

Chapter 74: On a limb

Laborers and soldiers alike busied themselves with the very last of the harvest. Tons of cereals were already in warehouses or ground into flour by Kazar's mills. Only a few vegetables and some orchards at the edge of the forest remained, and they soon became hives of activity. The Kazarans collected the fruits as they ripened, defended the fruits while they ripened, and dressed and cooked the hare-like monsters who failed to break through to the ripening fruits. Marruk broke the yearly record of captured 'harrans' (the monsters) by seven and made a pretty penny with the pelts, not that she needed the money anymore.

With the harvest coming to an end, Viv proposed a vote on taxation. After extolling its necessity, they gave the citizen a choice between a small fixed part and a high percentage of their revenue, or a larger fixed part and a smaller percentage. It was basically a choice between being risk-adverse or not and didn't make much difference to the city income-wise. What mattered was that people got a choice and the opportunity to discuss it. There was another round of massive, village-wide meetings and quite a few scuffles but that was liberty and politics for you.

The newly arrived Enorian refugees were included in the discussion but didn't participate much. Most of them were abjectly grateful not to be made into slaves and being given food until they could develop their new lands. A few of the younger men and quite a few women joined the newly formed witch-pact corps of crossbowmen, now supplied by the Yries directly with ever-more polished ranged weapons.

The insular and distrustful people had decided to up their presence in Kazar. They were selling crossbows and armors in exchange for cloth and other goods. Viv had started stockpiling weapons in preparation for autumn, when a lot of soldiers would be free from the work rush.

They celebrated harvest day.

Viv didn't have to do much. People had been doing this for ages and didn't need direction. The same grannies and aunties who always did the thing did the thing. The same boisterous dads and grumpy, tender-hearted old farts mounted decorations at the ass-crack of dawn as they had for decades. Kazar took on festive airs and the fair grounds were once more the scene of vibrant preparations. At Viv's personal request, their prisoners were even granted enough good food to handle their own banquet, after being told that it was 'for decent behavior'. Viv sat at the place of honor while young lads and lasses competed in games of strength and dexterity for each other's attention. She had to sit with a smile while the difference between Europe, which had pursued musical excellence for centuries, and Kazar, which had pursued survival, was made manifest.

For all their horrible flute plays, Kazar had a vibrant cultural identity, and they had claimed it with even more fervor since declaring independence. Soldiers and guards loved to add white, embroidered pennants to their armors so that every spear was a flag. A few traces of red dyes were appearing as well with the mountain tribes getting increasingly closer. Arthur

had been given a special throne as the town's mascot (she thought she was some sort of mayor). It was all very intense, but Viv was used to it now. You could only spend so much time taking care of people without genuinely caring for them. Viv was trapped in Nyil and she no longer minded that much. She only wished she could send a message to her family and friends. Tell them she was alive. And happy.

As the festivities were coming to an end, something unexpected happened. The head of the scouts, a dour man by the name of Michar, came to get her. He was unusually embarrassed.

"Yeah. So. I would like to know if you could be my witness."

Viv froze in her seat and cast a dubious look backwards towards Solfis. The golem didn't react.

"As in, for a duel?"

"No. I'm getting married."

Michar didn't strike her as a bridezilla so it was probably fine.

"Hm, I have no objections, I guess? When?"

"Tonight."

It was already well past midnight.

"Now," he precised.

Viv's paranoia woke up and flushed the last traces of sweet wine from her system.

"You're fucking with me?"

Michar's absolutely flustered face told the contrary. He was red as a beet under that slightly green skin tone. He also showed signs of deep shame, not the nervousness one would expect from a shit schemer and Michar was a shit schemer if there were any. He didn't have a single cunning bone in his entire body.

"It was... sort of a last minute decision, Your Grace?"

"You unexpectedly decided to elope?"

"No, well yes, well, there is this girl. She's not the most social one."

"A Hadal."

"Yeah. Their first generation. Anyway. We were fucking and I proposed. She said yes."

Viv glared at the man and wondered what had caused his brain to short-circuit, and thought that to propose 'in medias coitus', or whatever it was called, was the height of dick-fueled retardation.

"Lead the way," she offered with an annoyed sigh.

And he did. Right into the forest.

The Hadal base could be found through an unassuming grotto entrance decorated with some red flowers and entire bouquets of mummified beastling heads. It was a cavernous and maze-like underground structure with naked, grey stone walls, not a single fucking light and passages blocked by heavy doors. It was also quite silent. The weirdest thing was that it smelled good. Really good. Like laundry and freshly-made pastries. She could not feel a single hint of the dampness or cold one would associate with such a place. Even as they reached some sort of main hall, the scent became that of flower and soap.

There were benches in the main hall. They cornered tables loaded with half-eaten victuals but there was no one sitting there for now. Illumination was provided by a few gems embedded in a stone roof dotted with a few timid stalactites. Irao took the center spot, looking all solemn because he was standing straight for once. Marruk and Solfis had followed, as well as Arthur and they sat their asses on a bench on their right.

Irao seized a tiny bell and rang it once. It gave off a light chime that sounded much louder than it really was. Viv felt a rush of black mana. It was too confusing and fast to follow, but her danger sense remained silent and so did Solfis. She was not under attack.

Hadals were filling the other benches, appearing as if from nowhere. Michar stayed at the back and a slightly shorter woman materialized by his side. A dark veil hid her form and most of her features.

The room was still silent.

"Viviane?" Irao asked.

"Yes?"

"I don't know how to officiate a marriage."

Restraining the urge to groan, Viv directed the two lovebirds to walk down the 'aisle' and busied herself humming Mendelssohn's wedding march. She stood by Irao's side and welcomed the pair with her most serious expression. For some reason, the atmosphere favored whispers. She spoke in a low voice.

"We are gathered here tonight to celebrate the union of first scout Michar and..."

She hesitated then, until a barely audible whisper floated by her ears.

“And ‘Hey’, of the Hadals.” (Hay? Hei? She didn’t know.)

“Michar, do you vow to take Hay as your spouse, to protect, love, and hold her...”

She did her best to make something nice and romantic. The rugged Michar was crying like a fountain, snot dripping down his nose.

“until death do you part?”

“Yes, I do.”

Viv repeated the same for Hay who nodded vigorously. The ‘veil’ had turned out to be an unadorned white cloth. She was practically bouncing on her feet.

“Then by the powers I hold as the leader of Kazar, and in the name of all the light gods, I declare you husband and wife.”

Viv almost jumped when she felt something caress her spine, and an old pain woke up for a fragment of a second just as the blue halo of the gems above her took on a light golden sheen. It had worked.

“You want to add something?” she asked Irao as an afterthought.

The man pondered for a long time. Finally, his yellow, slitted eyes landed on the assembly. Viv knew that they were wearing dark colors but they were so coated in mana that she could not even discern their faces.

“We left. We gathered. Now we live, we choose, we love. I wish you the same. Enough talk, let’s eat.”

Viv joined in with the party but must have fallen asleep mid-way, because she woke up in the tower with a glass of water nearby and a small note written in an angular hand. It said: ‘thank you’.

A few days later, at the bank.

The door shifted under the pressure of tiny white claws and Tom Manitaradin’s eyes widened. He turned from the lobby desk where he was exceptionally present and addressed a shadow behind a potted plant.

“Fetch me Lan, please.”

The shadow was still a shadow a moment later, but it felt emptier and the statuesque accountant sashayed to his side.

Witch, now heiress, now mayor Viv's companion strutted sinuously over the polished tiles. Its paws clicked merrily on the ground, and it was not long until its head popped from behind the counter. A pair of malevolent red eyes settled on Tom. They used to be feral and murderous, filled with barely contained aggression. Now, they were cold and patient. Still murderous though.

Tom saw himself reflected in the slit pupils and pondered the strange intellect behind. The albino drake placed a full pouch on the counter.

"Change to gold?" Tom asked. It was the creature's second visit.

Once again, an affirmative rune materialized above its head. Tom knew this to be impossible, yet it happened anyway. He made for the pouch and patiently counted the coins. Those were Enorian currencies, swapped against deadland loot at the temple of Neriad, he wagered. Prize for a raid.

By his side, Lan placed a hand over his shoulder to signify that she would begin. A pulse of mana erupted gently from the woman and those who were sensitive enough could have then guessed that she was, in fact, a priestess of Sardanal.

The god of wealth, growth, and insight was well respected in the north and she was strong enough to bypass an occulted status. Yet, she seemed to struggle. He felt the tension in her posture.

The creature's eyes veered to his left as soon as she started praying. Again, an impossibility. In order to distract it, he picked up the owed golden talent and placed it on the desk with reverence.

The creature gave one last disdainful look at Lan before centering its attention on its newest treasure. Tom could see the pupils dilate with pleasure. It picked the talent between careful claws and inspected it.

Lan's hand suddenly clamped on Tom's shoulder with a ferocious strength, and only his experience stopped him from letting out a gasp of pain. He could feel her nails digging into his muscles, and a mild shake did nothing to calm the woman down. Tom managed to keep his composure through a supreme effort of will, although it was not strictly speaking needed. The drake had taken the pouch from its collar and gently, carefully placed the talent within. It turned and departed without a glance.

Sharp talons clicked on the tiles. The door opened and closed. They were alone.

"What was that about?" he hissed in anger.

"Dragon."

Tom's heart missed a bit. He gasped lightly, and felt tears well in his eyes from the sheer, mind-defying absurdity of it all. No, she was messing with him. This made no sense at all. No one on Nyil would be mind-bogglingly insane enough to— she was messing with him.

“Lan, this is not—”

“Dragon.”

Viv sprinted through the underbrush in a gait specifically designed to avoid getting caught by a root. She jumped between two trunks and felt her danger sense flare. The witch didn't turn. A nope shield rose behind her back before she could really think.

A stone disappeared with a hiss.

“Shroud.”

A line of black mana hit the ground and a wall sliced up to mask her figure. The earth was twisted and pitted like an asteroid. At the top, towers of solidified gravel extended like gothic spires. The design was both alien and familiar. Another stone hit it a moment later. Viv was already off. She raced under low boughs, jumped on a stump and caught herself in the middle of a small ridge which she scaled an instant later. Short mana extensions dug handholds as she moved. She went over the elevation and blocked another stone. A line of trees blocked her path. A small burst of mana cleared enough foliage to let her through and right in the middle of a beastling pack.

Viv's shock was extremely short-lived and she kicked the only standing creature in the jaw. She crossed through the trio of flea-ridden huts, then jumped down another ridge. There were boulders under her feet here.

“Sneaky Ghillie Lemon Squeezy.”

Viv's shape was soon covered in an eldritch, tentacular coating of black mana. The mundane name did not render the unsettling appearance of the ever-changing armor. It moved randomly when she did, sometimes turning her into an inhuman beast. It had the added benefit of making it harder for others to spot her vitals.

Behind her, the angry shrieks of the beastlings turned into death screams. Time was of the essence. Viv took a sharp turn right and crawled silently under a thicket of pine trees. The shadows swallowed her and her vision was reduced to a narrow corridor. She looked up barely in time to find her path blocked by a thick webbing and a spider the size of a frying pan.

“Aw fuck that.”

The entire structure vanished in a cloud of annihilation magic. She bit her lip and kept going. Her thoughts were distracted. Specifically, they obsessed over a single concern.

“Please don’t jump on my back please don’t jump on my back.”

Fortunately for her, the eight-legged creatures didn’t apparently live in colonies and she successfully made it on the other side. The trees were more spaced there, with tall ferns in between. Her goal was very close. Sadly time was up.

Solfis landed into the middle of the clearing.

“Aw.”

//You did better, Your Grace.

//You have made some improvement.

“I stopped because there was a big spider.”

//Fascinating.

//However, your mistake this attempt was getting in the thicket while I had a visual on you.

//I killed the beastlings noisily.

//You should have guessed from the timing that I would see you crawl in.

//After that, it was merely a question of cutting you off.

“Oh.”

//You did scale the ridge with commendable speed.

//You blocked all the projectiles aimed at you.

“I’ll have to do better.”

Solfis tilted his head.

//If I may, Your Grace, I question your sense of priority.

“What, for training?”

//For spending so much time doing so.

“Didn’t I mention it? When the prince returns, we won’t wait for his siege specialists to lay siege this time. We’re fighting in the forest.”

//I remember you mentioning... guerilla warfare.

//I did not think that you would participate.

“Who else? Unless she dies, they will have a red mage.”

//Your path is not adapted to fighting in a forest, Your Grace.

“Neither is theirs. That’s why I’m training right now.”

Solfis took a few steps forward.

//You do not wish to slow them down.

//You wish to defeat them.

“Yeah, I have a plan.”

//Your knowledge of warfare might not translate well in our world.

“That’s why I have you and the others to go over it. Besides, remember what I told you about guerilla warfare?”

//I have logged the explanation you gave to Marruk.

//You define it as a smaller group of combatants engaging a larger, more traditional one through the use of ambushes, raids, sabotage and the use of mobility.

Solfis’ dry definition let Viv know exactly what the ancient war machine thought about those.

“Right, but at the core, guerilla warfare is about being a massive dick. And the people of Param already do it quite well.”

//We should build a traditional force.

“We will as well. That will be your job. Enough of that, time to regrow limbs. This is it.”

