. Some might mention war crimes and The Hague and capital punishment but those people lived on earth so fuck them. She had limits. She had rules. Non combatants were not targets. Prisoners had to be treated humanely. Lastly, no kids. No fucking kids.

Octas was going out of her way to be an absolute piece of shit.

It annoyed Viv.

Unfortunately, her annoyance had no outlet yet. She had to be more patient than the Herald. Force her into attacking too soon.

It was made more difficult at dawn, just as Viv had finally managed to fall asleep again. This time, she was in her armor and going to the door only took a few seconds.

"What is it this time?" she asked.

"Magic, milady." The alderman said.

"Viviaaaaaane."

Most specifically, noise magic from Leria, the newest herald of a goddess known for abhorring civilization and all its trappings. It included speech.

"How was she even selected?"

**//Octas goes through heralds quite quickly.**

**//We are fortunate that this one is rather incapable.**

"Yeah."

**//Because we are incapable ourselves.**

Viv stopped and looked near the door.

"Are you still pissed you did not manage to get her?"

**//Yet.**

**//This operation is not over yet.**

**//I have been delayed before.**

**//But never averted.**

“Alright, alright, let’s see what this is about. Ahem.”

Viv drew a few glyphs and opened the door a little, feeling no danger. Outside, there was only the earth wall of the villager-made fortification

“What do you want, you spider-faced twat vessel?”

Thus did diplomacy start.

“So kind of you to answer. And I was afraid you were snobbing me from your armpit-smelling, lice-infested shitpile.”

**//The villagers do not have lice.**

**//This is propaganda.**

“Oh, good,” Viv whispered, then louder “Did you come here for a reason or is this talk as pointless as your existence?”

“Oh, the little witchling thinks she has a sharp tongue. I always found it funny when the mud-diggers you are protecting bad-mouthed me behind my back, thinking themselves smart. Subtle as a gravid sow, they are. Just like my lying husband. Well, ex-husband I suppose. You know, I was one bitter old woman away from being married to a duke. I’d like to believe that I would have been a good wife, but instead the gods put me down, and down, and down. My path ended in a mud house in the ass end of the Koltisian marches, the shittiest region in all of Enoria. So, I am going to use any means at my disposal to climb back up. I think I will revisit that duchy after all.”

“You’re not in control. Octas is using you.”

“I am still me, little witch.”

“Your god only destroys. Even if you win, you’ll rule over a court of bone and ash.”

“And that’s entirely fine with me. After all, power can be its own reward and I always wanted to... leave a mark on the kingdom. It will just have to be a scar.”

Viv cursed in her mind the foolishness of the woman, and wondered if it was just her being an idiot or a failure of the school system or something. Even the youngest teen on earth got bashed over the head with metaphors and cautionary tales on Faustian bargains they had to refuse. O’Brother. The Devil’s advocate. Aladdin. Well, maybe not the last one. How could people just accept deals from dark gods? It made no sense to her.

Although, to be fair, she was lucky and gifted with magical might.

Well, whatever.

“You are slaughtering innocents in that pursuit. Don’t you have a minimum of decency?”

“You are a gifted mage so you can do what you wish but some of us mundane women have to make do with less savory options. Oh, and yes, thank you for reminding me. I care not about your insufferable bumpkins and their hypocritical masters, but perhaps you do? My servant brought me one of those crotch beastlings they pump out year-in year-out. What’s your name, shitstain? I never bothered to learn.”

A cry sounded through the noise spell and Viv felt a chill crawl down her spine. behind her, a family cried. The mother’s screams were particularly deafening.

Arthur trotted by Viv’s side and squealed. That was... very irritating.

“You’re fucking cheap,” Viv said.

“Just like my master said, why avoid the old methods if they work? You care, I don’t. So I do it. Tewan is the name, good boy. So, I propose this bargain. I will let every last peasant leave if you surrender yourself to me.”

There was silence in the back of the room, but it didn’t last long.

“No,” the alderman said, “don’t. We will not succumb to darkness.”

“Our faith is strong!” Another said.

Mutters came, most of them praying the gods for deliverance. Even the soon-to-be-bereaved mother just yelled please. She didn’t ask for Viv’s death.

Viv would have said no anyway.

But it didn’t make what would follow any less painful.

“No response? Let’s ask Tewan what he thinks about it. Tewan?”

A scream of pain.

“Oops, used too much strength here. Weak paths are so fragile.”

“You know I’ll refuse. If you want to indulge in torture like a fucking degenerate, just do it,” Viv spat.

“Oh, but I will. But I enjoy it more with you knowing you could have stopped it.”

**//It’s a trap, Your Grace.**

“Where is the signal coming from? Can you tell?”

**//Allow me to scout.**

Viv waited the agonizing seconds it took for Solfis to return. The Herald was just going on with her session. Viv thought she had a strong stomach but even she felt disgusted by the display. It was just evil for its own sake.

**//There are no hostiles within the village, Your Grace.**

**//There are, however, seven acid spitters poised to bombard the magic circle.**

**//Acid spit is notoriously good against shield constructs, because it is heavy and adhesive.**

“Can you kill them?”

**//I believe I can kill four by running on top of the barricade, but the rest will fall back inside sticky webs.**

“If you think it’s worth the risk and expenditure, do it.”

**//Acknowledged.**

**//Mission parameters accepted.**

**//COMMENCING COMBAT OPERATIONS.**

Solfis scurried out in his disturbing gait. It proved to be a long wait because of the screams of the dying kid. Fuck.

Viv knew it had worked when the Herald cursed and the cries abruptly cut. Behind her, the mother wailed.

“You little snake. Enough of games. I will find you soon.”

Viv breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that at least the child’s sufferings had ended. It didn’t help the villagers behind her. Solfis’ return was liberating. It meant she could act.

**//The Herald is mobilizing all she has left.**

**//Including her last siege tarantula and the queen of the nest.**

“How bad is it?”

