

By the time Viv returned to the ravaged village, the kark were well on their ways to finish the cleanup. There were more survivors than she expected though those who had made it were shadows, haunted by what they'd seen. Most of them were children, teenagers, some mothers with their children. All of the men capable of fighting had died in front of the village buying precious time for their people to run.

"They will be absorbed by other clans. We are down to seventeen. Once, the Red Tribe counted fifty-four clans," Marruk said from her position of command near the pyre.

"You've lost more than half of your population?" Viv asked, horrified.

"Lost half of the population. A very neat way to describe families killed to the last person. Children left on the plains to be eaten. All of this."

She waved towards the survivors saying goodbye to the fallen, or performing the last rites. Once it was done, the body was deposited on the pyre next to the others.

"Some ancestors will fade with no surviving offspring. Such a tragedy. Their wisdom and the fruits of their efforts will be lost forever! And this pyre, carrying so many. Will they be lost on their way, with so many others rising to the sky together with them? We cannot even afford to do things properly..."

Viv looked at a crying mother. This one couldn't let go.

"People shouldn't have to cremate their children."

"So it is. Let us attend to the pyre now."

It was well in the night before they finished collecting all the bodies. Arthur very kindly went after anything that tried to lurk closer, attracted by the scent of blood and death. Viv stood nearby when Warchief Matar arrived at the head of his regiment of pakar riders, late but not terribly so. There wasn't much for them to do besides mill around, but at least they got to attend the goodbyes.

It was a grim affair, Viv thought. She'd been to plenty of funerals by now and the mood had always been subdued, but New Harrak was finding itself in a situation where most losses had come as a side effect of victories. Her people had sacrificed their lives for something. Sometimes not much but... something. This wasn't like that. The slaughter was just another one in a long list of senseless losses those people had been experiencing for years. They were just... tired. It was visible in the way some of them lost themselves to the flame rather than drink and mourn.

Viv left and did what she had to do, because no one else would do it. She approached the pile of dead raiders left where it was, and prayed before they could turn into revenants. The steppes didn't need more revenants.

"Neriad, Enttiku, those people were scum, but let them find peace anyway. If there is an afterlife, may they be a force for good rather than what they were here."

She sent a massive amount of mana to both divinities. A soft golden light covered the corpse pile for a brief moment, and she could have sworn someone patted her head.

Viv knew that if she were victorious, the kark would end up within spear range of Pure League civilians who saw them as nothing more than animals to be culled.

She hoped that when the time came, she would have the courage to do what was right and stop the slaughter, because after today, the temptation to let go was growing stronger.

She could just go out with Arthur and... it would be easy. It would be so easy. Ride across Lutene lands, blighting the soil and torching every person in uniform she came across. Their elites would never catch up with her. She would slaughter them, spreading their remains over a gray, dead country until they begged for her to stop being the calamity they liked to pretend she was. They would never see it coming because she was holding back, holding back and being nice instead of fully embracing the black elemental aspect of her. Just a band of death at the border with the kark. A border. A warning. A scar that would never heal. Starving masses would drag princes from their brittle thrones... And they would all know it was her.

Arthur landed by her side.

Are we going?

“No. We are leaving with the kark. They need to learn how to stand for themselves. I won't always be here.”

If you say so.

One might say that to display majesty, a little bit of practicality had to be sacrificed. That person had never visited the Prince's Hall in Luten. The golden sunlight of a late summer shone through the skylight over marble desks and engraved lecterns designed to allow the prince's council to work in a pleasant setting. Looking at the prince, however, it was clear he wasn't having a pleasant time.

“I call this extraordinary session in order.”

He sighed. The past ten years had cost him a lot of his youthful exuberance. Now, with experience came regrets, and a lack of smiles. Many of the councilors watched him walk in his regal robes with wary eyes, fearing what fresh ignominy might have been cast upon their head. He pulled on his beard — never a good sign — and the men and women around flinched at this old nervous tick. It didn't befit a prince to show weakness, any weakness.