Viv had estimated that her understanding of change was sufficient to start experimenting. The first step was to perfect a diagnostic construct. In order to do so, she had grabbed the willing pair of inquisitors and the less willing Enorian earth caster, whose name was Lodan and who was a bit of a twat. The participants had gathered at an isolated guard house at the edge of the city for some tranquility. A large circular altar now occupied the center of the room, with Viv’s notes and books spread across a large desk set against the far wall.

Viv busied herself inscribing the four runes Orkan had mentioned and then recognized from her book. They would serve as a basis for their work.

“I am a prisoner of war,” Lodan screamed while she was working, “not some guinea pig!”

“Orkan volunteered. I just need you to smooth the stone between two attempts,” Viv explained curtly. She was still working and in no mood to be pestered. This was going to be a long session.

“Goodmother, I do not begrudge helping my fellow citizens in their captivity, but let me remind you that I am no stooge!”

“You have always been a lackey, Lodan. I’m just more transparent about it. Now you can help me willingly or you’ll be my first attempt at regrowing fingers. We clear?”

“Ahem,” Denerim interrupted. “What Lady Viviane is saying is that your participation in a project that will benefit all of mankind is greatly appreciated.”

The earth caste glared.

“Neriad will bless you.”

“I follow Maranor.”

Orkan and Denerim looked at each other, and then smoothly turned away.

Viv whistled.

The door opened and Solfis’ nightmarish form bent in like a stalking lion.

“I’ll help,” Lodan decided.

“I knew you would see reason,” Viv said. “Alright, I am done. Orkan, if you please?”

The inquisitor ambled smoothly to the stone.

“Should I undress?”

Viv considered the question.

“It would be nice but too distracting.”

“Wait, that’s not what I meant!”

“Step in please,” Viv continued. She was in serious mode now. Orkan obeyed and Viv cast the spell.

Immediately, a rush of information threatened to overwhelm her and it took her unnatural willpower and mental strength to elevate her consciousness over the messy overload. The spell fed her details on, well, everything, and it required an instinctual understanding of the body. As it was, only her formation as a medic allowed her to recognize that the blasts of lightning were nerves, pulsating fibers were muscles and the windy alveoles referred to the interior of the lung. While navigating the cascade of sensations, Viv realized that she had to dive back in to manage. She selected one at random and focused on it. The rest disappeared into the background like a muffled orchestra. They were still there, but muted. She felt around and realized that she could feel blood pass through it. Some things were added, some were filtered. She was in the liver.

Viv pulled back from the spell and blinked. Her cortex was not currently dripping down her nose. So she had that going for her. She felt less exhausted than she feared despite the fact that the spell Orkan had revealed was obviously tailored for a healing path and would have melted the mind of a lesser caster.

“Well, that was something. Orkan, I think that your healers focused on selected parts of the body, not the whole damn thing.”

“Oh yeah we had to place the wounded part of the table. Once, I was hit in the crotch. Made sitting down really awkward.”

He smiled. Denerim facepalmed.

“You might want to mention it next time. It was a bit overwhelming.”

“Wait, so you saw everything?”

Viv slowly massaged the bridge of her nose, declining to answer.

“Like everything?”

Orkan waggled his brow.

“I was in your liver, Orkan.”

“Aw.”

“Right, I need to draw again, this time with a smaller circle. Lodan, please.”

Viv removed her mana from the table and the earth caster wiped it before getting back to sulking. Viv ignored his sullen form and took out her silverite blade. It was time to draw again. The circle was now smaller and more focused. This time, she asked Orkan to only place his hand in.

Viv expected the sensory overload this time. She arranged the sensations in her mind and managed, after half an hour of effort, to split them by nature. She could feel blood traveling with deep thumps in the vein network, see the muscle waiting for a signal to contract. The nerves were long, complex strings. The bones pushed on, protecting their marrow. She pulled out later.

“Right, besides some scar tissue, your hand seems perfectly healthy.”

“Glad to know.”

“Okay. The base spell works, now I need to dig deeper.”

Viv picked the runes she had selected and incorporated them in her design. The next step was to 'zoom in' to cell level using the 'smallest' and 'part' glyphs. She kind of knew it would work because creating the spell was half programming and half talking to someone when you were not completely fluent in their language. If the glyphs made sense to her then they would make sense to magic because the glyphs were magic given meaning.

After a few tweaks, she managed to identify cells by type and visualize small packets like bone fragments or a single muscle fiber. It was far from the DNA-based healing she envisioned but she suspected that it would remain beyond her for a while. She would have to be content with regrowing a limb from another, for now.

The next step was to form an imprint of the limb and that led to another problem. She realized that the glyph she had picked, 'image', was insufficient. She needed 'capture' as well to keep the form in her mind.

"Fuck, I need to learn a new glyph."

"Well, that's it then," Lodan said from the sulk corner. He stood up and stretched. Viv realized that Orkan was meditating and Denerim was boiling water for their lunch. It was already noon.

"That's it my bouncy ass, we have a few busy days before us. Get used to it," Viv grumbled. The Enorian sneered.

"Right, goodmother. As you say."

Viv took a step forward, only to be stopped by Denerim's hand on her shoulder. He shook his head.

"No slapping the prisoners of war even when they act like little shits," he said with an apologetic smile.

Damn him and his anti-war-crime religion!

"Fine!"

Viv retired to her study corner and found what she was looking for in the book. It took some time for her to understand and practice the new glyph. Fortunately, 'capture' was a simple concept and she had a clear vision of what she needed to achieve. It took her an hour to finish. She ordered an incredulous Lodan to clear the altar once again while munching on a sandwich.

That was it, normally. She inscribed the whole spell and took a last good look at it. Despite her fumbings, the end result was streamlined and elegant with the last part being Denerim's job. One more activation on Orkan's hand left her confident that she could keep it in her mind, as well as mirroring it into a right hand.

She was ready.

“Let’s bring in the first test subject.”

She walked out and found a cage where a squirrel-like creature was waiting, obviously in some distress after being spat out by a dragon. Arthur had kindly provided experimental material against compensation (tastier meat). Viv brought the creature inside, used an anesthetic provided by the local apothecary and placed a tourniquet over the squirrel’s foot. Then she amputated it.

It was kind of weird to feel bad about it, considering what she had done to other humans. Humans were a bit shit though. Squirrels had done nothing to her, ever.

Viv picked up a cauldron from the corner of the room. It contained the slurried remains of a medium-sized monster called a scalehound, a nasty pack animal that lived in the forest. She wasn’t sure what the spell would consume so the unappetizing gunk contained every body part including the cleaned viscera.

It didn’t smell very good. At least, a butcher had used a skill to preserve it.

She placed the cauldron on the altar and triggered the spell, focusing on the remaining foot. It took some time but eventually she got it all. The bones, the ligaments, the tendons, the veins, the nerves, the cartilage, blood, lymph... One by one, the elements added themselves to the incredibly complex interconnected construct that was a squirrel’s foot.

She had it.

An attempt to recreate the foot immediately failed. Her consciousness lost itself in the mass of gunk, but she found a workaround by picking a small amount of it in a nearby bowl. Slowly, carefully, she directed black mana to change goop into cells and proteins. It felt like it was taking ages, and the cells did not manifest immediately. Instead, the gunk solidified from a loaf of indistinct matter into a more and more refined shape. The circle proved itself vital as she would never have managed it without its support.

Eventually, Viv pulled back and stopped.

She had a foot.

It looked a bit ugly and not fully well-formed. It also lacked the hair of the original. It was still a foot.

She had built a foot ‘ex nihilo’.

“I did it. Now, we must..”

Viv shook her head when the three surrounding humans looked up from whatever they were doing. Lodan had been dozing off. Denerim and Orkan were cleaning their weapons. The sun was setting through the windows.

The squirrel was long dead.

She sighed.

“Patient is deceased. Time of death is... oh it doesn’t matter. Arthur?”

The bored dragonette climbed down from the roof and opened the door. Viv threw the squirrel’s body at her. It disappeared into her gullet with a single gulp. Runes appeared on the ground.

Cold

Not

Juicy

“Don’t worry we will have a proper dinner afterward. I think I’m done for today.”

Her mind was overtaxed. She acknowledged it despite her urge to go on. She was so close, so very close, and it had taken her very little time all things considered. Just a bit of creative use of black mana.

Everyone packed up to leave. Lodan turned to her as the group was splitting up.

“You are still my enemy, woman, but I have to admit that you are an incredible mage. Perhaps your victory was not a fluke, after all.”

It seemed that it cost the Enorian some effort to say so. He looked a bit flustered. Viv considered telling him that she didn’t give a shit about his opinion then reconsidered. She still needed him.

“I appreciate your candor. See you tomorrow, Lodan.”

Best she could do.

Viv went back to the tower and crashed for the night. She was back at it the next day.

“Another squirrel, lady Viv?” Denerim asked, but Viv shook her head.

“I’m too slow rebuilding the limbs. It takes a lot of effort and I need to practice. I’ll make squirrel feet until I can do it in less than half an hour.”

Interestingly enough, the volume of flesh was not as important as the variety of constituent cells, which meant that building a human leg would not take exponentially more time. She worked strenuously at mass-producing the same rodent limb over and over for another three days before she felt confident in building another one. This time, she used a bit of flesh-mending potion to stop the bleeding and to give herself some time to work.

She was getting nervous.

It was stupid, but she was basically attempting a medical miracle by scamming the sentient planet and that felt risky, somehow. Now was to hoping that the squirrel would not turn into some fifty-meters tall flesh titan a la Akira. Fingers crossed.

Viv finished rebuilding a new foot, this one current-squirrel-compatible, and signaled Denerim that she was ready. Then she had to signal again because he wasn't paying attention.

"Sorry, I was distracted. It's been four days. Alright, here we go."

The last of the three parts of the spell required him to reattach and heal the new limb to the maimed test subject. Viv sort of expected a deep, complex chant with like fifty stanzas and the secret forbidden name of Neriad which was made of fifty syllables in Hebrew. Instead, she got a phone call.

"Oh Neriad, you who shine upon those who fight to make the world better, I beseech you. It may look weird because I am healing a squirrel but bear with me, for we are furthering the cause of...oh."

Golden light erupted from his skin with enough intensity to light every corner of the room. Denerim's hair glowed and split like he had enough electricity in him to power a city block.

It kept going, there was more light.

Even more light.

Jesus fuck that was a lot of light. Viv hid her eyes and collapsed, suddenly struck by a terrible pain. Her head bashed against the altar and she fell backwards. The agony disappeared as soon as it had come, yet it left her a gasping wreck on the ground.

Suddenly, Solfis and Arthur were there. The golem picked her up and gently hauled her to her feet. There was still a lot of light and a certain heaviness in the air of the room. The unpleasant smell of gore had been replaced by a powerful clean one, like crisp mountain air. Solfis looked... careful.

Viv turned and faced the divine incarnation of Neriad.

The golden god wore the body and traits of the inquisitor, yet only an idiot could fail to see the difference. Its sheer presence filled Viv with the realization of how deeply insignificant, inconsequential she was. His mere gaze was a physical weight upon her shoulders, and yet, for all its might, Neriad's presence no longer hurt her. A thin golden halo surrounded his body without extending out. He was holding himself back for her sake.

Neriad took a step forward and placed his hand against Viv's head. She realized that she had been bleeding from a gash when he reached out with a thumb and made the pain disappear.

“Ah, Viviane Saint-Lys, the outlander. We meet in person.”

His voice had a fucking echo.

“Although renewal is the domain of Sardanal, I know a thing or two about healing. I will grant my servant Denerim the rest of the spell. I applaud you for thinking out of the box.”

Viv opened her mouth and grunted something. She was tired. She was caught off guard. He was a fucking god. She could feel the overwhelming pressure coming from what could only be a mere projection. He was immensely, mind-defyingly powerful.

“Errr.”

The figure patted her shoulder.

“I will notify a priest that you require soul healing. In return, you will perform the limb rituals on my servants. You will see that generosity brings its own rewards.”

He smiled and it carried both humor and a bitterness as deep as the ocean.

“I must leave. Octas the spider bitch is trying to sink an island off the coast of the Vizim. My attention is required. Do you, perhaps, have one more question?”

Viv had many questions.

“What happened to me? Why am I here?”

Neriad closed his eyes and breathed in. Shadows crept back from the corners of the room while strange voice whispered at the edge of Viv’s hearing.

“You will not like my answer, I’m afraid. You were picked at random as part of a vast and ancient game. You have done nothing to deserve this. I can only tell you one more thing. Your family and friends are fine.”

Something in his voice felt... off. Viv’s old social paranoia woke up and she searched the god’s face for more.

“Completely fine?”

“Completely fine.”

Neriad had the carefully neutral face of the shitty liar, but he was telling the truth. It took Viv five seconds to figure out what he meant.

“Motherfucker.”

“Duty calls, outlander. I will leave you now. Keep an eye out east. I would be displeased if my wounded servants were to die, hmm?”

Neriad closed his eyes and Denerim opened them.

“Well, that was something,” the inquisitor said.

Then he slowly, slowly toppled backwards into Orkan’s waiting arms.

“I think we should continue tomorrow,” he said.

“That would be for the best.”

Viv watched the two depart. Arthur used the opportunity to chomp on the squirrel while Solfis kicked Lodan awake. The Enorian had collapsed during the incarnation process.