**//The queen can cast spells.**

“Huh.”

**//Rejoice Your Grace, this is our best option.**

“Will you tell me the odds?”

**//Never.**

“Damn.”

Viv made sure she had everything. Marruk and a few of the villagers piled up behind. Viv knew they would be useless but she didn't have the heart to tell them off. Even Ardek's arrow barely slowed down the creatures. Ah well.

“Can we use the circle?”

**//It seems to be the best option despite the presence of acid spitters.**

“I swear it feels like the circle is more a bait than an actual protection at this point.”

**//Baits also have their use.**

**//Speaking of which, I will go directly for the Herald.**

**//After spiders have entered the perimeter.**

**//I will hide near the barricade first.**

“Will you be ok energy-wise?”

**//Yes.**

**//It will be very short.**

“We're ready to go?”

**//Yes.**

“Then let's.”

\*\*\*

In a way, it felt like familiar territory. Run through trenches, keep your head low. Do not give a target. Viv jumped across the clearing on the circle, Marruk offering a protective barrier. Arthur flew low over their head on her quest for more legs. She easily dodged a web and roasted something out of sight. Viv returned her attention to the situation and activated the shield. Acid flew over her head in yellow strands that look disturbingly like actual spit. Viv was about to use annihilation when Arthur swerved and flapped her wings. A wave of gray mana pushed the liquid away. She torched another spitter, then another before diving with a furious roar. When she resurfaced, her claws were white with ichor.

So yeah, Viv had kind of forgotten she had a juvenile dragon.

“Come on, Marruk, can't let the bird do all the work. Blast!”

Viv's concerns were completely dashed when most of the surrounding palissade on the Deadshield side collapsed. Spiders of all sizes crashed in a thick wave against the houses, and walls blocking their way. Dozens of the fat fuckers crawled everywhere. Viv was too angry to be disgusted.

“Ok you shits. Let's dance.”

The witch drew every reserve she had from her dagger and threw spears after nets after blights on everything and anything that approached. The villagers lit fresh resin, creating a circle of flames against the smaller specimens. As for Marruk, she was everywhere. Any time a creature drew too close for comfort, she greeted it with a shield to the face. Despite all their efforts. They were pushed back and the circle under their control kept growing smaller.

“Why won't you just DIE?” A voice screamed from outside the village.

As always, impatient.

A thin, skeletal shape burst out from the webbing near the palissade and moved out. The spiders all stopped and turned their heads, sensing the danger, but it was too late.

Viv smiled.

It was Solfis' time.

\*\*\*

The golem's frame topped the palissade, one sharp claw digging in the tempered wood as if it were sand. The flimsy bone frame immediately captured an ocean of data. Light, temperature, sound, magic, and heat measurements raced through finely engraved runes by mana telemetry, all absorbed by the powerful processing machine that was its core.

The artificial mind that made up most of Solfis analyzed and dealt with all of it at a speed that no humans could match, several processes working in parallel to make sense of the ocean of data available. Solfis saw all, it knew all in that brief instant when it was still falling onto the battlefield. It recognized seventeen major hostiles. It calculated the probable trajectories, altered its projected path and calculated again in a recursive loop. It assessed the terrain and adjusted the plan based on hidden webs, slippery rocks, and future corpses. Solfis was limited by its medium, the shoddily made bone frame, but hidden in the golden core was the immortal defender of Harrak. A thousand scenarios were picked and dismissed in favor of better ones until only the best possible path remained. Solfis would move to Octas' puppet,

then kill it. The Herald was but one creature in the long list of foolish meatbags that thought themselves unbeatable.

Now, it had arrived.

**//PRIMARY TARGET ACQUIRED**  
**//OVERDRIVE MODE ENGAGED**  
**//COMMENCING COMBAT OPERATIONS**

Unnecessary processes shut down to prioritize battle efficiency. Solfis hit the ground and pushed at a perfect angle. It sprinted forward, body almost horizontal. Now that new information merely trickled in compared to the previous burst, the artificial soul at the bottom of the pit embraced the only constant in its existence since the fall of Harrak.

The pleasure that came with carnage.

It let go.

Solfis skipped at a perfect distance, its next step carrying a leg claw through the closest spider's cerebellum. In one graceful rotation, it planted its other leg in the ground and pivoted, sending the twitching carcass into another hostile's legs. The pivot ended in a small skip to another spider's skull. The fragile thing crumpled under the claw with a pleasant squelsh. Solfis reveled in it. The golem understood the dance of death with the composed appreciation of the true aesthete. It dove under five coordinated silk throws. It dodged left, letting another spider shield it from the herald's next red spike. It used the victim as a springboard. The spider died and Solfis was aloft in the air, in compact form. Another spike missed its shoulder by a breath, just as predicted. An optimal maneuver. The optimal maneuver.

Perfection in motion.

'Energy levels dropping.'

One second.

The golem absorbed more data, refining its choices and making the most minute adjustments. It landed foot first on the last siege tarantula's head. It sprinted along its back and raked a claw through the chitinous armor, cleaving the beast in two. It was close to the queen now, very close. The creature opened its wide maw. A ball of silk formed over it. Natural casting.

The Herald glared at Solfis. Three spikes were ready. Their plan was simple, yet efficient. Octas always went for those. Octas was practical. She was also single-minded where Solfis was many-minded. The golem perceived the buildup of black mana behind it, and it trusted the heir to aim true, to outperform her weaker fleshbag kin. The golem sprinted forward, then jumped through the web of invisible silk protecting the two foes, twisting and twirling. Impossible acrobatics through the eye of a needle.



The herald smiled. The only way to defeat one such as Solfis was to close every path, because if one was still open, the golem would find it. There was no escaping the silk. If it launched. Lost in its glee, the demigod failed to recognize the incoming danger.