“I have just received a scroll from the border fortress. Prime minister, would you kindly share its content with us.”

The old minister unfolded the scroll with a frown. His lips moved as he glanced over the words written in a script he was not entirely familiar with.

“The Harrakan empire has declared war on us,” he gasped.

There were a few whispers, one laugh, that one quickly silenced, and quite a few confused looks. More beards got pulled.

“What is the meaning of this?” a woman asked.

“They claim an attack on their embassy... two years ago? One of our senior officers defected to them and our men tried to reclaim her,” the minister replied.

“Instead of sending an assassin?”

“So it would appear.”

Consternated growls erupted from the back benches. Someone was going to lose their head over this.

“Our agents reveal no movement of troops, or at least none within the past two weeks,” the spymaster added.

“That missive was delivered in person by their sovereign!” the prince hissed.

“However,” the spymaster pointed out, “the empress herself left alongside senior mages and all of her pet kark.”

The person who'd laughed huffed.

“What will she do with those animals? Teach them to do tricks?”

Few members still bought the idea that the kark were inferior weaklings who would break at the first cavalry charge, their lands ripe for the taking. Not after losing several family members to the futile push west.

“Three hundred armed kark are a concern. Three hundred steel-clad kark with imperial training? That is very concerning. Not to mention the woman herself,” a general grumbled.

“Elaborate,” the prince said.

The old man gave him an assessing look. It used to be that questioning Luteneze superiority could land one in jail for treasonous speech, though the prince had mellowed over the years. In this regard, at least. He decided to hazard it.

“She killed Elunath in a mage duel. The city still bears the scars of the event. Oh, she also escaped Helock's keep in a rather explosive breakout.”

“Surely there was some poetic exaggeration involved?”

“I assure you, there was nothing poetic about those events. I have talked to witnesses. Two elemental mages fighting? That was like... like gods incarnating to dish it out. A mountain walking, yet falling to a corruption that nothing could shield against... Have I mentioned that the Helock's arena was cordoned off for two months because she poisoned it?”

“So she is a great mage. We have ways to deal with those.”

“Only one way, in fact. Sending a mage contingent against her would be suicide.”

“The dark blades it is then.”

“You'd better send your best, because they will only have one chance.”

Several councilmen disagreed. The prince returned his gaze to the declaration of war. It was a partial one.

It meant that she wouldn't just fly to his palace and drop a strategic spell from the back of her pet dragon, because there was little that could stop her from doing so. Even a full mage flight might not suffice.

Somebody ought to stop her before it was too late.

Maybe the King of Baran would be open to talks.

The return was much slower since the landship reduced its speed to match that of the pakar riders. The healers had suggested that the survivors ought not be separated, and there wasn't enough room for all of them on the ship, so most now the steel construct rode over the plains like a fat tank.

“I think I want to call it the Beacon,” Frosthawk said.

“The ship?” Viv replied.

“Yes. It is the first of its kind, the messenger of our old glory restored for all to see. It represents the ancient and the new fused in harmony. And it also represents hope.”

“A bit ambitious, isn't it?”

“I think we need to be.”

The arrival of the clan survivors was met with dismay and relief in equal measure: dismay that yet another clan had been destroyed, relief that there were survivors. Most of them were immediately absorbed in surrounding groups while others were sent on their way to distant clans, those that were not here at the falls, having only sent their warriors. The lack of discussions on what to do told Viv this wasn't the first time it had happened.

To her surprise, one of the fallen clan's oldest women walked to her alongside a gaggle of surviving children. Marruk translated while Viv stood there awkwardly.

"She wants to know if it is true that you carry a metal shield with the symbols of everyone you have ever helped."

"Oh yes, of course, should I get it?"

"She would like to see it."