//A remarkable outcome, Your Grace.

//Personal visits by gods are very rare.

//Yet, you do not seem satisfied?

“Read between the lines, Solfis. Why would my parents be completely, completely fine? How could this happen six months after I left?”

//Apologies.

//Query returned no results.

“They think I’m still alive, Solfis. They think I’m still alive. How?”

Chapter 75: Growth

Viv stayed in a foul mood for all of two hours. The exhaustion of spellcasting and then meeting with a god compounded with her anguish to form a nebulous cloud of anger and confusion. She wished she could have stayed maudling for a day, reclining on a comforter and nursing her heart and a glass of sweet wine. Unfortunately for her, Viv had the sort of single-minded obsession that prevented her from dwelling on a problem she could not solve. Eventually, it all came down to a simple fact. She had a hurt soul that prevented her from communicating with the divine. She needed that soul healed before she could even learn what was needed to cross the veil back to earth. If it was even possible. She would get a healed soul later. In the meanwhile, there were limbs to reattach.

The first patient was to be Koro. The tall Amazon woman was still inconsolable after the loss of her arm. Viv brought her to the redesignated limb reattachment hut the very next morning while also trying to keep her expectations low.

“You can regrow my arm?”

“No, I mean maybe, I mean we think it could work.”

"You can regrow my arm?" she yelled, "Oh Viv thank you thank you I never expected you to come up with something you're a real sister!"

Denerim wasn't in the hut. Instead, they found Brenna alone mixing a fresh batch of goop. The town's healer was fresh and rested now, a stark contrast from her harried self after the battle. She even looked a bit younger.

"Oh, here you are. I am standing in for the inquisitor. Neriad came to me in my sleep to share the knowledge of the relevant spell."

She blushed slightly.

"What sort of dream?" Viv asked with suspicion.

"A woman doesn't kiss a tell, my dear. Now let us get started, shall we?"

Viv pestered in her mind about not getting bonked in her dreams by god-like dudes, like, ever. There was no justice. Nevertheless, her patient was waiting and she started by forming the limb this time. She decided that it was best to cut the stump literally at the last moment so as to prevent her patient from bleeding to death. Shame she didn't think of that before. Rest in Arthur, poor squirrels.

It turned out that reforming a human limb was not overly complicated compared to a squirrel limb, but also that the size difference made it a long-winded chore. Viv actually had to draw from her dagger's power reserves to keep going. Koro was watching the thing reform with clear wonder.

"If it doesn't work, we can still eat it. I always wondered how I tasted!"

"Squeel!"

"No cannibalism in my operation room!" Viv reproached. The arm was almost fully formed now. She could see keratin solidifying over the fingertips and the muscles getting toned. The arm was white and hairless like a marble statue.

After hours of grueling labor, she had it. Probably.

It looked right.

"Can I move now? My ass hurts," Koro told her.

"No. Now we cut off your stump and reattach the arm before you bleed out."

"Oh."

"I am ready," Brenna said as she stood up from the desk where she had been working. She approached to construct and traced her own side with a light finger. It lit up and bathed her peaceful smile with golden light.

"Alright Koro, remember that this will sting a bit while your conduits are redrawn."

“Cutting off my stump won’t sting?”

“We’re going to use an anesthetic.”

“A what now?”

“A painkiller,” Viv explained. Fortunately, the helpful apothecary had prepared quite a lot and he sure knew his stuff. Viv traced the place where they would cut with a pen and checked on Koror to see if the medicine was taking effect. The tall woman had crossed eyes and her tongue was slightly out.

“Koro?”

“Bblblblblblblblbl.”

She was high as fuck. Good enough. Viv signaled Solfis and the golem deftly removed the scarred tissue with the kind of expertise surgeons would kill for. Viv smashed the newly-formed limb against the stump just as Brenna activated her part of the ritual. The healer’s voice took on a deep pitch, one that felt mirrored by some other voice at the limit of Viv’s perception. Flesh melted into flesh as if it was putty and the fingers twitched. They turned pink as blood flooded Koro’s new extremities.

The fingers twitched again.

“Koro?”

“Blblblblbl yes?”

“Can you move your arms? Please?”

“The one I lost is sort of itchy.... Oh?”

She stared with childish wonder at her reformed arm. Her hand closed into a fist. Big, fat tears pearly in the woman’s eyes then fell in a generous cascade over her ruddy cheeks. The new limb flexed with a little bit of awkwardness, but soon the amazon had every finger touching her thumbs in a rhythmical dance.

“Is this a dream? Is it?”

“No,” Viv answered. She felt moved as well as they both watched the regrown limb with a mix of hope and apprehension. Even Brenna was holding her breath.

“By Neriad’s fetching buttocks, have we done it? Did it work?”

Viv nodded, quite happy.

“Looks like it —urg.”

Koro had taken the smaller woman in a bear hug strong enough for Viv to count all her ribs.

“Thankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“Hey. Hm. You might still feel some discomfort.”

“Thank youuuuuuuuuuuuu I will name my first daughter after you I swear. Where is Yan? I am going to declare. YAAAAAN! You tight-assed stud! Where are youuuuu?”

The woman crashed through the door despite Viv’s best efforts to hold her back — the outlander would have had a better chance at stopping a bull — and disappeared somewhere in the distance in a blur.

“Did she use a skill?” Viv wondered.

//We may want to change the protocol for the following operations, Your Grace.

“I don’t think using restraints is such a good idea,” Viv replied.

//Then perhaps a more resilient attire?

“Yeah.”

Viv had unleashed a drugged up horny two-armed bare-chested amazon upon the poor owner of the city’s brothel. She wished him all the best.

“Alright, I’m exhausted for today but let’s regrow an eye tomorrow.”

Unfortunately for the tired Viv, the news of her achievement traveled across the land at the speed of a sprinting Koro and a party was held that night in her and Neriad’s honor. Her reputation had grown so much that, by then, most of the city knew that she was an outlander. Denying the truth proved pointless because the Kazarans were like a bunch of excited kids given a big secret. They whispered it among themselves while eyeing strangers with suspicion. In this case, it just meant the prisoners. By the next day she had seventeen people lined up to regrow fingers and arms. All her tasks were delegated and she would spend most of the day in the operation building. Monster flesh was regularly retrieved by an overly enthusiastic Koro at no cost. Also, for some reason she received a message from the bank to inform her that gold swap for silver would be set at a guaranteed and generous fixed rate for her and her immediate companions only. No idea what caused that.

It only took two weeks for the first ripple to make itself known.

“We want to join Kazar.”

Viv reclined in her chair, breathing in the fresh air brought on by the Kazaran tree outside her tower's window. She took on Marredyn's appearance. The mountain tribe leader still wore that incredible big hat thing on his wizened head and a pleasant smile adorned his face. She thought that she could detect a hint of tension in the way he held his tea cup. She was not sure though.

Also, last time he had tried to influence her with magic and that still pissed her off so she let him marinate in the following silence. Served him right.

"Join us?" she finally allowed.

"Yes. A long-term alliance that goes beyond the military."

A moment passed again quietly and it was clear that the tribe leader's patience was fraying.

"Just like the one we discussed during our last meeting."

"What changed?" Viv deadpanned.

Marredyn grit his teeth.

"Your new ideas are more pervasive than I thought, and many, including my own son, have expressed a great interest in rediscovering our roots. I find them hasty and careless. Perhaps I was too, when I was young."

"Why don't you tell me what you had in mind and I'll write a treaty?"

"Any chances that you remove the tax on the transfer of goods?"

"Of course I will, wouldn't want to hamper trade and thus reduce the federal tax."

The man froze in his chair, tea cup held in a frightful grip.

"What's a federal tax?"

Viv gave him the most evil smile that centuries of bureaucratic legacy could produce.

"I am so glad you asked."

In the end, the mountain tribe joined Kazar as a separate state in what was starting to look like a federal republic, or a federal empire maybe since there were no elections scheduled and Viv had no plans to do so. The treaty was airtight thanks to Solfis' vast and really weird expertise on the matter. The golem had access to hundreds of years of imperial records and jurisprudence. The key was to keep it simple. The tribes were part of the alliance but they retained their own local government, local laws and customs. The rest would be smoothed out by increased interconnections and the end of entry, exit, and trade fees.

Two days after that, Ban returned and asked for Viv as she was resting from shoving someone's new eye back in its socket. The ancient head of the heavy infantry detachment was wearing his full armor including the pennants he and his men had started to attach to various parts of their gear. He showed the tree of Kazar as well as his rank. He had a pair of younger men with him.

"Lady Viv, I have returned and I bring two recruits with me. Those are my cousin and my eldest grandson."

He tugged nervously on his long white beard.

"I vouch for them, on my honor!"

"You know the score, Ban. Either Solfis says they make the cut or they don't."

//They will be granted their chance.

The golem exited from the operation room and deployed to its full height. One of the young ones looked him in the baleful orbs and took a valiant step forward which was either a credit to his courage or a total lack of survival instinct. Viv could not tell.

"I would die for Kazar, sir!"

//That is a start.

//Now let us make sure you kill for her instead.

Little by little, the heavy infantrymen trickled back into the camp now that the food situation was good enough. The exceptional harvest set people at ease and they saw it as a good omen and a sign that Sardanal had blessed the city. The recruits built a large barracks and training fields complex to house themselves. It had to be expanded once when the tribe warriors arrived, then another time because of an influx of crossbowmen recruits from the ranks of the refugees, mostly women. Viv assumed that a lot of folks were fucking but Solfis managed to maintain discipline.

Koro married Yan on the first day of autumn, just as Viv finished reattaching the last missing digit. Nothing would ever get her used to the scent of base-material goop. It was now time for the second phase of the 'fuck the prince' plan.

"Ok now that everyone is rearmed and relegged, we need to prepare the terrain for the arrival of the punitive expedition," she told the council at their next meeting.

"It cannot possibly happen before next year," Farren replied, "are we not rushing things?"

"Can you be absolutely sure about that?"

"Yes, we are mostly sure."

It was Brenna who had interrupted the argument before it could really begin.

“And it doesn’t matter,” she continued, “because we have another reason to set out.”

Viv nodded at the invitation to elaborate.

“In his message, Neriad said that he would send people our way and also be miffed if they end up in some monster belly. So to summarize, we can leave most of our regular troops to be trained here while setting out with the scouts so we are not exactly interrupting anything. Second, it will allow us to escort the next batch of refugees through the forest. Keep in mind that they will mostly be crippled until we can heal them. Third, it will allow us to recon the next battlefield and fourth, if I spend another day cooped up in the operation room, I’m liable to stab someone. Seriously.”

The others nodded.

“We can imagine that someone who enjoys fighting her way through hordes of undead would find this life dull,” Farren said with a supportive voice.

The others agreed and voiced their sympathy.

“We’re grateful for the healing and guidance. We’ll manage while you go kill and cook some monsters, don’t worry.”

“Yes. We can hold the fort while you unwind. There is plenty of forest for you to thrash to your heart’s content!”

“And please take Arthur with you. Please.”

They nodded vigorously. Viv didn’t really trust herself with an answer so mostly kept silent until the end of the council.

The next expedition was set to leave soon. Denerim and Orkan would join, but they would not return to Kazar afterward.

“We stayed until the spell was ready, but now it’s time to return to the fold. Besides, we received a sending,” the old knight had told her.

“A sending?”

“Like a dream, but when we woke up we knew that we were needed in Enoria. I do not know the details but I suspect that it relates to the civil war. Many people will die and have died already. This means horror, pain. Aberrants. Contracts with the dark gods. I suspect that a

lot of inquisitors are converging on middle Enoria right now. We'll know more when we get there."

Two-Six would also join them as the top scout in Kazar who also happened to be comfortable with people. Viv asked Solfis to stay and oversee the training of the new recruits but her idea was immediately shut down.

//Absolutely out of the question, Your Grace.

//You may not travel to the deep woods on a scouting mission without me.

//This project is certainly more dangerous than retaking Kazar was.

//Additionally, you do not have my database knowledge on endemic monster species.

//Additionally, none of the meatbags here have my short-range detection capabilities.

//Additionally, Ban can handle the two months of physical conditioning and basic drills required to turn this provincial chaff into decent candidates without my input.

//I would even disobey a direct order to stay as it would contravene a main directive.

"I was not about to ask."

//Forgive me for doubting the integrity of your decision-making centers.

"That is the most roundabout way of calling someone stupid I've ever heard.

//I am delighted to be expanding your horizons, Your Grace.

Marruk was coming, of course.

"The last time I crossed it was as a caravan hand. I didn't get to see anything except the next set of latrines. I'm eager to see what the forest has to offer!"

"You mean food, right?"

"Of course!"

Viv left the Kark woman listing mushrooms and recruited the next member of the expedition.

"Squee!"

"I don't know, Arthur. I have never seen oversized squirrels before."

The expedition set out with heavy backpacks and a small cart dragged by two harnesses. It contained additional supplies, mostly food, as well as Solfis. With the deadlands warding stones left behind, the golem would be back to limited operation time. They departed at dawn at a brisk pace. Denerim spent the first hour discussing details.

“We can take turns dragging the sled. Don’t even need two people if we stay on the road. Two-six and Viv should be exempt.”