A dark mana bolt hissed through the air, then through layers upon layers of mana-charged webbing. The heir's artillery spell was as aggressive and decisive as she was. A piece of the void tore contemptuously through the herald's hastily raised shields like a javelin through wet paper. All of Solfis' receptors screamed that its current body could not absorb it, that it would rend its hastily drawn defenses, but it did not fear. Solfis cared only for the meaning infused within. The desire to protect it, a golem. A desire to win. The destructive message spoke to it on a fundamental level. With a last spin, Solfis landed in front of the herald just as the bolt landed in the queen's face, left side, in its largest eye. It pierced through the head with a hiss and a terrible finality. The large creature tilted forward, dead before it could hit the ground.

Solfis jumped on the herald.

Two seconds

The representative of Octas burnt with mana, its power multiplying at an alarming rate. The body whined and creaked under the onslaught and the mind that used to be Leria broke, her soul torn apart by the cataclysmic power flooding her tainted flesh. Muscle bubbled and ripped. Long black legs erupted from its back and flew forward, still foaming with transparent ichor. Solfis grabbed and pulled and twisted mid-air once again. One of them cracked his leg, another, his torso. Damage was unavoidable, but so was Solfis. Its claws reached for the unholy ball of chitinous cancer where the brain ought to be. For all her powers, Octas was still bound by form.

Two deceptively human arms locked on his own with divine speed. The horrid bulb looked up and the golem stared into the black, multifaceted orbs of a goddess.

'damage detected'

*CAUGHT.*

The creature communicated in the language of the dragons. Concepts only, no sounds. Efficient.

**//Am I?**

*YOU*

*RECOGNIZE*

*LOST ENTITY*

*REMNANT*

**//So are you.**

Solfis pulled its head back and headbutted the goddess' vessel.

There was a crack, a high-pitched scream of suffering. The golem pushed its arms forward and grabbed the herald's shoulder between the chitinous joints. Its target only realized the danger too late.

Solfis pulled. It tore the arms off the demigod.

It felt fantastic.

Claws free. Swipe. Head torn off. Vile liquid burst up in a geyser. The distended body spasmed, innumerable legs contracting with so many clicks. It fell forward with the ponderous weight of a shipwreck. Solfis dropped elegantly down, landing on a single claw, flawless from beginning to finish.

**//PRIMARY TARGET TERMINATED.**

**//ENDING COMBAT OPERATIONS.**

Three seconds.

'Energy levels critical'

'Emergency shutdown recommended'

'Retrieval team notified'

Solfis ignored the prompts. It was an old code, an obsolete thing it could not quite erase. Times had changed. She had found it. She needed it to thrive. It would return. It did so now, ignoring the last fleeing forest spiders now free of the dark goddess' influence.

Behind him, the heiress dropped from the palissade, falling with a curse after sticking both feet on netting. It did little to stop the angry joy filling her soul.

"Woo! Prenez ça! Woo. That's right, run away you eight-legged freaks! Yeah! Yeaaaaaaah!"

"Squee!"

**//Mission accomplished, Your Grace.**

"Amazing work as always."

"We have won!" The primitive militiaman yelled. "Oh thank you, thank you!"

Solfis ran calculations on its remaining options, now that its energy was almost depleted. It did not like its chances. It calculated the likelihood of a charging station while the mostly useless fleshbags honored and flattered the heiress. At least, they realized her worth and status.

"We will throw a great feast!"

A ping alerted Solfis of the woman's intense reaction. Her eyes widened slightly. Solfis knew she had reached a natural conclusion as to the nature of the food that would be offered.

"How soon can we leave?" She asked.

Octas was but a footstep in the heiress' path, as it should be. Solfis' calculations seldom worked when it came to her fate, but there were two things he was absolutely confident about. One, she would survive to bring the new Harrak to glory. Two... she would unlock that genocidal maniac skill yet.

It would just take more 'spiders'.

**//Soon, Your Grace.**

**//Very soon.**

## Chapter 93 What goes around.

Viv expected much from the aftermath of the Herald's death, most of it bad. The village had lost almost one person in five. It was a tragedy, one that should logically lead people to be dicks and blame her for not doing more. It did not happen, however. In fact, the villagers were abjectly grateful and treated her like a complete hero. She was blessed in the name of every god and called a champion of good and civilization.

It felt nice.

The villagers did not stop to grieve. While a few burly men built a pyre for the deceased, the rest of them dedicated their efforts towards harvesting spider parts and conserving them. Between Viv, Solfis, Arthur and Marruk, the group had made enough meat to last the village through winter. The air was thick with wood smoke and grilled... seafood.

Viv had sort of given up on horror after watching Ardek, the remaining hunter, dismantling a carcass. She was beyond that. As expected, the creature didn't share the biology of its earthen counterpart. It had lungs. And a large brain. It was weird as hell, because the outside was similar but the innards were completely different. It asked some metaphysical question Viv had no answer for.

The interesting part were the leg muscles. The corded, pale flesh reminded her a bit of crab and she was kind of missing it, so she finally decided to give in and requested spider to be prepared for her. The villagers were absolutely delighted to oblige. They made a feast out of it and gave her perfectly seared skewers with fresh vegetables and the juice of something lemony.

It was absolutely delicious.

Viv decided that after all that bullshit, eating your dead opponent was an acceptable form of revenge after all and realized she was missing white wine terribly. And mayonnaise. In the afternoon, with a table placed in the middle of the field and Arthur kept entertained by the village's small children, Viv placed her back against her rustic chair and finally relaxed.

Viv gave herself two days before leaving. One reason was that she was tired from over a month on the road. It was not just physical fatigue. She was fed up with traveling every day through forest, forest, and more forest. Also trees. Occasionally meadows and copses. Fed up, really. The second reason was that Ardek directed the food preservation efforts as someone whose path dealt with being scrappy and efficient. He was the star of the show and his insights would make a huge difference.