Weird request, but Viv grabbed her old shield from her cabin. It was battered and mishappen, with each partial layer obscuring the one before, and since people used different alloys, the symbols were in different colors too. Honestly, whatever could go through her magical shield would never, ever be stopped by that thin layer of metal but there was just a psychological benefit to holding steel between the enemy and her. She'd felt the same way about her body armor.

The old woman passed a hand over the pitted, irregular surface. She nodded, then reached into a pocket for a coin.

It was an iron coin bearing a line.

"The symbol of the Spear Shaft clan," Marruk whispered. "It is a great honor."

The old woman admonished Marruk for a while. The poor girl had to translate the abuse as well.

"She called me an idiot and that her clan was done for. I think she's... doing this thing you said, when some people handle pain differently. She says that if you carry the symbol on your shield then it will be as if the Spear Shaft clan was never dead."

"Tell her I accept. I'll have Frosthawk's people attach it immediately."

"She asks if you will carry it in battle as well."

"Yes."

"She asks if you can bash someone's skull in."

"No, this is my shield. Magic is my weapon."

"It will have to do."

It didn't take long for the council to deliberate on the Trial of Wisdom, barely half an hour of screaming that seemed to leave them confused and annoyed. Marruk and her father Matar were called to the stone in front of the assembled warriors a moment later. The female warrior who usually did Viv's translation found her with a nervous smile, right on time for the delivery.

"The Council has decided that Marruk triumphed over the trial of wisdom. She saved our people before the pakar could arrive thanks to her great metal beast. She is our new Warchief."

The acknowledgement was lukewarm, to say the least. Some of the younger warriors cheered but most of the old geezers nodded, or looked away. No one overtly defied tradition, at least, not now, but it wasn't probably the rousing endorsement Marruk could hope for. As for the woman herself, she strode to the stone.

Nobody stopped her.

Little by little, the crowd quieted while her leadership spread over the assembled kark like a warm cover. Viv could taste the kark's leadership skill in her soul and it was very, very different from her own. Viv's leadership was overwhelming, buoyed by her many achievements and her tendency to ruthlessly kill any opposition. Marruk was completely different. She was solid, but more than that, she was comforting and resilient. She had been through a lot of shit since first leaving the steppes, but she'd gone back to her feet swinging every time. It had taken her a ton of effort and a bit of luck to collect all of her iron and to grow into the confident woman she was now, and it showed in the way the people she touched settled. Her soldiers closed ranks with pride while others straightened. Marruk wasn't just here to bring steel. She would stand amongst her warriors and hold the line whether it was against a cavalry charge, a gut spiller, or a siege tarantula. She was the Pillar of the Kark, and she was here to stay.

"I can tell some of you are not happy, and I think why. I left to find help while my father stayed. Year after year, he fought for our people while I was away. All the iron and all the allies I have now, they are because he was there to protect our people. That is why I had time. Now I come back with a bountiful reaping while he was bleeding for our home, and I dare take his place, for he has no food to offer."

The old ones nodded. The younger warriors looked introspective. All of them gathered closer, made curious by her words.

"To you I will say first that strength is not just holding a spear. To hold one's pride is the duty of a warrior, but to sacrifice one's pride for the good of the clan, of the tribe, that is a warchief's duty. I found help because we needed help. All the steel you hold on your spears, the allies we have, the metal beast, those are here because I looked for ways to help you, my people. Because I fought for it tooth and nail against the southern nobles who would cheat us, and because I found people I could trust, even though they are not kark. The steel

you hold, that is MY strength... and that is with that strength that we shall push the Pure League out, once and for all.”

Some of the kark bellowed while others remained quiet, but Viv could feel their eagerness to see if the steppes could win under its first woman warchief.

“But before that, I still need to prove myself to you,” Marruk continued, catching everyone off guard.

“And that is why... we shall conduct the Trial of Strength!”

The crowd roared in approval.

“For my first, I nominate Odon the Bellicose, of the Hollow Tooth clan!”