“I would prefer to scout ahead, yes,” the dark-haired and dark-eyed woman confirmed. She was wearing a forest armor made from a gambeson covered in a variety of cloth and furs. The irregular brown and green patterns probably helped with her stealth.

“Hm I appreciate it,” Viv said, “but I’m not sure I should get the preference treatment.

The rest of them exchanged a few embarrassed glances.

“Hm no offense lady Viv, but how high is your power? Early twenties?”

It currently stood at seventeen after weeks of effort running through the forest.

“Not even that? Neriad’s balls that’s low.”

“Hey!”

“No, please do not be annoyed. This is what we meant. All three of us stand above forty. Your time would be better spent keeping an eye out. You will tire more easily than the rest of us.”

“Fair enough.”

Viv was not mad to have spent months of crushing training back on earth just to be some sort of cute weakling here. Not at all.

Denerim then split the watch, of which Viv was not exempt, as well as various duties including latrines, foraging, and setting up camp. It was all done on the fly, in under an hour and with no one complaining. Viv thought that he must have a skill or something. They kept going and Viv immersed herself in the strange sensation the woods brought. The sounds grew smothered and this vague feeling of infinity soon clung to her mind, giving her a slight vertigo when she allowed it. Her mana mastery let her feel a stream of mana as thick as syrup flowing through the world around her. It was no more conscious than a wave is conscious, but it could be just as overwhelming. Viv wondered if the effect could increase if one stepped away from the main path. Come to think of it, mana behaved strangely around the straight line, as if it avoided the stone scar cleaving through its territory.

“That road is ancient, right? How can it not be overgrown?”

She thought she might have already asked Varska. Perhaps the others knew more? It was Solfis who answered. She should have guessed.

**//The Deadshield trail was built at the dawn of the Age of Expansion, Your Grace.
//Empress Kadiran ordered its construction after her husband was slain visiting a neighboring kingdom.
//Records from this era show inconsistencies and wild exaggerations.
//As expected of indoctrinated meatbags.**

“Wait, are you not all about indoctrinating meatbags?”

**//Soldiers and citizens yes.
//Record keepers no.**

“That is not worrisome at all,” Orkan commented with a wide smile. Denerim shrugged. Viv thought that he might be jaded. He proved it an instant later.

“Unsurprising if you consider who pays the chroniclers and why. We had the same problem before the temple founded an order of historians. The first great sagas were meant to sing the praises of those who paid to have them done. They served a purpose and that purpose was not reporting the truth.”

**//How perceptive of you.
//Ending digression. Returning to main subject.
//Later chroniclers disagree on what means the Empress used to create the path.
//However, they all agree that it must have been a vile and scornful spell.
//Something that would kill the land for centuries.
//Nevertheless, the width of the path has been reduced by over two thirds compared to the original way.
//It will disappear within a few more generations.**

“Wait, really?” Viv asked with surprise.

**//Yes.
//The woods are ancient.
//They always return.
//Always.**

With that slightly ominous comment, silence returned to the group. Viv realized that she enjoyed walking through the seemingly endless forest. The peace came as a pleasant contrast to the rush of activity of the past few weeks. With summer ending, the heat was manageable. A light wind brought to them a bit of freshness and the pleasant scent of living things. She was only missing music.

That night, they made their camp at a prepared site at the edge of the forest between two large boulders. There were enough blackened pits around to know that quite a few people had camped there in the past.

“A popular place, but I suppose that you want something more complex?” Denerim asked her.

“Yes. I was thinking about something underground and easily defensible so that people can rest without worries from monster attacks. Speaking of which, do we expect anything soon?”

Two-Six returned from foraging then with her arms filled with nuts. Marruk's eyes widened in anticipation.

"Nothing but beastlings. At most a few scalehounds. We are too close to the edge and the road for the larger creatures, and we are the optimal configuration as well."

"What do you mean?" Viv asked.

"Well, the less people there are, the less traces we leave. This is also why we didn't bring animals with us. Few creatures will notice us and some of the more mana-sensitive ones will avoid us as well. Large convoys are systematically attacked, hence the defenses."

That night, Viv took the opportunity to finally see the result of the past few months of efforts. The wide variety of stuff she'd pursued in the past two months gave her a wide spread of progress. It wasn't a bad idea to take a more generalist approach on occasion, if only because she would have gone insane just practicing the same exercises all the time. Solfis had approved.

Current status:

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

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 25.3%

This had not changed much except for her attunement, a constant reminder that her time was short.

Physical		Mental	
Power	17	Focus	36
Finesse	21	Acuity	36
Endurance	24	Willpower	37

Crawling through thickets had improved every aspect of her body while the endless practices on the change meaning and subsequent surgeries allowed her to push her mental stats towards the next level. Solfis had confirmed that she had all the signs of a young expert and anticipated that she would only keep progressing from now on, albeit more slowly.

General skills

Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 4
Survival	Intermediate 2	Householding	Apprentice 8
Hand to hand combat	Apprentice 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7		

It was the first time that those had moved that she could remember, and only athletics and survival were concerned. It had taken a lot of effort but she could feel the difference thanks to her experience on earth. Athletics did not teach her where not to walk. That had been Orkan. Instead, it acted as a small boost and guidance on how to move, how to breathe. It constantly pushed her to do better without her having to make a conscious effort. The same was true for survival. A look at the nearest underbush and she guessed that there were thorns under that, and quite possibly snakes as well.

Not for the first time, Viv wondered how a modern army would fare here before they could develop their interface. The answer was probably decently well so long as their supply lines were intact, but isolated squads would be wiped out too easily.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Beginner 6
Arcane Constructs	Beginner 7	Danger sense	Beginner 6
Leadership	Intermediate 1	Intimidation	Intermediate 7
Acuity reflex	Beginner 7		

Acuity reflex and leadership and made some good progress. In particular, her leadership now allowed her to spend much less time remembering, deciding and delegating than before. This left her a lot of free time without harming the quality of her work (that she could tell). It also meant that local armies and states could perhaps outperform some modern administrations in terms of performance simply because their civil servants were inhumanely good as opposed to, for example, the absolute brain-dead baboon of a woman who had handled the making of her passport.

She also suspected that acuity reflex, leadership and danger sense could not be trained the normal way. They had to be learned in context. As for mana mastery and arcane constructs, they had made massive progress. Without them, she could never have cast the spell to regrow limbs.

It was all very fortuitous.

Anyway, Viv was satisfied with the results and could not wait to kill new things and then eat them. What was life without some adventurous gastronomy anyway? She had taken spices and dry herbs with her.

The expedition progressed for two more days at a brisk pace until Viv felt a change. The trees were growing taller, so tall, in fact, that sunlight barely filtered through dense canopies when they stepped away from the road. The cries of creatures grew more common while strange and alien plants grew in colored copses, or spread over old barks.

On the dawn of the fourth day, Viv woke up to the moss behind her singing quietly. The sound reminded her of a choir heard through stone walls, subdued, yet still wonderful. A tree stood in the distance, its silvery leaves unfolding to welcome the growing light. Tweeting notes rose from a scarlet bird with an iridescent plumage. The beast stared them down from a dead branch as high as a small building.

//Welcome to the deep wood, Your Grace.

Then a white, scaly form smashed into the tree and the bird died.

“Squee!”

Chapter 76: A tale of many wings

There were plenty of camping spots along the old imperial road. Well, perhaps ‘plenty’ was pushing it, Viv thought. There were a dozen ones that clung to the sides of the stone scar like huddling chicks. It was enough for the average slow caravan to travel from one end to another without having to clear space more than three times. The issue was that they had been selected for safety and convenience and Viv wanted hideouts selected for discretion. It would be pointless to have a base that any scout could find by looking in the wrong direction, and so the first step was to scout around to find suitable places. After a breakfast that included fresh fowl and Viv making a small crown of red feathers at Arthur’s request, the group set out to find something promising.

//The Deadshield woods may appear flat to the eye of the uninitiated.

//They are not.

//We will soon come across hills and caverns.

//There are many such elevations in the forest.

“Let’s hope we find something suitable quickly, or we will have to go on without.”

//You do not need an overabundance of supply caches, Your Grace.

//Although you need more than one in case some of our soldiers get captured and betray one of the locations.

“You are thinking a bit far ahead.”

**//I am always thinking far ahead.
//You meatbags should try it too.
//Your Grace.**

“Yeah yeah.”

Solfis was right of course. Viv found a minute of amusement when she realized that the trio of close quarter fighters had not even turned their heads at the exchange. They kept looking around with vigilance, even Marruk who was carrying Solfis on her massive back. Viv was getting roasted by a genocidal bone golem and had spent minutes creating a headdress for a dragonette and no one batted an eye. Really got to show that if you were rich or powerful enough, ‘weird’ turned into ‘eccentric’. That was nice. With more and more people considering Arthur their mascot, ‘eccentric’ would soon become ‘normal’. Viv refrained from laughing maniacally and kept walking.

So far in the forest, the underbush was less as tall trees blocked a lot of the light under lush canopies. Vines and other growths spread over old bark in a riot of color sometimes made brighter by an errant ray of sunlight. The forest kept the space under its boughs cool and comfy, so that the scouting had become a pleasant stroll to Viv. Her skinsuit helped regulate the temperature as well and when she felt a bit too hot, she would gulp some water from an enchanted canteen. She had paid money for a minor cooling enchantment, not much but it was enough. Between this and the minty toilet paper, all her orifices were clean and refreshed, haha.

Better not share that with the rest of the group. They would just become jealous.

But really, it was nice. Nice, tall trunks so large it would take four Vivs to embrace them alternated with small thickets of fruiting brambles. She saw mushrooms in small packs and picked a few Solfis recognized as safe for consumption. They found roots as well. Sometime in the mid-morning, Two-Six returned from her scouting in a rush and everybody grabbed their weapons.

“No no, nothing urgent. Witch Bob, I mean witch Viv, can you shoot your spells from afar? And accurately?”

“Yes.”

“Good, follow me... I found something! You lot cover our backs but don’t clang on your shield or whatever it is you tin cans like doing.”

“Oi!” Orkan protested, but they were already on their way.

Two-Six dragged them through more rugged terrain going directly north and away from the road. Viv had to jog for twenty minutes before they arrived at the edge of a clearing. Crumbled pieces of wood dotted the space, a sign that the opening to the sky had come from the fall of a giant. She had this intense, focused demeanor that really showed her Hadal parentage. Most of the time, only her pallor and slightly stooped posture betrayed her but now she was predatory, hunched forward and moved sinuously over the terrain like a quiet

shadow. The woman turned and her eyes flashed red under the brown of their normal appearance. Viv was sure that it was an illusion to mask scarlet iris and a slit pupil.

Two-Six had stopped. She was staring at something with laser-focus. Viv searched the clearing and could not quite detect what this was about. The place had a powerful brown and green mana presence but that was it.

“Siege tortoise right ahead. Young one, male, recently shed his keratinous scutes.”

“His what?” Marruk asked, confused.

“The plates on its back. The small ones shed when the tortoise grows,” Viv replied as she searched the ground, finding nothing. It was a mess of rotting wood, grass and small trees.

“Right?” she asked, now uncertain. It was a shit idea to make too many assumptions in a world with magic.

“Right!” Two-Six said with excitement. “The siege tortoises find a place to huddle and shed all of them at once, then they eat the discarded scutes to recover the mana within and wait while it transfers to the new layer. That means that right now...”

“It’s vulnerable,” Orkan finished.

“And delicious!” Two-Six finished. She grinned and licked her lips, revealing teeth that were a bit too sharp.

//Is this a scouting or a culinary expedition?

“The food is only part of it. There is something you need to see beyond. The tortoise merely blocks the way. And also the best avenue of retreat if something unfortunate happens.”

//Very well then.

//I assume that you want Her Grace to slay the beast from a distance?

“Right. We don’t have time to dance with the creature. If Viv kills it from range we can harvest it, and then...”

“Make soup,” Denerim says. “It is considered a delicacy in all of Param. The green mana refreshes the body and removes exhaustion. I have salt. We could preserve some of it as well...”

“Alright, alright you gluttons! I’m in!” Viv complained. “Just can’t see the target.”

Solfis snarled and unfolded himself from Marruk’s back. Fully deployed, he was more than half again as tall as her. He took one step to the side and picked a straight offshoot from a nearby stump, then one step back to kneel by Viv’s side. He worldlessly flipped it horizontally, and Viv understood what he meant. Solfis had aligned the improvised arrow towards the tortoise’s body.

At first, she struggled to spot the beast in its surroundings, even knowing it was there. The identify ability had trouble focusing as well, perhaps because she could not spot anything specific. The monster's green mana merged it into its surroundings both visually and to her magical perception. It took a minute for her to identify its dorsal spiked ridge as 'not a branch'.

"Fuck I could have walked right by it."

//That is why human armies must employ scouts.

//Complimentary paths lead to the most effective groups.

//As you already surmised, Your Grace.

//Because of the limitations inherent to your fleshy forms.

"How do I kill it? Its head is pulled in."

The group stopped.

Then Marruk sighed and banged her door-shield very loudly.

"Squee?"

Viv blocked her ears and cursed when a horrible and slightly flabbergasted head emerged from the shell. A sphere formed over her shoulder while glyphs popped quickly into existence. She overcharged the spell before the tortoise could find the source of the disturbance.

"Blast."