They had a nice ceremony on the first evening to spread the ashes of those who had fallen as victims to Octas and her machinations. The alderman named Kordek among the first victims of his deranged wife

Her patience (it was patience and totally not laziness) was rewarded on the second day when the villagers brought her sauteed queen face muscles in vinegar sauce and a large core attuned to brown and life mana, with just a bit of dark. Honestly, it was hard to say which one pleased her more. They were both magically active.

"Can we use this to refill your energy?" Viv asked Solfis while rubbing Arthur's belly. The dragonette was gorging from dawn to dusk and Viv thought she had even grown a little bit.

**//Yes, Your Grace, but it would require time and effort to readjust my frame.**

**//On a related note, you could not recharge this specific core efficiently.**

**//Because its attunement to black mana is very low.**

That was one thing she had not considered. The core on her dagger was black attuned and so she could charge it without issue. Solfis' core used to belong to a dragon and was apparently attuned to every form of mana. The queen's core could only be recharged with transparent mana, and that was extremely inefficient. She would be stuck with manually recharging Solfis for a while and hope they didn't come across anything too problematic, because he had less than a minute of autonomy at normal power and that wouldn't get them very far.

Finally, it was time to leave. Viv regretted that she would not get the full culinary experience of oven spider, sauteed spider, spider skewers, roasted spider and crispy spider, but duty called. Or to be precise, she wanted to get to fucking Helock. The villagers sent her off with prayers and demonstrations of affection but even the most naive earthling would have realized that they were glad to see the back of her so they could fully focus on rebuilding the village. As promised, Ardek guided them.

Viv still got spider sandwiches with a leafy green that tasted a bit like garden cress. Quite nice.

The group left north east, towards lake Hydon where they could take a ship. At first, they avoided the few isolated villages on the way, but Ardek convinced Viv to go to the nearest town for supplies after a week of travel.

“We will get fresh food and I can get information on what is happening locally. Moving with you is not like moving alone. We are slower and we are out of rations.”

“What do you usually do alone?”

“I forage for food. You three just eat so much. Just your Arthur can eat three harriens per day! Per day! We will run out long before reaching the lake.”

Viv debated going with him, but she was still wanted. Revealing herself just before boarding the ship was one thing. Letting every bounty hunter know of her approximate location while she had no way to move fast was another. As for Ardek committing an indiscretion, he had sworn an oath not to reveal her presence so she wasn't too worried.

The town itself was called Lesso, and they stopped in a prairie not far from its walls. Viv relaxed there while the hunter purchased what they had to get. He returned laden with provisions and significantly more relaxed.

“The posters are still up, milady. They're pretty good!”

“Yes,” Viv glowered, “I noticed.”

Spring was slowly progressing. Every tree was in bloom, which made their trip rather pleasant. Whatever fucked up deity had created this world had not included magical mosquitoes or perhaps they were not endemic to this region. In any case, things were pleasant enough while they moved through smaller paths and secondary roads. Ardek still had them give most villages a wild berth, since the bounty hunters were looking for a witch, a Kark, and a 'drake'.

“I am not sorry for being me!” Marruk grumbled one evening after looking constipated for an hour. Viv had been wondering what was wrong with her.

“If you were not here, they would still be looking for a witch and a drake,” Viv replied.

“Yes. Yeah! I'm not making it worse,” the proud Kark told herself.

Ardek interrupted them, then.

“We should stop here for tonight, this is a good spot.”

Viv saw a small brook where they could wash, and there were trees blocking the sight. The forest was growing thinner and cultivated land more common the farther they went. They currently stood on a slope that extended for at least a kilometer, leading to a small town. Light was falling and a few torches already shone in the distance.

“This is Seldon-upon-Tane. From here on, it’s full north all the way to Losserec, the capital city. We are east compared to the path I’d normally take but don’t worry, I can find our way.”

That didn’t fill Viv with confidence. The scrappy youth was unfazed by her clear display.

“What I don’t know, I can ask.”

Viv shrugged and busied herself setting camp and loading Solfis. The golem had been on low consumption mode ever since the battle. Even with Viv working on him every night, he was still very low on reserves. The issue here was that she didn’t have a charging station he could use, and just pushing mana manually was a slow and inefficient process. Marruk soon called to say that food was ready. Viv helped herself to a bowl of porridge and hoped they’d get something less boring next town over. She got a spoonful in when a bright light shone near her hand.

“What the fuck?”

A sleepy Marruk just gawped at the source of light on Viv’s finger. Viv’s danger sense was still silent. It took her almost a second to realize what was going on. She stood up in a rush and fell forward, head swimming.

**//The antidote, Your Grace.**

“Fuck. Poison. POISON!”

Fortunately, she was still prepared from the spider days and grabbed a phial from a pocket on her chest. She downed it and felt immediately more alert. The spoon fell from Marruk’s hand. The mighty woman tilted forward.

“Dammit. Ardek! Ardek?”

Only now did she realize that the boy had disappeared. Panic flooded her system, waking her up. Her heart beat frantically. She jumped on the Kark woman and forced an antidote dose between her red lips.

“Come on come on come on.”

Marruk reflexively gulped it down and blinked.

“Whu?”

“No time. Take Solfis, we gotta run. What the hell?”

Just then a flare took off from a nearby thicket. Viv turned her head quickly enough to see Ardek’s illuminated face. He looked awfully calm. It pissed Viv off.

She sent a net his way and was rewarded by a scream of pain. Fuck that guy.

“We got to run. Now!”

Arthur was out hunting so there would be no help there. Marruk stumbled but managed to grab Solfis and strap him to her back. They moved, leaving most of their belongings behind. Viv barely took the time to grab her pack, minus the tent. Around them, torches were lit in the distance. Viv’s sight was still blurry as the general-purpose antidote fought what must be a powerful sedative. There seemed to be a lot of them. She might have gone so far as saying a metric fuckton of them. Had to be the drug. Same with the voices. So many of them. And horns.