A scarred kark in heavy armor roared at the head of Marruk’s soldier. Viv knew him from reputation. It wasn’t a very good one, but he was unerringly loyal.

“For my second, I nominate Sa... Sa... Sala? Hey, that’s me!” the translating woman squealed.

Viv patted her back while Sala stood there under sudden and crushing public attention, until her reddish skin turned almost purple. Viv lost the end of the speech though she could get the content from context only. Marruk announced her third fighter by hitting her chest twice with resounding bangs of metal against metal, then her gauntleted finger pointed at her father. He raised his spear in acknowledgement.

Viv wasn’t sure but he seemed shaken.

The preparations were complete and it was now the fourth day since Marruk had ridden into the camp with an archwitch, a fortune, and a metal beast in tow. Viv had expressed concerns that the army would need supplies since the Steppes were not exactly rife with resources, but it was past harvest and the kark were actually doing well in that department. It turned out that a civilization that lived on the move was actually pretty good at keeping supplies moving as well. Go figure. As for the contest of strength, mages and shamans had turned an open valley into a sunk amphitheater complete with seats and everything. It was extra, and unnecessary, and Viv was pretty sure the Red Tribe was just enjoying a change of pace in their war against extinction.

On the fateful morning, the contestants were called in while people ate and drank all around. Viv was in the premier lodge along all the other important people, trying her best to ignore the chewing noise and burps over the ever-present howl of the wind.

Odon the Bellicose was first to take the field on Marruk’s team. He was a spearman, of course. Most of the kark were. His opponent was another scarred master who’d survived

countless fights and, once the combat began, Viv realized why. A quick inspection confirmed her observation.

[Spear of the Winds: Fourth Step on a path that pursues spear mastery, focusing on mobility and distance. Close Quarter Combat specialist. Human Slayer...]

Matar's warrior was a breathtakingly graceful dancer with a spear that moved so quickly that Viv couldn't follow it. By comparison, Odon was an armored ball of controlled fury.

[Tipped Juggernaut: Fourth step on a path that pursues battlefield dominance, relying on armored aggression. Human slayer...]

Viv glanced over the description as a realization crept up her spine.

She had been racist. There was just no other way to describe how thoroughly she'd underestimated the kark's martial prowess. How else could they have held back an army with knights, assassins, and armor? The spear dominated their war arts so, obviously, they'd be really good at spears, but Viv's prejudiced brain had decided the best kark soldiers went to Solar's wife to be taught.

Apparently, they'd been going there because only she was a match for them. It was now that she had the time to pay attention that she realized how good they could be. In fact, even with an old warrior explaining what was going on in northerner, she was lost.

No matter. Her prejudice was a secret so no one would ever find out. It was a positive side effect of keeping one's mouth shut on occasion. Now though, images of what a legion of blindly loyal spear-wielding iron junkies in heavy armor could achieve invaded her mind with the promise of more heavies, always more heavies. And they hated humans too! It would only be the third warband of human-killing aliens joining her banner.

She needed to get herself some merl as well and her Pokedex would finally be complete. It was only a matter of time really. Hell, she was already missing butter-grilled spider legs.

Viv convinced herself this wasn't an evil mastermind mental process as she smiled at the kark. It was such a good show too.

Matar's warrior was a blur, his spear movements beyond what Viv thought were possible. He had affixed a steel end on an elaborate, and probably enchanted bone weapon. Odon was pure steel from head to toe and his style matched. He just rushed his opponent down relentlessly. Because of the way the area was set up, it prevented the more agile fighter from keeping his distance, a feature the larger warrior used mercilessly to back him into a corner. Matar's candidate was forced to block or avoid every thrust but Odon merely pivoted to let the tip slide on his imposing defenses, minimizing the amount of movements he had to do and allowing him to just keep the pressure on. Viv was concerned that Odon would run out of steam before he could win, but that didn't happen. After a remarkably long time considering how hard those were fighting, Odon landed a hit on his opponent leg. It only went downhill after that.