The artillery spell crossed the clearing in eerie silence and passed through its target's neck, top to bottom.

The head fell off.

"Soup time!"

"Squee!"

Viv sat heavily on a piece of wood, playing with a feather. She had been sidelined once again because of her low physical stats and her lack of experience in processing tortoise carcasses. Arguably not her fault.

"Hey Two-Six, how come you're so knowledgeable about wildlife?"

The Hadal tossed a piece of ligament and shrugged.

“Most first generations were trained to kill people. I managed to apprentice with hunters from Mornyr instead, providing cheap meat to every poor church around. They didn’t mind my origins, only cared about how well I could stab things dead. Many of the Hadal survivors share a similar story by the way. The best hunters get commissions to hunt specific beasts and quite a bit of money as a result. Best part is that they don’t try to kill you afterwards because you’re a loose end.”

“Is there a hunter organization?”

“Depends on where you are. Baran has a royal society, for example, but you go south and everyone in a village can hunt. I remember one time we were chasing this scalehound...”

Two-Six shared a few stories. So did Denerim, although the old knight had mostly hunted aberrants. Orkan had been trained as a duelist and only had a limited experience killing monsters. The discussion lasted until lunch where Viv got her promised soup and had to agree that it made her feel energetic. They decided to return to the cart to load it with meat before continuing their exploration. It was then time for Two-Six to show what she had discovered.

“I found a cave that would be perfect for us, but it has strange creatures in it and I’m not sure if it would be wise to clean it.”

**//I have a vast repository of knowledge at my disposal.
//Lead on.**

They walked for only an hour in a straight line this time. Their path snaked between smaller hills and elevations, following a dry riverbed of smooth stones.

“Are there rivers here?” Viv asked.

“In the woods, yes, but no large ones close to here and the smaller streams change course all the time,” Denerim said. “Ah, I believe that we have found our destination?”

The path ahead cleared a bit as they entered a secluded valley nestled between two elevations. Two-Six was right, it looked good. There was even a small pond to the side filled with clear water. A cave with a large entrance waited at the end of a gravelly way with only sparse trees. The problem came from the creatures currently living in and around those trees. Viv had never seen anything quite like it.

The trees were covered in a silky white substance with strands extending between trunks. Small white grubs traveled around those, tending colonies of clear-capped mushrooms and doing the gods knew what else. A dozen large worms as thick as a human torso crawled around surrounded by clumps of servants. Large creatures that obviously belonged to the same species glided gracefully around. They looked like butterflies if butterflies were the size of eagles.

“Well,” Viv said.

They studied the scene in silence. Viv carefully kneeled to inspect a nearby grub, clearly some sort of scout. It was slowly climbing over rocks. It was as long as her hand and rather thick.

Images of world-ending insectoid threats filled Viv’s mind until she realized that the host trees the creatures used were still relatively hale. They didn’t look particularly threatening.

[Pleiada grub: harmless, a worker drone.]

Arthur landed nearby and inspected the scene with curiosity. She didn’t seem threatened by the gliding creatures.

//The coloring is slightly different, however this species matches the record for Pleiada worms with 97% accuracy.

//Pleiada worms are endemic to the Deadshield woods and produce valuable silk.

Viv watched Arthur go closer to the grub and lower her snout. She hoped the curious dragonling would not try to eat that? Were they full of protein? She hesitated. Meanwhile, Solfis was not done.

//Unfortunately, the silk cannot be harvested without wiping out the colony.

//Indeed, the flying specimens you see act as a deterrent and very mobile defensive force.

//They have a peculiar defense mechanism.

“Squee!”

Viv turned to see the grub writhing in Arthur’s claw. The dragon was inspecting a yellowish liquid on her hand. The grub had thrown up on her.

“Arthur noooooo!”

//When threatened, members of the nest will mark the attackers with a pheromone.

It hit her then just as everyone grabbed their shields, including Viv though she was a bit late. A pungent, acrid smell invaded her nostrils. It was not exactly horrible but it was overwhelmingly strong, saturating her nose in mere moments.

//The defenders will converge upon the marked one.

One of the fliers emitted a high-pitched, keening sound, soon mirrored by another, then another, until the clearing sounded like an angry choir. They flocked towards the humans. Viv grabbed Arthur and started running. The others did exactly the same thing except Solfis who merely strolled. Denerim and Orkan each took Viv under an arm while Two-Six picked up Arthur herself. Marruk was at the end of the formation. They accelerated even more, and not a moment too soon because the droning mass of giga-butterflies was picking up speed.

//Following which they will detonate themselves in a powerful explosion.

“Aw shit.”

“Squee!”

Viv did not wait and started to throw purge nets at their pursuers. The thin black wires bit into the swarm but the creatures were simply too fast. Even with enhanced perception, many of them dove under or whirled around her assault. Pieces of wings and quivering bodies were left in their wake but it was not enough. She persisted. Purge net was the best tool she had against fast-movers.

The creatures gained on them. Denerim guided their flight into a narrow ridge and managed to stymie the flying worms by forcing them in the narrow corridor. Viv's spells simply didn't stop and the first rank got mowed down. The rest kept its distance after that. Viv immediately saw why. Some of the creatures had climbed up and were getting ready to dive-bomb them.

//Ah, excellent.

Viv watched the golem and noticed that it had picked an absolutely panicked harran, the rabbit-like creature. He briefly inspected it.

//Shields up please.

Viv did not think. She raised the largest mana shield she could and braced behind her steel buckler.

Her danger sense screamed and the reflex casting ability activated. The world slowed down to a crawl. She could see every hair of Denerim's beard as the powerful knight gritted his teeth. She screamed her defiance and put everything she had in the defensive spell. Every ounce of mana she could muster went to thicken the half-sphere separating them from the suicide bombers. It could stop a tank round, she thought.

Solfis' arm blurred and the world punched Viv left and right. Her mana was completely drained in an instant. Her head slapped back.

Her ears hurt.

She had trouble breathing. The sky was nice though, blue with nice white clouds and a surprising amount of dust. Pieces of debris, rocks and roots rained upon her. It was really quiet.

She was in quite a bit of pain.

Her ears whistled. She gulped air and it tasted hot.

Someone forced a bit of glass between her teeth and the soothing, familiar herbal taste of a flesh-mending potion chased away the metallic tang in her mouth. The concoction was bitter as hell and she could tell it was the good stuff because her hearing returned on the spot. People were swearing.

“Neriad’s balls that was close.”

Viv gingerly sat up to a glowing pair of yellow eyes and a series of massive craters as if the place had been shelled by the Americans. She was already okay, physically. It was not something that the combat medic could really get used to. It just went against everything she knew before... before all of this.

“Is everyone alright?”

There were a few mumbles and curses but overall people seemed fine and more than a little annoyed. Viv could tell why. It was time for another lesson in parenting. Except...

“Hold on. Where is Arthur?”

//She appears to have headed out, Your Grace.

//Towards this mountain to our side.

Viv cursed and for the first time perhaps ever, felt anger and disappointment towards the dragonette. The four other humans fell silent. She sighed deeply.

“I’ll go get her.”

“We’ll be following you.”

Viv wanted to be alone to scold her adoptive kid but she recognized that they were not in a safe place. Splitting up now would be the height of stupidity.

“Lead on.”

The team checked themselves and their gear quickly. Nobody commented on the fact that they had been two fingers away from getting pureed. After a brief inspection, Solfis opened the way up. They were still in the ridge they had followed to escape the Pleiada swarm.

It had been uncomfortably close.

Viv reminded herself that it was not because a grub was harmless by itself according to her inspection skill that it was really harmless.

“By the way,” Marruk said with a careful tone, “should we clear out the worms now that their defenders are gone?”

“No, I want the colony alive and well,” Viv replied.

“Hmm, you do?”

“Yes.”

The others did not comment and she was in no mood to explain her idea right now. They climbed the sharp incline quickly and found a beast trail carving its way against the side of the mountain. Pines grew in thick clumps there and hid the way up. Their sap had replaced the scent of dust. Viv shivered at the memory of a giant spider and focused on the bone golem before her. They kept climbing.

“How high could she have gone,” Viv grumbled. It was not like Arthur to be gone like that, and certainly not like her to stay on foot. She preferred flying.

They were almost at the top when Viv heard an angry squeal. There was a footprint at the edge of the flat summit, just before her.

It was really, really big.

Viv heard a woosh like wind through giant sails and her heart skipped a beat for the second time in less than ten minutes. Mana imploded before her eyes. She was stunned again.

The witch faced a kaleidoscope of colors the likes of which she had never experienced. The sensations overwhelmed her in turn, even though her own sense of mana was still nascent. The riot of dyes was simply too much as it rolled and roared around her. Red for fire, for anger and passion. Black for destruction and change. Life for itself and for saving what was precious. Blue came with peace and immobility, then grey with movement and lightness. Brown and green spoke of growth and tenacity. There were other colors she had never seen in humans at the edge of her awareness as well, floating and whispering of things forbidden and pretty. A vivid phantasmagoria took her like a wave and washed her mind on a sandy shore of confusion. She was left blinking and disoriented, but there was one thing she knew. Arthur was there, where the mana came from, and that was where she was going.

A hand grabbed her shoulder as she took the next step forward.

//Your Grace, you must not.

“I must.”

The hand stayed. She turned her head. The other mortals were frozen just like she had been. Denerim had recovered enough to gently drag the others back. Their eyes met. She ignored the question within. She ignored the option to give Solfis a clear order to let her go.

“I must.”

The baleful yellow glare surveyed the track of the massive paw in front of them, assessing their chances and finding them risible, no doubt. Nevertheless, the answer was exactly what she expected.

//I am right behind you.

There was nothing left to say. She went over the edge.

They stood on a small plateau surrounded by the tips of towering pine trees. A large rock covered half of the area in front of them and on the face of that rock there was a cave entrance and in front of that cave entrance there was a dragon.

It was green.

It was also fuckhuge. Or at least it felt fuckhuge. It was certainly big enough.

Also, it held Arthur's squirming form under its paw.

"Get the fuck off of her."

Viv realized she had spoken and came to regret it, as Solfis took his place by her side. She had never seen the golem look anything but detached, but now he was low to the ground with its legs flexed and his arms ready. It would have been threatening were it not for the fucking dragon.

A yellow iris narrowed on Viv. She decided that she was kind of fucked and might as well show some spine.

And yet, despite the tension, no violence occurred. The dragon's gigantic head swiveled on its serpentine neck. The creature had to be at least as tall as a two-story building with the horns being in the attic, and that was sitting on its haunches. Its head matched Viv in height. The visible part of its eyes were as large as her entire head. Her inspection skill triggered and returned a headache. She vaguely got the impression that it was male and rather young. She also understood that only a hundred and fifty years old was young for a dragon.

As for the reptilian legend, 'he', she guessed, lowered its head to inspect her under every angle. Arthur was still struggling but she seemed unharmed under all those talons. It was a status quo that she was okay with for the moment.

The inspection went on. It lasted for a whole minute during which mana ebbed and flowed but the dragon made no move. It appeared to be beyond dumbfounded. Finally, a thought entered Viv's mind. The meaning was conveyed through the language of the world, the same runes she used for her spell. There were no sounds uttered.

HOW?

It was simple but also very, very loud and Viv's mind could not adequately be covered with her hands, so she dug a circle at her feet and hoped that the dragon would not mind. It did not. Perhaps he didn't think of her as a threat. Unfortunately, he was probably correct. With the minor protection in place, Viv addressed the living myth.

“The gods played their games. Please release Arthur.”

The dragon was still tilting his head here and there. He repeated the question though this time it was not as loud. She realized that he did not understand her, so she formed glyphs and tried to think them at him. It only worked because his mind was already touching hers.

God of Outlanders made it.

Please release tiny one.

The dragon looked at her fixedly. He blinked once and sniffed her. He was oven-hot from this close.

A human god?

She thought back yes, and the large creature finally realized that Arthur was still struggling to escape. She had her jaws around his... thumb. For lack of a better word.

I was challenged.

For territory.

Viv wondered what the fuck he was on about, but not for long. The dragon sent a scene directly to her mind. In there, she was very tall and a bit sleepy. A child sprinted from behind the line of pines. She had felt her, of course. The child stopped and stood on her hind legs, wings deployed. The child was offering a territorial challenge. She was amused by the child's recklessness and grabbed her mid-lunge. There were others coming. Tool makers.

Viv was thrown back in her head. She reeled under the onslaught and felt a migraine forming, the kind that no flesh-mending potions could fix. The green dragon was looking down at Arthur who had stopped struggling. They were communicating, Viv was sure of it. Eventually, the green dragon turned back to Viv and she felt their minds connect.

Incomprehension.

Leaving.

The large creature smoothly turned with a grace that belied its large body and took off at a run. Viv hid her face against the powerful draft. When she opened them again, he was away.

Viv watched the dragon swerve and disappear behind a hilltop. He was as fast as a plane. She could still taste hints of grey mana where he had spread his wings.

She sat down where she was.

So yeah.

A dragon.

He existed incredibly strongly in her mana perception, and possessed all the dyes at levels she could only dream off. She thought that no spell of hers that could put a dent in him would reach him anyway. He was the most magical creature she'd ever felt by several orders of magnitude. Before it, human casters were mud blocks playing gods.