“That doesn’t feel like bounty hunters.”

“Whu?”

“You keep going Marruk, you’re doing amazing.”

“Oh.”

The mighty Kark was drooling, running up the slope with somewhat hesitant steps. There were torches in front of them now. Viv had a quick look around. There were torches everywhere. An illusion, maybe.

“We need options,” she said in Harrakan.

**//There is a gap there with fewer torches.**

**//By that cliff.**

Yes. The terrain was difficult here and there was a small elevation higher up. That could help. Viv ran more. She heard cries of alarm. She spotted men in uniform far to her right, shining brightly under the radiance of magical light. They wore armor. They were not moving, just standing there watching the darkness with apprehension. Then they were gone, hidden behind a fold of the land. She kept going.

Pretty sure they had been wearing loyalist uniforms. They were the right shade of blue. Inside her addled brain, panic bubbled to the surface and she ran faster. A scout spotted her on the left next. He whistled but didn’t approach.

A moment later, something stabbed her in the arm. Danger sense warned her, but it felt muted somehow and she was too slow to react.

“Arg, MERDE.”

Wait no, not stabbed. But hurt. Pain lanced her with every step she took. Something clattered on the ground, an arrow with a round head.

“Easy peasy...”

A hastily put up shield blocked a second arrow. She could not stop running.

“... sneaky cloaky.”

The next projectile hit her leg but disappeared with a hiss. She grabbed her wounded arm to prevent it from dangling around. Fucking broken, no doubt.

**//Your Grace, they are trying to capture you.**

“I noticed!”

**//I mean that they will not use lethal force.**

**//Do not hesitate to exploit it.**

Viv’s mind tried to process what the golem had said, understand it so she could use it, but the persistent poison clouded her mind. It was so hard to focus despite her high focus. She suspected that only this allowed her to function while Marruk coped on endurance alone. She was a one-eyed idiot guiding a blind person. And Solfis had almost no battery.

They were so fucked.

No, she had to persevere. Find an out. The cliff came closer. For some strange reason and although they were surrounded, no one came to her. The few soldiers who spotted her just whistled and signaled, but they never approached. Speaking of which...

[Enorian Infantryman]

The inspection skill returned a vague impression of southern force, but she could not pay it much attention. More blunt arrows hit her armor, disintegrating on contact. They hit her legs, arms, chest, testing for weakness. An arrow at the back of the knee made her stumble. Another hit her wounded arm, eliciting a hiss of pain. All the while, Viv was fighting down terror. They reached the base of the cliff and angled right into a small ravine. The cries behind her had gone closer. She could swear she could hear horses.

**//Your Grace.**

**//There is a spellcaster ahead we should go to.**

“Fuck.”

**//Your Grace, I apologize for not seeing through the deception.**

**//I considered Ardek’s oath breaking unlikely.**

**//Right now, we should consider... alternative options.**

Viv refused to accept that. No capture. No letting others decide for her. She had killed a fucking prince. They wouldn’t be nice about it. She had always told herself back in Afghanistan, that if she ever was at risk of being captured, she would blow her head off. This didn’t feel much better.



The ravine was not empty, there were torches far, far ahead. In front of her. Near the exit. And in front of that, there was a familiar figure.

“Aspect of fire. Firewall.”

A crimson circle lit under Eteia’s feet. Flaming columns ignited at the mage’s back, blocking the path. The heat was so intense that Viv had to turn her head, letting the heat disperse on her mana coating. Marruk slipped to a halt.

Eteia was clad in her own armor, with a shimmering of light that indicated that a shield was already in place. It kind of stung to be trapped in return after trapping the woman so thoroughly.

But Eteia was not gloating. In fact, she looked more distressed than anything. Her mouth was half open and her eyes searched the shadows of the night behind Viv’s back. The witch’s mind went into overdrive, perception of time slowing.

She was done for. It was obvious now. She never had a chance. Whoever wanted to trap her had been very, very thorough. Illogically so. She suspected that it was... what was his name again? Constable Tarano, current head of the loyalist faction. And she knew why Solfis had guided her here instead of to another doomed passage.

Eteia was still under oath not to hurt Viv personally, an apparent oversight on the part of her attackers. It meant that there was a brief window where Viv could ask questions and plant the seeds of a future escape.

“Why do they want me alive?” she asked in a rush.

The mage was eager to talk. Perhaps she was worried about Neriad smiting her on the spot, but Viv thought there might be more to it.

“Not to execute you. I think Tarano wants your research. I don’t know anything more.”

Sympathy. Fear. Conspiratorial tone. Guilt. Viv filed all of this and came to a conclusion. She had to give herself a breathing space, and she had to do it fast. Intimidation would not serve a purpose here, so she shelved it. Eteia would not be bluffed and she most definitely had high focus. Better to try and sway her.

“Let them go and I will surrender peacefully,” Viv proposed.

It was more a test of character than a real negotiation. Viv didn’t have a leg to stand on, and Eteia knew it as well. The mage could just step to the side and let Viv get stopped by the next group. Thankfully, it worked. The mage nodded to the side.

“They can try to climb.”

**//Your Grace, it could work.**

“Then do it.”

Solfis whispered to Marruk. The Kark went to the base of the shear wall and got lifted by a pair of bony arms until they disappeared. Viv heard a few arrows clatter against the stone but she could no longer see anything.

That was it then.

“So... how do we do this?” she asked, keeping her voice under control.

“I have silverite manacles. Put them on.”

Eteia removed a pair of shackles from a bag at her back and looked like she would hand them to Viv, but a glance to the side dissuaded her. She tossed the things towards Viv who inspected them summarily. They were simple circles covered in runes, with a basic steel chain that could be attached to immobilize her. She deactivated her cloak then put them on with a grimace. It was a necessity in those circumstances, but she hated it anyway.