The agile fighter did try a last ditch attack that might have pierced the armor — Viv couldn't see any blood — but when that failed, he forfeited. The two of them bowed to each other and the crowd before retiring to their respective tents.

“Well, that went well,” Viv said with some relief.

“A great fight! Those two are great warriors. There was no need to worry.”

“It's more brutality and grudge that were a concern.”

“Hah! We are not resolving a blood feud! Have you never ended a fight with a show of respect?”

Viv thought about it. She had. She'd also killed someone with mana poisoning.

“Well, at least it's going well so far.”

Marruk's point had been made. Viv was pretty sure Matar's champion had better stats and more skill but Odon's fantastic gear and adapted training had made the difference. It was a lesson the kark had experienced for the entirety of the war, but it was the first time the teacher was another kark. Many of the spectators were disappointed that skill hadn't made up for equipment but others were excited. The next fight would show Sala. As soon as Viv saw her opponent, he knew they wouldn't win this one. Sala was on the very edge of taking the fourth step.

Her opponent was on the fifth. He was a spearmaster and teacher hybrid path. He was also ancient, all of his hair white.

“The first fight usually shows the strongest warriors. The second fight is about tradition. Respect for our ancestors. Your friend's choice says a lot,” the kark translator grumbled, though he didn't seem too angry.

“Her approach to tradition is unusual,” Viv conceded, “but you should not expect a female warrior to hide what she is.”

“Ah, yes. You are a shaman who specializes in killing, so the habits of the kark may seem strange to you.”

“Not that strange considering the Enorians thought the same. Marruk is making a statement here... even though it will cost her.”

“A statement?”

“That she stands for new customs when they are called for.”

Viv wasn't sure it was a good idea. She would have placated the old guard with some concessions to tradition while pushing hard for key changes, including the right for Sala to

stab some Luteneze, but rubbing things in people's faces tended to crystallize them in their positions, her dad used to say. It wasn't her call though.

From the beginning of the fight, it became clear that Sala's opponent could end it in moments, but he didn't. Sala moved well despite being relatively inexperienced. After probing her and testing her skill, and to Viv's endless surprise, the mentor started to teach her. It was obvious in the way he mirrored her style to point at flaws or offer suggestions. Even Viv could get it.

From excited and tense, the mood around the arena turned more argumentative, with many kark discussing the merits of various schools of martial arts. Viv's translator explained old debates with a passion and a knowledge that she'd only seen in hardcore football or car racing fans. It was pretty interesting.

After more than ten minutes of demonstration, the fight concluded with Sala deeply bowing to the old man who then offered to teach her more in a very loud voice. The crowd cheered when she accepted.

"It is like a retelling of the story of Agon and the Old Master!" her translator said with tears in her eyes. "It is one of our oldest and most sacred tales!"

Damn. Marruk was much craftier than what Viv had given her credit for. Shifting the narrative? Now that was devious. Viv was a little bit proud.

The third fight was the one everybody was waiting for.

Warchief Matar entered the ring in his refurbished metal armor carrying an elaborate bone spear.

Marruk came in as well in her heavy plate, with her huge door-shield and a flanged mace.

The two faced each other in the ensuing silence. The head shaman said something but her host was too absorbed to translate. Matar roared, a sound carried by the wind that promised swift retribution for the crimes against his people.

Marruk slammed her tower shield on the sand. The loud noise somehow cut the wind, and the roar. Marruk was here, and she was here to stay.

There was a certain irony in the unstoppable force standing for tradition while the immovable object was the champion of change. Viv watched the two fourth step warriors circle each other, then the battle began in earnest.

Matar moved a lot, Marruk didn't. He attacked often, she didn't, but each of her attacks was dangerous and perfectly timed. Viv realized those were not just great fighters engaged in a fight for the fate of their people, they also knew each other intimately.