And yet, for all its magical and physical might, the creature had been disappointingly stupid. Viv had felt it in the way he had struggled to accept her status as a draconic surrogate mommy. He had not known what to do. He had shown no real curiosity, not like Arthur who even now sniffed the grey mana and flapped her wings with eager interest. Viv had survived, yet she had learned nothing. However, it turned out that Arthur had.

My human.

Pain?

Arthur's mind was an eager, bubbly pot of instincts and desires. She conveyed her message as best she could, through the haze of her own inexperience. Viv tried to return a thought but failed. The connection was too fragile, for now.

"I am not in pain. I am also not angry, but I am displeased. And disappointed."

Arthur's horned head drooped and Viv girded her heart to stop herself from rushing to the poor little one's rescue. It was an important teaching moment.

"You put yourself and me in danger."

We are strong.

And smart.

"We are not as strong and smart as you think. Maybe one day we will be, but it will take a long long time before we are as powerful as the one you challenged. Listen, it is good to be courageous but not good to be reckless. You are a smart girl and I thought you understood the difference but apparently you don't. You were in danger when the rathclaw attacked you and also when the flying worms pursued us just now. You attack first and think later.

I destroyed aberrant.

Mighty hunter!

"The problem is not attacking, it's attacking all the time. Sometimes you can win and sometimes you can't. We have been lucky so far. One day that luck will run out if you keep testing it."

Vivane strong.

Killed rathclaw.

Stopped worms.

“I got hurt by the worms.”

“Squeeeeee!”

“I’m fine now but the explosion got me. And you left. Look, I love you. You know that. I will always come when you are in danger. You just need to realize that I’m not as strong as I wish I were. I get hurt. I get tired. We are still fairly small, the two of us. We won’t get the chance to grow up unless you show as much cunning as you show courage. Attacking the aberrant from the sky where it couldn’t hit you was smart but touching the worm when Solfis was explaining what it did was not, nor was challenging the older dragon.”

Challenged to distract.

Protect my human.

Dragon too big.

“You left by yourself without telling me. Of course I would follow and of course I would meet him as a result.”

Arthur flopped down on the ground.

Feeling horrible.

“Look, the most important thing is that we are alive and well. So long as we have that, we can learn and we can progress, yes?”

And grow larger!

“Of course, but until you are large, please be smarter, be more cautious, and coordinate with me. We will work together and get much gold and food, yes?”

Gold and food!

“So no more running around and putting yourself in danger okay? Be a smart dragon so you can be a big dragon.”

Yes.

Smartest dragon.

Will not worry you.

Patient and deadly.

“Thank you. Now come here, let me hug you.”

Viv returned to the others. The mood was decidedly subdued. The idea of checking the dragon's lair was not even considered. Everyone decided to return to the base camp and rest for the day, including Solfis. Just as they were climbing, Denerim went to walk by Viv's side.

“So, does being an outlander come with strange and weird powers? Like attracting disasters and then surviving them?”

“Nope!”

They eventually found another mountain cave that fit the bill and left markers for later. The trip through the deep woods went without further incidents. They came across a swarm of voracious rodents, a territorial large bird with feathers like blades and a particularly aggressive pack of scale hounds but nothing the group could not handle or deter. Two-Six found a total of three well-hidden natural caves that could be used as supply caches, all of them marked for the future. They also managed to bathe in a natural lake after Solfis ‘fished’ a lone monster out of it. The golem had simply walked into the water and then walked out with his catch.

On the ninth day, the trees grew shorter and the sense of immensity abated. A few rain clouds hung low over the horizons. The wind had picked up when Two-Six returned to the group and signaled the presence of newcomers. Humans, this time.

“The ones you were expecting,” the Hadal said laconically.

The group stood still in the middle of the road, weapons sheathed. A large troop soon crossed a bend and came into view. They slowed down and deployed across the road. Viv waved at them and they kept going, though they kept their hands on their blades.

Viv had a gander at them and yep, no mistake, those were the people Neriad had announced. They were a weird bunch of armor-covered, scarred, overarmed grumpy men and women whose defining feature was that most of them were lacking one or more limbs. Only the youngest fighters looked whole and those were probably relatives. Viv spotted a wiry lad with a missing eye and a monocle on the other holding a massive longbow on his back, an old man with mutton chops with a missing leg, a missing arm, two prostheses and a warhammer. A woman with a cut-off hand had a blade mounted on her armguard. They were led by an imposing fighter with his right arm cut off at the shoulder. He had a long, narrow sword strapped to his waist and didn't look scared at all.

The first of the wagons turned the bend then. Viv counted no less than three arrows planted into it. It looked like a normal cart that had been reinforced with planks and nails rather than the design she had previously seen.

Viv had never seen such an intimidating bunch, They radiated spite-fuelled expertise.

The leader stopped in front of her and bowed. She tried to inspect him. It just returned a vague sensation of danger. She had to admit that he looked good, like a romantic muscular hero from some old fantasy movie. Like a darker Brad Pitt with long wavy dark hair and a clean goatee.

Ok he was really hot.

“Greetings, milady. Are you perhaps associated with Kazar?”

“That we are. We were told to escort you but looking at you, not sure you really needed it.”

“We can always use a war mage, milady. And, are you the one we heard about? Can you really regrow lost limbs?”

“Yes. It’s worked so far.”

“Good. The lads and I have decided that if you help us with our handicap problem, we’ll help you with your rat problems. We all really dislike rats, especially the crowned variety.”

His voice was deep and surprisingly soft. It was also tinged with a deep melancholy and Viv got the impression that he really didn’t believe things could get better. The others behind them were more communicative though. They eyed her with a mix of greed and hope. They also nodded while caressing an assortment of nasty-looking war implements.

Viv looked at centuries of collected scorn and military experience, just waiting to be cured before they could be unleashed.

“Yeah, that will work just fine.”

Chapter 77: The Convoy

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

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

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

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

“No? Why?”

“They’re cunts. But you didn’t hear it from me.”

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

“I wonder why I have not met her clergy yet.”

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

“Yeah, not so sure about that, Denerim.”

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

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

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

“Oh.”

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

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

“Wow, aren’t you going a bit fast?”

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

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

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

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

“Wait. Was he flirting?”

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

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

//Perhaps his physique usually suffices to attract partners.

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

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

“Damn.”

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

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

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

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

//A yes, a subject for my experiments.

“Nevermind.”

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

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

exhausted. While he seemed to manage, she had dark pockets under her eyes and her traits were emaciated.

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

“It’s good that you came to escort us. Your name was Beebiane?” he asked.

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

Deadly.

“Viviane, yes. Don’t worry about the pronunciation. Most people struggle with it.”

“I’ll learn. I’m Solar and this is Wamiri, my wife. If you can really do what you say you can do, we will be in your debt.”

He closed his eyes and frowned.

“Sorry. Not really doubting you, more like...”

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

“Yeah. That. You have no idea how hard I’ve tried to find a way.”

“There are other methods to regrow a limb?”

He snorted.

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

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

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

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

“Because of the civil war?”

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

Viv frowned.

“I heard that noun before.”

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

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

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

“The king’s loyalists occupy the south, right?”

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

“Did Prince Lancer die?”

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

Viv blanched.

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Well, he has a good chance now but things are not as simple as it seems. Look, the temple of Neriad knows what happened. Truth is, both sides butchered each other at second Regnos. More than half of the rebel nobles are dead. Not wounded, dead. The first princess got beheaded during a charge aimed at cutting off the rebels and the first prince is maimed.

Only Lancer is a serious candidate right now, but he needs to win the war and it doesn't look good. You got to understand. Almost fifteen thousand people died on that field.

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

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

"And Prince Lancer."

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

Viv blinked.

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

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

"How prophetic..." Viv mumbled while Wamiri tutted.

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

"Damn."

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

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

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

///That would be me.

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

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

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

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

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

**//That would be a warning cry from a Tempest Raptor, Your Grace.
//An aerial apex predator in the Deadshield Woods' more shallow parts.**

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

"Wait, we're in a shallow part?"

**//Yes, Your Grace.
//We stand in a sort of isthmus, if you will pardon an inaccurate approximation that your fleshy brain will comprehend better.
//The Deadshield Woods are much denser going north and south.
//Nevertheless, we still travel to what is technically 'deep woods'.
//Thus, this cry, which warns other predators than the Tempest Raptor spotted prey and not to interfere.**

Viv pondered that for exactly half a second.

"It's us, isn't it?"

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

"Well, that's unfortunate."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The silence was deafening.

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

//Your input is noted.

//Now shut up.

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

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

“Me?” the Kark asked bashfully.

//Indeed.

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

//Additionally, she is quite muscular.

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

“Oi, Solfis!”

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

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

//Very well.

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

//The Tempest Raptor will initiate a dive.

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

//We will strike at this exact moment.
//Under my guidance, the Heir shall strike its head with a mighty spell.
//I will use the opening to jump on the creature and neutralize it.
//That is all.

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

//I will use my superior sensor systems to warn you of the beast’s approach and its direction.
//The Raptor should stop about twenty paces away from the ground.
//I will point at the most likely place beforehand and count down for you.
//With this, you should have no trouble landing your attack.
//But if you fail, it would be unfortunate for Marruk.

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

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

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

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

They didn’t have time for this.

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

The man chuckled a bit bitterly.

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

“Thanks. Alright, let’s go.”

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

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

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

“Ah. Hm.”

Viv was lost in translation.

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

"Won't the raptor smell us or something?"

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

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

//For it.

"Will it really take the bait?"

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

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

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

"You'd think that with dragons around..."

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

//Predatory birds rarely attack each other.

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

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

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

The golem raised his featureless face up.

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

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

//One spell is enough.

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

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

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

//Three. Two. One...

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

Then the wind hit.

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

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

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

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

//Raptors have small heads and small brains.

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

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

//Because.

//It pleased me.

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

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

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

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

Sadly, it did not taste like chicken.

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

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

//Thanks are unnecessary, Your Grace.

//Social graces are useful between organics.

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

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

"You saved my life in the end."

//You did not know that at the time.

//Nevertheless, your appreciation is noted.

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

//You are blessed by luck.

//It placed us on a collision path.

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

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

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

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

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

//More privileged and poorer than someone else.

//Luck and privilege are not sins.

//Squandering them is.

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

Kill!

"Hm... Now?"

Yes!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Agreed.”

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

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

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

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

**//I will deploy as well, Your Grace.
//I have full confidence that you will prevail.**

“You’ll support the infantry?”

**//Auditory sensors report the presence of two more large beasts than Two-Six reported.
//I shall intercept to prevent them from breaking through our lines.
//Or the battle will be more complex.**

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

**//No need, Your Grace.
//It would be better to take down the weaker shamans as soon as possible.
//Your reserves and efficiency have significantly improved since the last tide.
//Do not hesitate to... make a point.
//The forest will regrow.
//In time.**

“Right.”

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

“Squee!”

Fight.

Smartly.

“Don’t get caught. By anything.”

“Squee!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Purge net.”

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

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

“Werfer.”

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

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

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

Viv threw net after net at the beleaguered flank, buying them enough time to reform. She spotted a young woman being pulled by the arm with a scream and decapitated three

beastlings before they could brain her. She scrambled back. Others were not so lucky, but the beastlings were paying a heavy toll.

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

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

Viv's instincts screamed at her.

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

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

"Nope!"

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

Below, the beastling shaman was chanting more. It was a vile thing, covered in fetid stained skins and a beast skull masked its feature. The creature it rode was strange. It resembled a four-legged creature covered in whitish fur with a low bulbous head. It moved like an insect, not a mammal. Where Viv's spell had hit, dark blood leaked lazily, preventing the thing from bleeding out. It had its front paws deep in the entrails of two of the veterans.

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

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

"Blight."

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

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

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

"Shoot faster then."

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

"Do it."

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

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

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

"Meltdown."

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

The thing was dead.

She could let go.

“Blight. Blight. Blight.”

Chapter 78: Autumn.

Acuity +1

Acuity Reflex: Beginner 8

Danger Sense: Beginner 8

It made sense that those skills mostly improved when she was in danger. Viv considered the small yet helpful progression as the veterans finished off the wounded beastlings and collected their own. The old man by her side turned to her.

“You can’t prove that you killed more than me.”

“I can definitely prove it, you decrepit fucker.”

She climbed down while her erstwhile neighbor complained about ‘youth these days’. The younger warrior she had saved from being carried off grabbed a hand with frantic gratefulness.

“I was dead without ya. If you were a man, I’d marry you without my parents’ approval!”

“Errr thanks?”

The poor girl was soon dragged by the ear by an irate relative. Looking around, some of the soldiers were young and whole, probably family members who had decided to join. A bit green around the edge. Her ‘retinue’ gathered while she was looking around.

“Got the last shamans,” Two-Six said in a slightly gravelly voice. Her eyes were searching the closest veterans who were, in turn, studiously ignoring her.

//A satisfactory outcome.

Arthur didn't say anything. She was doing her best to gnaw on a partially-roasted furry limb. It resisted the attempt and it looked like the dragonette was taking the offense personally. Marruk seemed fine, still vigilant despite their recent victory.

"Ok. You guys can do what you want, I'm going to check the infirmary."

A makeshift perimeter had been established. It was mostly empty and those who were brought in went out almost immediately on their two feet. Or one foot and a prosthesis, depending. Solar joined her soon after with his wife in tow. She met Viv's eyes and placed a proprietary hand on the tall man's ass.