At first, she didn't feel any different. Mana was still there and she could still move it through her conduits. Her core felt normal as well.

“It will inflict pain if you try to draw glyphs or if you let mana spill out of the limits of your body. Don't try it, because it really hurts,” Eteia whispered.

“Speaking from experience?”

“Yes. I wore those when I was debriefed.”

Eteia winced. Viv got the impression that the defeated mage's return had been unpleasant. She was probably on thin ice.

“It's going to be unpleasant and humiliating but you must stay in control of yourself, got it?” Eteia finally said urgently. Then the mage's face turned as cold and rigid as a statue and Viv knew they were no longer alone.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself of the basic rules. If captured, she had to try to escape as soon as possible. That was fucked because they wanted her personally. Trust no one, that was also hard because she wanted to try to work through Eteia. The rest was doable. Keep faith in herself and the others, stay calm, shut the fuck up unless she really couldn't. Escape as soon as possible. Resist whenever possible.

Viv turned to face the newcomers. Inspect was still working at least.

A group was walking towards her under the powerful glow of magic lights, one that was absolutely massive. There were men in elaborate plate armors that bore the title of [Knight Captain] or [Baron], grim and powerful. [Court mages] and [Warmages] in fancy robes that resembled her own like a Chanel cardigan resembled a hoodie glared at her and at Eteia with mighty frowns. They were all men. In truth, the only women were a pair of [Bishops] of

Enttiku and Maranor, respectively. They didn't look friendlier than the rest. The man at their head strode with confidence and what Viv felt was an unreasonable amount of vindication. She took solace in the fact that the gold of his armor failed to dispel the dark bags under his eyes. At least she had made things hard for them.

Which was arguably going to come back to bite her in the ass now.

Also that was a fucking parade just to get her.

The VIP room stopped only a few steps away, with the mages loading so much mana Viv felt dizzy. Maybe anticipating some last minute lash out or something, instead of paying attention to her wrists. The amount of enchanted gears on those fuckers could buy the entirety of New Harrak seven times over with enough to spare for a blowjob at the Spotted Feather. Viv was a little intimidated by so much bling. Her confusion also only increased as the lead dude said nothing. He was just staring at her with a strange mix of rage and relief.

[Constable, extremely dangerous, one who pursues the double path of regency and arcane swordsmanship. Competent caster, deadly duelist, Men bane. Leader. Administrator...]

The list went on. It was not quite as impressive as Solfis but to her, it was enough. The man was on the sixth step. The sixth. She was still small fry despite her efforts. Only Irao could match this guy. He was a tall lad with gray hair cut short and a handsome face with a strong chin upon which was a scar. He had some stubble that gave him a roguish edge, and deep-set dark eyes. Viv got George Clooney vibes except she had never seen the actor play a cold-blooded killer and that was what she got as well. He had blood on his hands, and given the huge double-handed sword on his back, she didn't wonder how he delivered it.

As for the rest of them, they were doing their very best to murder her with their eyes.

"You are a difficult woman to find, Viviane of Harrak."

She did not reply. It was a show now, one meant for the soldiers gluing around them like flies on spilled blood. Had to remind herself to let the twat have his moment and to exert patience. Her time would come.

"I am Constable Tarano, ruling in lieu of His Royal Highness Kule, First Prince of Enoria and our rightful ruler. You are my prisoner. As you have surmised."

He took a few steps forward and Viv felt the weight of his aura upon her. Red, life, grey. He was powerful. Not a pure caster but probably able to stop magic and close the gap. It didn't matter anyway. With three steps of difference, he could probably sneeze and kill her. He was also one of the few men who really, really towered above her head which pissed her off. She hated feeling small. Calm, ok, calm. Stay in control.

Because Tarano was not.

The Constable closed his fists and the armor creaked under the strength in his fingers. Viv waited.

Suddenly, she was up in the air. Pain blossomed in her belly. It was sharp and cold and blinding. She landed painfully on her knees and hands, unable to move so much as a finger. The agony in her arm redoubled. She retched acidic water. Fucker had punched her, she could tell from his still raised fist. Felt like she's been hit by a dump truck.

Grabbed by the collar and lifted. Couldn't breathe properly. Oh that man was livid alright, absolutely mad with her.

"I. Raised. Lancer. Like my son."

Well fucking good job you did then, you wanker, Viv thought in her heart. Something must have shown on her face because Tarano's lips quivered with rage and his eyes were bloodshot to all hell. He was breathing fast, bearing his teeth like a wolf.

It took a couple of seconds for a man who ought to have willpower in the sixth tier to chill out.

"Fortunately for you, I need you alive. So, you will stay alive."

Viv's world went up and down. She was flying through the air. This time, she expected something like that and managed to roll into a ball before smashing against the cliff wall.

Pain.

Pain.

Viv forced air into her lungs. Entire right side was going to be black and blue tomorrow. At least she had not tried to cast. Left arm was broken for sure. Yep, definitely broken. She bit back a moan of pain and focused on happy thoughts. She was not alone. She was not alone, ever. Just had to catch her breath for a while.

Tarano gave a few orders and the silly committee dispersed, leaving her still surrounded by elite soldiers. Before he could do more, he got distracted from her presence when a pair of soldiers and a priest in a golden robe brought Ardek forward. She had nailed him in the flank, quite deeply it seemed. He was still surprisingly calm.

"Please save me," the little asshole stated.

"He doesn't respond to mundane or divine healing, Excellency," the priest said. "The grounding potion deadens the pain and his emotions for now, but the prognostic is grim."

So that's how the fucker had remained calm and fooled both her and Solfis. A grounding potion? She could use a drop or two right the fuck now.

"A curse, I assume?" Tarano asked.

"Most likely, yes."

"I thought you had removed the curse. You lied to me?" Ardek asked.