Again and again, Matar sought to overwhelm Marruk to prove a point, using his greater stats and experience to slip under her guard, but the old girl stood her ground and she walked

back to the front every single time. It was a shock of will as much as a shock of arms. Marruk was a Pillar of the Kark though, that was her path, and she would never stay down.

It was amazing how those two were evenly matched. Marruk had grown so much since the starving door-wielding bodyguard Viv had met in Kazar. It was amazing! Viv was so proud. She was sure to cheer with the others as the two stubborn warriors butted heads (metaphorically). After a hard fifteen minutes of head to head combat, Marruk's father stopped.

The kark all around held their breath until a miraculous silence spread across the plains. Even the wind quieted down. Viv's ears popped out of sheer surprise.

"You have proven yourself, daughter," Matar said. "I am old. Perhaps our people need a new vision. I concede defeat."

Viv nodded to herself. She was pretty sure he could have won in the end, by forfeiting, he allowed for a peaceful transfer of power. Marruk jumped on the occasion.

"I have proven my speed, my wisdom, and now my strength. I am your new warchief!"

The crowd roared with measured enthusiasm, some of the kark exchanged concerned glances. All things considered, it was an amazing result. It was just that three days of change wouldn't undo years of horror. They were still waiting for the other shoe to drop. It was then that Marruk's leadership expanded in a ring of absolute conviction.

"You are waiting for me to lead you against the expedition force to avenge the Spear Shaft clan!"

"Yes!"

"I will not do it. Not now."

The announcement fell like cold rain over the freshly stoked crowd.

"This is what we've been doing for years. They come and kill, we chase them away. Sometimes, we kill many, sometimes we do not, but there is always another raid, another push. No more. No more! This time, we trap them. This time, no one is going back to Luten."

People mumbled, uncertain. They had probably been promised something similar before.

"We are going to train, not as clans but as an army, and we are going to catch them before they can flee. From now on, the Red Tribe are victims no longer."

Marruk gathered the clan heads to her while their warriors left the arena in a state of circumspect confusion. Viv sighed. There would be some preparation needed before this ragtag band could win a war. It was clear in the way their old warchief willingly gave up his throne without some nasty backroom maneuver. What a desperate people.

“They can’t be assassins,” Irao said.

It was a statement of fact.

“It goes against their nature,” he added after a while, as a way of explanation.

Tylek the Shadow Hunter stood nearby like a confused student about to get reamed. Viv knew he didn’t speak Imperial, but he could guess what Irao was saying.

“You are a hunter, right? You do traps?” Viv asked since she wasn’t quite getting it.

“Of course!”

“And that is fine?”

“It is up to the enemy to keep an eye open in the steppes. Those who are not vigilant will pay the price. Such is the way of this land!” he roared.

“But infiltrating lines to slit people’s throats is different?”

“It is not honorable! The foe must know they are attacked, or are we Luteneese?”

Viv blinked.

“So it’s their fault if they fall into a trap, but your fault if you attack them while they are unaware?”

“Yes! You get it.”

Absolutely the fuck not. Wait...

“It’s about... who starts it? If they fall into the trap, they are moving, but if you infiltrate then you are moving? Instigating?”

“Yes!”

“How about hiding in preparation for an ambush and getting closer unnoticed? Is that fair so long as the attack is announced immediately before you strike?”

Tylek hesitated. His brow scrunched with efforts as his mind studied the proposal. Ethics wasn’t apparently his forte.

“I... suppose? Ambushes are not honorable, unless the foe itself announced it was coming? I... am not sure. I think so.”

“Would the rest of the kark army go for an ambush?”

“Against the Pure League? Absolutely.”

“Well then. I know what strategy we’re going to use. It’s going to take some time before Marruk can turn that desperate tribe into a proper troop, by the way. In the meantime... Irao?”

“We have felt their presence. They have killed a patrol not far from here. We can trap them soon.”

“I think I’d very much prefer giving them a visit. It’s been a long week and I need to unwind.”