"You did very well. How long have you been here? On Nyil?" Solar asked.

"Six months, give or take."

"You were a war mage in your previous world then?"

"No, a combat medic. Like a battlefield healer."

"A doctor?"

"Some people joke that doctors save people while we just make them comfortable. In reality my job was more to find the wounded, stabilize them and evacuate them."

He blinks.

"Ah, you were thinking about helping us further. Do not worry, most of the veterans are on their third or even fourth step here. They have more attunement than the average grunt."

Viv understood what he meant. As people got older, their attunement increased and they had access to a bit more life mana, so it essentially meant that older, more experienced folks could cure more allies. There was a limit, of course, but it made a difference.

"In any case, thanks for the assistance. It is always awe-inspiring to fight alongside a war caster. In any case, please excuse me as there is much to do and we should not stay there."

The veterans quickly made a pile of bodies which they set on fire. The few convoy members who had died were buried quickly but with ceremony. A few had been dragged into the tide and killed. A young man had caught a stone on the other side of the palissade. The bereaved cried silent tears but kept on with the rest with a perseverance that Viv found concerning. They moved quickly to leave the pile of roasting meat and the predators it would inevitably attract. They camped that night as if nothing had happened.

Arthur lost her fight against the piece of monster. It was too stringy.

They were in Kazar a week later.

The arrival of the veterans led to a party on the fair fields, following which Viv was pretty much gang-pressed into providing surgery the very next morning before they could even get settled. Hadals brought monster meat which was turned into biological goop and almost all of the convoy came to attend the first operation. Unsurprisingly, Solar had been selected by unanimous vote. He was led in by a teary Wamiri in the pale light of the rainy dawn. Every attendant was tense. Some were praying.

“You know I’ve done that shit before, right?” Viv said, somewhat miffed.

“Don’t take it personally. They have been told all their lives that what we can do is impossible,” Brenna told her. The grey-haired healer of Neriad looked much fresher than Viv who was still a bit tired after almost three weeks of traipsing through the woods like some savage. At least she had taken the time to bathe.

Viv proceeded as usual, though with a bit more care since she had not cast that spell in two weeks. The construct still flowed as naturally as before thanks to her improved mind. It had stayed fresh in her memory. She was still not used to all of it, being able to think more clearly, focus on more things for a longer time. It just felt too good to be true. Regardless of her concerns, they regrew the arm with precision over the course of two hours, her patient unmoving on his stone slab as usual. Solar sat up from the operation table when they were done and slowly, slowly raised his new hand. It was pale and hairless but appeared functional.

“Slightly less muscular than the original. A hair longer too,” he casually announced.

“Oh, sorry, it’s just that—”

“Shhh.”

Viv would feel annoyed but there was something mesmerizing about seeing Solar flex his fingers one by one, first slowly then faster until she could no longer follow. He finally gathered them into a fist. Viv felt mana push from the man’s shoulder, probably an early attempt to regrow his channel.

“It will take some time before you can channel mana again from it, and it will itch extremely uncom...”

The mana surged and Viv watched, mesmerized, as the channels reformed before her eyes. They grew by a centimeter by second. Solar’s expression was one of absolute focus.

Viv was absolutely confident that it would be less painful to skinny dip in a bath of concentrated sulfuric acid than attempt what that motherfucker was doing right now.

The channels kept expanding. Sweat pearled on the handsome man’s brow but he never stopped, not even a little. Finally, he growled and the conduits reformed the rest of the way to his fingertips.

He exhaled.

“Bah putain,” Viv exclaimed in French.

“By Neriad’s plump buttocks, really?” Brenna added. She had handled the patients’ discomfort over the past month and she knew what he had done.

Solar ignored them completely. He picked up his sword by the door and stepped out. A crowd waited outside. The blade master drew his blade and picked a large stone from the still-barren ground. He threw it in the air.

His new arm blurred.

The stone split cleanly into eight mid-air like some bullshit samurai superhero movie prop or something. Viv had never seen something so outrageous. The crowd loved it though. Wamiri burst into tears and smashed into her husband who passionately embraced her while they cheered and celebrated with warm tears. Prayers to Neriad were sung with boisterous enthusiasm. Even Brenna was moved.

“I heal for moments like this,” she whispered in Viv’s ears. The outlander nodded wisely, though she could not help but bemoan that miraculous events were a god’s grace while any fuckup was hers. Typical. Her grumpiness was short-lived however, and soon Wamiri crushed her in a bear hug that let her count all her ribs.

“Thank you, thank you! We waited for so long!”

The woman then said words in a language Viv had never heard. Others came to congratulate her as well. It was the first time that she saw the veterans smile so freely. They jumped and talked in clumps on the grey dust of the reclaimed land, with a few green sprouts here and there like glimmers of hope. Viv took a deep breath. It smelled a little bit like dirty people with a black mana aftertaste but... that was fine. She had clear goals for Kazar and for herself, plans on how to repair her soul and survive. Those were all things that would happen in a vague future. This, here and now, was a concrete achievement.

And now she had to clear more land.

The group of veterans quickly organized themselves by order of urgency. The blind archer was first on the new list on account of him being a great hunter and monster meat being a necessary ingredient to regrow the limbs. The nobles put themselves first and Viv wanted to put a stop to that, but they argued that their leadership skills made them useful in organizing hunting and building parties and, while Viv smelled bullshit, the others did not object. She was not willing to die on that hill.

The next month became a blur of activity. She would operate on three to four people per day, with a day break every now and then, most of those used to work on more ward stones. Arthur used the opportunity to go with the hunting parties and observe them and their prey while Marruk trained against the newly-healed veterans. There was one incident with the

general store shopkeeper trying to gain more power in the city. He was a narcissist with a tendency to claim credit for other people's achievement. Fortunately for Viv, she was technically in charge and managed to contain him to a role as 'export advisor' to handle his sense of grandiosity while undermining his influence through a defamation campaign. It took her several hours of work to manage the problem. That was fine. Working with assholes was unavoidable, and it was best to nip this in the bud.

Honestly she was tempted to have him assassinated but... just imagining assassinating every asshole in a country made her shiver. Solfis would not get his genocidal maniac. That was out of the question.

Finding a place for the veterans to stay was not exactly a problem. Providing roofs was. Most of the families were content with a plot of land on the frontier and some managed to grow grass and small flowers even though it was getting late in the year. The problem was the nobles. They expected mansions and servants, and there were none. The temple was kind enough to provide them with its temporary officer lodgings but it did not suffice. A pair of them came to visit Viv one evening. She recognized them as some of the plate warriors who had held back the beastling lines.

"I understand your concerns, gentlemen, however, I will be brief. You are Enorian nobility. This is Kazar. There is no excess of land for you to live off here. Even if there was, I would have no reason to give it to you."

"We are aware that you are an outlander, Bibiane, so we perhaps need to state what should be obvious. Nobles are power multipliers. An army with nobles at their front will always perform better than another, even with fewer fighters. You need us."

Viv leaned over the tea table with anger in her heart. Solfis, by her side, shifted minutely while Arthur licked her chops with renewed interest. The two bearded men in their fineries did not look too worried, but they did sit back in their chairs.

"I need officers. I need leaders of men. Those are the ones that make armies effective and they naturally tend to rise to the top. You inherited your titles from your ancestors, I am sure, but this is not what makes you leaders. Education and training are what differentiate you from the rest. We provide those now, thanks to Solfis. Our first low-born officer is already on his way to a powerful Harrakan path, so no, gentlemen. I do not need you. The deal is the same for everyone. If you do not like it, you can return to your lands. I won't hold you back."

The two men looked at each other.

"We... cannot."

"Ah yes, you are deserters."

"No, we were exempted due to our handicap. It is another matter. You are aware of the current... social expectations in Enoria right now?"

"Like how they call me Goodmother and I am expected to repopulate the land?"

“Well, yes. Deviating from the norm can bring censure,” the man on the right said.

He gripped the hand of the man on the left.

“Oh,” Viv said. So exciting! Only six months here and Kazar was on its way to become a haven of sexual liberation. How very French of her.

“Which means,” she mercilessly continued, “that you need to stay here more than I need you here.”

“You would truly force us back?”

“Ok enough with the bullshit. You will get officer pay if you become officers. If you spend it on a housekeeper that’s your problem. If you can’t take the deal then I no longer give a shit.”

“You will need to create nobility, eventually. You are a young woman, Bibane. Let those who know the realities of this world pave the way. ”

Viv stood. The officers matched it with offended grace but once again Viv’s unusual height served her well. In the instant it took them to realize they were outsized, Viv unleashed her intimidation aura. The decisiveness of her actions and the broken bodies she left in her trail had marked her soul and she revealed it to them now. The nobles fought it. They were solid men who had fought and bled for their king, but they were creatures of a system they were now rejecting while Viv was a maker and breaker. They were on her turf and here she was bitch queen of the fucking universe.

“I will be indulgent and forget that you contested me twice, and since you are a bit slow on the uptake I will make myself extremely clear. We live and stand here because we have risked everything to resist the old order and Enorian nobility. All those who hold power now do so on their own merits, not hypothetical future ones or because their parents had titles, and I will not change this system for you or for anyone. You will prove yourself and get the pay you deserve or you can get the hell out of my land. That is all. Now get out.”

They left, though the younger one turned and told her one last thing.

“We will prove ourselves then.”

“See that you do.”

Once they were gone, Solfis crouched by her side.

//Should we place them under surveillance?

//Some of the Hadals would be willing.

“Do it.”

//I will add that, according to my records, many emperors experienced difficulties with high nobles.

//May I suggest Empress Kadiran's approach?

"It's lethal, isn't it?"

//She had a habit of having the recalcitrants quartered and decapitated.

//Then had the heads mounted in front of the imperial palace.

"Not sure if it would fit with the decoration."

//It would.

//If we added more heads.

"I will keep your advice under consideration but let's keep this as a last resort please. It would be a shame to have armor-plated corpses when I could have warriors instead."

"Squee?"

"For the last time, that's not how pressure-cooking works!"

Viv expected trouble but the nobles unexpectedly relaxed their stance, though Viv assumed that it was a temporary reprieve. Instead, they requested that she move the new ward stone to form a triangle with the band of greenery around Kazar as base and an abandoned tower as tip. Viv suspected that they had plans to reclaim strategic points as secondary outposts, which would then need to be administered by competent subordinates, that is to say, themselves. Solfis agreed with her assessment. He also agreed that it reduced the exposure to waves of roaming revenants and provided an additional defensive spot for creatures that roamed deeper in the deadlands. Places like Sky Fort and Fort Stone were still farther inland. The deadlands were vast. Even if the reclamation kept steady with an influx of outside population, it would take centuries or even millennia before they could change the basin back into a livable place. Speaking of the forts, she received worrying news when a contingent of over a hundred Baranese soldiers stopped in the city to resupply.

"We're vacating the forts and so are the Enorians. It's too risky to stay here with the civil war messing with our supply lines. Raiders do not respect international treaties," a captain in white told her over tea.

The man smelled a bit rank but he was obviously grateful for the invitation and Viv didn't mind too much. He was also very open about the current situation.

“There is a base of Neriad that acts as a nexus for all defenses a week travel west of here. Have you been there?”

“No, never. I have not had a reason to go.”

“Well, it is a heavily defended fortress with two mages capable of scrying distant locations and communicating with faraway places. They spread the news of Enoria’s trouble and several kingdoms have decided to temporarily withdraw their soldiery from the frontier. We all depend too much on squads moving freely through Enoria.”

“Is the situation that bad?”

“Oh yes, with both armies in tatters, mounted raids and marauding bands of warriors roam the land, bleeding it dry. Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“It’s nothing. We’ll have to be extra careful.”

“Yes. Any wannabe necromancer who considers moving to the deadlands will do so now. They say that thousands of revenants walk through the southern plains on their way here. Be careful.”

“Yes.”

Another thing she didn’t need. Fortunately, not all news was bad.

Viv observed the line of Harrakan heavy recruits moving with their shields linked across the empty field. Despite their numbers, the soldiers remained perfectly aligned as they sprinted at the speed of a moving car. It lasted for a beautiful second and a half then half of the line collapsed with a great fracas. The sound of colliding armors reminded Viv of a fender bender on a highway. All of the men still clambered back to their feet no worse for the wear. At least for now.

“How is that even possible?” she mumbled.

//The specialty of Harrakan infantry was not their superior discipline, equipment, and training.

//It was the famous charging shield wall.

//After consulting with the veterans, it appears that this art was progressively lost after the cataclysm.

“How can an entire technique get lost?” Viv grumbled.

//It was jealously kept by select regiments.

//And those were eventually wiped out.

//A testament to the barbarian fleshbags' ability to, through relentless efforts, make themselves even more stupid.

"They can't be barbarians if they came from Harrakan legions."

//Any force that did not return to defend their capital lost the right to call themselves Harrakan.

There was an edge in the golem's snarling voice that Viv had seldom heard before. She stole a glance at the entity's form and failed to see any change, and yet she felt cold crawl down her spine. Solfis' head turned to her.

//They will manage this maneuver before Prince Lancer returns.

//It will not be enough to tip the scales.

//I expect that the enemy will outnumber us again.

//However, few tactics can be implemented without a solid core of fighters to provide a base.