"The archpriest of Maranor in Lesso died bearing your sin, boy, someone who was worth infinitely more than you. We did not cheat you, this cost us dearly, but Enttiku is an old crone and she always gets her due. Always. And she can be petty when she wants, as you have just learned. We will give you time to accept your fate and rest assured that your share of the bounty will be sent to your next of kin."

Ardek gasped and moved a bit. Thick red blood dripped from his weeping wound. It felt strange seeing such a thin body sliced open. Reminded her a bit of a village near Kandahar, back on earth.

Tarano waved his hands, dismissing the dying hunter from the vicinity without care. He walked leisurely and knelt next to Viv who decided she had no particular reason to test how many of her bones were broken by moving, pain tolerance skill or not.

"Just as vindictive as I was told. How old was he? Thirteen? Fourteen?"

Old enough to know, Viv thought. She harbored no illusion that oaths to the gods got broken on occasion, but that one was supposed to kill Ardek before he could spill. How the little twat managed, she wasn't sure. She just knew that someone had died for the information to be given. In any case, it must have taken a clear plan on the part of the hunter, meaning he intended to backstab Viv from the start. That kind of hurt.

Wait a minute, Ardek was old enough to be a soldier here, meaning that Tarano had ordered many people of his age to their death. Maybe he had killed some himself. He was trying to get a rise out of her, perhaps?

"I like silence in a woman. I think we can work together after all. We will talk later. Naden, Lotae, I leave her to you. And Kordok."

And so the constable left her with the two priestesses and one of the tallest dudes she had ever seen since coming here. That was fine. She inspected her captors.

[Priestess of Enttiku]

This one wore the black robes of the goddess of death, or god maybe? The Paramese seemed uncertain of the divinity's gender. There were a few subdued colors on her dusty garment, which Viv assumed meant she was a bigwig or at least a middlewig. She was mature and beautiful with a darker skin and curly hair that hinted at a partially northern ancestry. She didn't look too pleased to be here. By comparison, the other was pale and thin, sharp, with cold eyes and a mighty scowl. Clearly not sympathetic to her plight.

[Priestess of Maranor]

Maranor again. Viv felt like she had never met the bitch and yet they were already enemies for life or something. Her and her fucking fan club.

The last one was problematic. Very problematic. He was inspecting Viv with a level of attention that bordered on the maniacal, which was bad. What was worse was that he was the tallest man Viv had ever seen with the dry muscles of the martial artist under form-fitting mail. A truncheon hung from one waist and a sword from the other. He was bald and rather ugly, but clean. As Viv watched, he stepped towards her.

[Royal Jailor: a path dedicated to containing and taking care of captives. Attentive. Decent melee combatant...]

They were leaving nothing to chance, huh? Just as she thought that, the man took a step forward and pointed at her.

“You are my prisoner, now, and until my superior sees it fit to change that.”

Mana shifted and took hold around the man. Something stuck to Viv’s soul, not exactly unpleasant but there. Immediately, the jailor bent and delicately removed the knife from Viv’s belt. He also took her backpack.

“Compliance leads to peace; resistance leads to pain. Please follow me.”

There was a time to resist and this wasn’t now. She moved down the valley surrounded by at least fifty soldiers and a couple of mages. Viv was at the center of a very large formation, she realized from the surrounding torches. There was actual mounted cavalry at the edge as well. The voice of Constable Tanaro soon broke the oppressive silence.

“What do you mean, you let them go?”

He was walking in front of her with the rest of the rich old men. Eteia stood on one side, the gesture designed to isolate her.

“My priority was to capture the witch, which I did.”

“And you could not stop a drugged Kark warrior?”

“As I said, my priority was to secure a dangerous caster alive. The good question would be how she managed to slip past trained scouts and elite archers.”

“They are not being judged now, you are.”

“That’s a problem now, isn’t it?”

The grizzled luggages hissed and spat insults and reminders but Eteia was unfazed. Viv guessed it wasn’t the first time it had happened. That was good information to have.

“You will watch your tongue, woman. Your status here remains... uncertain.”

“So it is. Was there anything else you wanted to address concerning my capture?” she replied in a frigid tone.

“You are no longer needed for tonight. Dismissed,” Tarano finished, and the red mage strode out in a huff while his sycophants mumbled about disrespect.

Viv noticed that the exchange had been quite public and wondered what the soldiers were thinking. She took a quick look around and realized that everyone was looking at her. The reactions ranged from hatred to terror to morbid curiosity. It was quite flattering in a way. Happily for her, none of those who met her eyes made any rude or suggestive gestures. They really took her for the antichrist or something.

It took half an hour to end in a camp, and Viv realized a few things as they moved to more open grounds. First, her escort was made of actual thousands of soldiers, their presence fire snakes moving in the distance. Second, it was only a portion of what was left in the camp, hidden from sight near the city she had spotted as they made camp.

It appeared that, in order to capture her, Tarano had brought the whole loyalist army.

Or what was left of it anyway.

That made no sense at all. It was just too stupid to contemplate, not to mention that someone gathering an expedition against her would remember that Eteia was under oath not to harm her. There had to be another reason. She tried to find it as she moved forward past wooden fortifications and among the lined up tents, but could not think of one. Besides, the poison was still not fully out of her system and she hurt everywhere. It wasn't fun.

She was stopped near a cage wagon, a genuine steel bar animal containment box on wheels drawn by a duo of oxens. The trio in charge of her well-being had her walk in a tent, though only the two priestesses followed. They didn't seem worried, which Viv took as one more reason not to attempt to take them hostage while surrounded by a division's worth of hostile soldiers.

“Are you hurt anywhere? I saw him toss you, you must be in some pain,” the priestess of Enttiku said with what appeared to be sympathy. The other frowned. Viv wanted to show her arm but she considered that a priestess with healing abilities would not need her to speak to detect what was wrong.

“We are not to heal the prisoner unless her life is in danger,” the other reminded with a detached tone.

The priestess of Enttiku sighed heavily, then sighed harder when Viv did not reply. She still lightly put a finger on Viv's ungloved hand. A moment later, Viv felt something shift in her arm and the pain lessened. The rest of her still hurt though.

Viv calculated her chance of convincing the priestess of Enttiku to help and decided they were zero. Enemy interrogators would get her through fear, naivete, overconfidence, or, in the case of nurses, sympathy. Anything she said would be used to make her comply for sure. The best policy was to shut the fuck up unless compelled to do otherwise, like with a knife at her throat.

“The prisoner will disrobe,” the other woman said.

“Let me close the flap first, Lotae,” the first said.

That made the good cop Neren and the glacial tart Lotae.

She did so and Viv was handed a shift. It sucked to lose her skinsuit and Varska’s robe but there wasn’t much she could do at this stage. She was left with rather conservative prisoner pants and top that covered much and felt warm. As expected, she was already bruising though. Once they were done, she was put in the cage and given some water by a taciturn Kordok, the jailor. The army moved out at dawn.

They walked for the entire day, barely stopping at noon. The loyalist army progressed as a column in full armor, which was something she supposed was possible with magical enhancements. There was a large baggage train as well that trailed behind her with a cloud of dust. As for her, she was right next to the rich, armored wagons like the one Lancer had used. Some of them were even more bling bling than his had been. She had seen less gold paint on some baroque salons. It hurt the eyes.

With nothing much to do, Viv focused on circulating her mana and ignoring the pain in her side. She wondered what the hell this was all about and progressively came to a conclusion. Some of the reasons for the presence of the army, she couldn’t know. At least for now. What she figured out was what had meant by ‘they wanted her research’, an hypothesis she grew more confident in when she saw the main carriage and its emblem.

She also figured out that the loyalist army would have no supply problems because they pillaged and burnt down any village they came across.

Kordok was being surprisingly decent. He made sure she had some hot food, one cover, and he had her go out and walk around and visit the privies on the few occasions when the army stopped. There was one time when Viv thought she heard a familiar ‘squee’ from above and hope filled her chest. It made Kordok instantly approach the cage and inspect her thoroughly. It seemed like he was keyed to her emotions and that was going to be a pain in her ass.

Viv got confirmation that night when the quiet jailor dragged her to the largest armored wagon. She was shoved in and found herself in a richly decorated, moving bedroom complete with couches, a desk, a large bed and even a bathroom. Tarano was here, sitting comfortable on a blue velvet chair. Two barons and an old and very powerful war mage accompanied him. They all looked too smug for geezers slumming it in a pimped out RV.

“I am sure you are wondering why you still draw breath so let me enlighten you,” the constable said without preamble. “Despite your many crimes against the crown and the people of Enoria, most of them punishable by death, we have... elected to grant you a chance to redeem yourself. In the bed behind me lies the only hope for our great country to be made whole. You are going to heal him.”



As expected, Tanaro wanted her to heal the first prince, the same who had been mangled during the first battle of the war. Incidentally, the last living sibling out of three thanks in no small part to Viv herself. Tarano was probably grasping at straws. Unless he could put Kule back together, he had a kingdom with no kings. His claim of legitimacy would melt in the succession war.

Lotae walked to the bed with a grim air and lifted the veil to reveal a man who, well, looked like he shouldn't be alive.

He was missing his entire left arm, left leg, and right foot if the lack of bump under the thin cover was any indication. More importantly, there was an actual hole in his flank, now covered by smooth skin but Viv guessed meant he was missing some essential stuff. And indeed, an IV dripped golden fluid into his right arm. He was also comatose and painfully thin.

[Crown Prince]

The inspection returned no information on the man's current health, which was probably due to the fact that her path didn't focus on healing at all.

She stared back at the constable, who was apparently expecting some sort of reaction. When she didn't speak, he ground his teeth with restrained rage. Damn did that man hate her guts.

"If you do not cooperate, we will make you. If you do, you will be allowed to make up for your mistakes and reintegrate society. We will let you settle and have a family with an Enorian spell blade of our choosing and with some restrictions. It is a very generous offer considering the circumstances."

A distant part of Viv knew she should remain quiet but the rest of her was tired, hurt, and boiling with outrage.

"Your reward is to be raped and used as a brood mare? Are you serious?"

A vein pulsed on the constable's forehead. He forced himself to take a deep breath while Viv shook her head, aghast. She couldn't believe her ears.

"Despite your many offenses, we know that you have expanded into the deadlands and fought the undead. My advisors believe... that you see the importance of order and civilisation even if your view is skewed by an... extremely inflated opinion of yourself."

Viv thought that one of them had created a functional kingdom and the other had brought his own to ruin so results kind of spoke for themselves. Her naked contempt must have gotten obvious enough that Tarano went through another cycle of deep breaths.

"And that you are also selfish and arrogant. Someone of your intellect should realize that a war caster is a war caster, but a woman who sacrifices her path to raise a family gives the

kingdom half a dozen war casters. It should be obvious to you which one benefits society the most.”

“At the risk of challenging your views on parenting, there isn’t that much overlap between being a good mom and melting someone’s face off. Wow, you fed bullshit to the masses for so long that you ended up believing in them as well.”

“I was foolish to expect a revolutionary to understand the notion of sacrifice.”

“It’s only okay so long as someone else does it, right?”

“Enough of this. You will save the prince, whether you want it or not.”

“Not with that ‘generous’ offer that you gave and can shove up your ass. I’d rather be caged, thanks.”

Thus ended the negotiations, Tarano not pushing for now. Viv was sure he would get back to her very soon but curiously, he seemed distracted. As Viv was brought back to her cage, she caught sight of the soldiers around their camp fires. The mood was subdued. Tense. She did not expect them to be happy so far into enemy territory, not to mention the aftermath of the meat grinder this war was turning out to be, but there was more at play. She was sure of it. Time was not on the side of the constable. But why? She had to play this carefully.