"I'll be honest, it doesn't sound like a charging shield wall is very fair."

//In war, only the losers care about fairness, Your Grace.

"No no I'm just happy to be on your side Solfis."

//I know.

//You possess strong survival instincts.

//But unlike everyone else here.

//You were on my side while I was a fading core inside of a dead construct.

//I will not forget.

//Now please excuse me, there is much to do.

//YOU USELESS, ROT-BRAINED FLESHBAGS.

//HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO FIGHT WHEN YOU CANNOT EVEN RUN?

//ARE THOSE ARTICULATED APPENDAGES STUCK TO YOUR ASSES JUST FOR SHOW?

Viv left Solfis to it and thanked all the gods that she was no longer infantry.

Progressively, the veterans were cured until only a handful were left. Solar and Solfis had a brief discussion of which Viv was not privy. The blade master agreed to training new recruits as a result, however, so Viv assumed it was good. Some of the veterans joined the scouts and shifted the balance back towards 'vanilla' humans among their ranks. It just resulted in

more marriages, which Viv was okay with. Others joined the heavies, especially the younger ones. The knights and nobles took the few horses the stables had and formed a mounted detachment with mobility in mind. Unfortunately, they didn't have chargers so their usefulness would be limited in a straight battle. The last group, at least fifty, joined Solar to form an elite group of fighters and duelists whose role had been played by the temple so far. Solfis talked to Viv on this topic while they were alone.

//I have two pieces of bad news concerning Solar.

“Uh?”

//The first is that he objects to killing humans.

“Wait. Did he not join us to defend against the prince?”

//Indeed.

//He insists that he will fight,

//He will disable his enemies, but not kill them.

“Fuck.”

//Unfortunately, I cannot compel him.

Viv stared at Solfis' malevolent orbs.

“Cannot?”

//My choice of words was deliberate.

//I assess that he would be better than Irao in single combat.

//He is the only one in this city that could potentially damage this frame to the point of non functionality.

//He has been hiding his true potential.

//Only his wife seems aware of it.

“How do you figure?”

//The distance between them when they spar does not match his displayed ability.

“Okay?”

Must be a sword nut thing.

//And she is used to him fighting with his non-dominant hand.

//Therefore, he has displayed less skill than he was capable of before being healed.

“I see. Is it going to be a problem?”

//Not in the short run.

**//His usefulness as a trainer will simply be higher than his usefulness as a warrior.
//He may also leave after the Prince is defeated.
//Additionally, I have identified Wamiri as a denizen of Vizim.
//It means that she comes from another continent far to the east of here.
//Beyond Halluria.**

“Wow. I should ask them how they met.”

//You might not get an answer.

Autumn was now in full swing with cooling temperatures and frequent rains. Viv found that she didn't mind that much. There was something gothic and peaceful about Kazar in the cold. Every morning, a cold wind would push more purple leaves to fall before her windows. Her schedule cleared with the last veteran being healed with legs that might or might not have been the original size but he didn't seem to be complaining. With that, Solfis had offered advanced mental training recommended for trained mages. She had gone through training regimens like a rocket and was now well on her way to respectability.

It just felt strange to be doing a lot but not moving. She had been in this world for close to nine local months now — probably a bit longer in earth time — and she had not traveled beyond the forest. It was necessary for her survival that she would seek divine healing and she didn't have any idea where the closest divine caster was, only that they were on their way. Her constant activities were only tangentially related to her official goal and she didn't really give a shit. It all felt normal those days. She had her friends, her magic, her position in the city. There was always a new glyph to practice or a new problem to solve. She was still progressing quickly. The world was vast and filled with wondrous horrors. Many of them tasted delicious.

Another month later saw Viv in her reception room with yet another officer retreating from the deadlands at the head of two hundred soldiers. This one was a little bit problematic.

He was Enorian.

More precisely, he was southern Enorian. The northerners could not send troops through loyalist territory under any circumstances anyway. He headed the last major contingent to leave the Deadlands fort ring. They now stood empty and defenseless. It would have been fine but Kazar was nominally at war or in a state of rebellion depending on whom you asked. This in turn, would have been problematic were it not for the temple of Neriad. They insisted that every soldier serving against the dead should be left to leave unharmed.

Viv was fine with that. Kazar was not ready, those soldiers would probably be used against the north anyway, and she had better things to do than track two hundred fleeing fucks through muddy fields and moist trees.

“Out of respect for the temple and because we understand that keeping the Deadlands at bay serves us all, we agree to let you through. You may not camp or linger within the boundaries of the city, however. No exceptions.”

Farren nodded and drank a bit of tea. The officer facing Viv was not what she expected. The Enorian was short and squat and absolutely covered in muscles. He was an absolute unit. A bristling moustache jutted outward from below a hooked nose that had been broken a couple of times and he had a massive scar on his left cheek that missed his eye by a finger. Clearly, he was not the standard diplomat and it showed when relief flooded his honest features.

“Thanks. I appreciate it. With that said, hmm, I was ordered to, that is to say, there is something else that I am required to discuss with you.”

“What would it be?” Viv asked without surprise. Farren frowned. Apparently, he was not aware that the meeting would cover something else. Neriad servants really were straight arrows.

“It’s about the soldiers you’re holding prisoner. Hm that would be seventy-three of them from the bridgers regiment and an earth-shaper.”

Viv paused and smiled. The captain paled a bit.

“Yes? What about them?”

“Oh, yes. Well, we would like to do an exchange so that they could leave with us.”

“And what do you offer then?”

“Seven indentured blacksmiths released from the temple’s base.”

Farren scoffed, which told Viv all she needed to know.

“Including three arcane blacksmiths.”

From Farren’s shocked face she could tell that the offer was a good one. They discussed back and forth but it became clear that the sweaty man had no authority to offer different terms, so Viv accepted if only because the soldiers and the mage represented a security risk. She hoped that it would not come back to bite her in the ass. If Prince Lancer had only been at war with Kazar, Viv would have refused.

The captain was clearly relieved at the end of the discussions, pleased that he had gotten what he had been ordered to obtain. It was more circumstances than his own doing but Viv didn’t feel like telling him as he didn’t look like a bad sort. As they climbed down to the exit, he turned to her with naked sympathy obvious on his honest face.

“Look, you guys are a frontier town. You got lucky with that drill thing but it won’t last. I know that it’s hard to accept but it would really be best for everyone if, when His Highness comes, he only finds open gates and you gone.”

Viv stopped a sneer. He meant well.

“Prince Lancer dragged hundreds of people as slaves for free and you expect me to believe he would behave better after this affront? Is he not a follower of Maranor, the goddess of power and ambition?”

“Well, it’s still the best possible outcome. No offense meant to you or the soldiers under your command.”

They left by the main entrance. Outside, armed guards were holding a cobbler and an older man in the simple garb of a laborer on their knees, blades drawn and at the ready. Viv did not say that those were the two people to sneak out at night to the Enorian camp to give them an intelligence report. There was no need. The captain must have recognized them.

“Have a safe return,” Viv wished him with a smile.

The man hesitated, taken off guard by the appearance of the spies. It took some time before he finally turned around and left.

Viv gave a nod to the guards. The first snowflakes drifted on the plaza, settling on the glacial stone below. Blood soon joined them. Winter had come.

Chapter 79: Winter

The Deadshield Woods were white. A thick blanket of snow expanded to the horizon in a sea of cottony clouds. The heavy shroud lay still under a lack of wind, frozen in time. This deep in the forest, the unnatural stillness had grown even more pronounced. It killed conversations with every falling tuft of snow, every creaking branch that caught the eye of the column.

From afar, the oppressive sensation had been replaced with deep tranquility.

It was a good thing, then, that Viv was watching it from her troglodyte room dug into the side of a small hill.

The forest ignored caves for some unknown reason. Viv had seen offshoots invading clearings she had dug with black mana, something that should have been impossible given the short time frame and her own power’s ravenous effects, and yet, here they were. The Deadshield woods jealousy reclaimed territory lost to invaders. The deeper one went, the more pronounced the effects. Caves stood untouched. Their current base was spacious and

well-provisioned. It was also camouflaged through natural means by the expert hands of the scouts, including Two-Six.

More importantly, fires provided heat. They had no shortage of wood to last the winter, even if it was a bit green.

Viv enjoyed the sight before turning to her prepared washbasin. The snow had melted. The logs were ready. She grabbed Arthur in her arms and winced under her weight. The big glutton's main body was the size of a large dog now, lean, with wings much larger. Only her increased power allowed her to maneuver her dragonette in position.

"Right. Arthur, do the thing!"

"Eeeee**COUGH**eee."

Gouts of flames torched the logs, turning them into an instant inferno. Viv almost shielded her face from the heat. The temperature of Arthur's fire was unbelievably high for something that came out of a living being, she thought. They waited for half a minute for the fire to settle. By the time it was done, the bath was already pleasantly warm. Viv made sure that her section of the cave was partitioned and closed the curtain above her 'window'. Time for a bath! She peeled off her skin suit and jumped in. Arthur followed her with serpentine grace, sliding in front of her with barely a splash.

Viv scrubbed herself with pleasure. It felt good to get cleaned up after a week on the road. Arthur was next and she squealed her approval when Viv gave attention to the best spots, which were the chest and that space between the wings. Arthur's scales were smooth and warm, so warm that the bath temperature was actually increasing. When they were done, she reclined to soak and picked up a steaming mug from a nearby rock. It was klod with a dollop of honey.

The Yries had somehow gotten their hands on a hive. Viv was surprised but it turned out that the strange owl-like beings were quite good with agriculture too. Or apiculture, she supposed. In any case, the first jars had arrived with winter and Viv had gotten one for herself. The Yries were getting more involved in trading which was encouraging.

"Actually, I never asked," Viv mused aloud, "are you alright with being called Arthur?"

Not name.

Calling sound.

"Hmmm so you're not happy?"

Good sound!

Short and effective.

Real name has meaning.

Grows with me.

Viv wondered if it was an instinctive dragon thing. It felt like that. They did not use sounds much, or at least that was what her meeting with the green dragon had indicated.

“So, what is your name right now? Have you picked one?” she asked.

Of course!

Behold, me!

She-who-feasts-on-squirrels-and-gets-much-gold.

“Squeeee!”

“Glorious!” Viv bellowed with enthusiasm. It was important to validate the dragonette’s choice so that she could grow with confidence. Probably. Viv was still a bit iffy on this whole raising kids thing.

It appeared to work because Arthur spread her wings with pride, standing on her hind legs with her arms held wide. Viv got a mouthful of water in her face for her trouble.

They didn’t stay in too long because the water was getting really uncomfortably hot. Viv used it to clean her skinsuit and left it to dry before returning her attention to the task before them. There was another convoy on its way from Enoria, according to Farren’s dreams. The difference was that this one was mostly made of actual refugees. It appeared that news of Kazar’s defiance had reached the general public and there were some in Enoria who citythought that it made for a tempting destination.

Viv wondered what kind of lunatics would come to the conclusion that a rebel city with a target on its back hidden behind a monster-infested forest would make for a good haven but what did she know?

Viv changed into a comfortable dress and turned down for the night soon after.

The convoy walked under the overcast sky. Errant flakes fell from the grey clouds with slow regularity. Those that landed on the path were crushed by the iron-shod boots of the Harrakan heavies. Viv reclined on her chair atop the largest wagon and let a flake land on her tongue, then she scolded herself for getting distracted.

They had no choice this time but to take cornudons and turn it into a real expedition. The servants of Neriad had dreamed of another group to fetch. This one reeked of hunger and despair. Those would not be veterans armed to the teeth and ready for anything, but genuine refugees, and so speed had been sacrificed in favor of protection. Five newly-made heavy wagons as large as buses trudged along the road. To protect them, Viv had brought a hundred men. Sixty of the trained heavies, mostly first generation and mountain folks under Ban, and forty witch-pact crossbowmen and women walked in ordered ranks around the massive horned beasts. Viv had no idea how the soldiers could walk with that much gear on their bodies but she suspected skill shenanigans.

She had to admit that they looked fancy. The armors of the Kazaran soldiers were rough and ugly things of dark iron, pitted and grainy. Each soldier then decorated it with their own tightly-attached scarves and pennants. The natives had picked tree patterns while the Enorian immigrants like Ban favored an upward sword on a broken shield, a reversal of the Enorian royal arms. They had insisted on placing a layer of metal with their pattern on Viv's round shield. The lightweight item was getting heavier and more unwieldy as different power groups added their mark but Viv didn't mind. She used it as a wall between herself and thrown stuff anyway. And people were happy.

As for the witch-pact crossbowpersons, many of them wore a white scarf over the lower parts of their face over mail or gambeson. They inspected the treeline, hands over their impeccably-maintained weapons.

//We are making good time, Your Grace.

//At this speed, we will be out of the woods by tomorrow afternoon.

"Then we are on schedule."

It was the first time Viv was officially in charge of the group. Most of the elites including Marruk had stayed behind to train and recover. She only had Ban and Solfis to help her. Things were thankfully going fine.

Viv didn't consider herself a leader of men. At best, she had always been a figurehead-cum-portable-artillery, which was fine. Her kind of leadership was more political than martial and even during her stint in the French army she had never commanded a fire team in a combat situation. That was why this expedition was so important in proving herself to, well, mostly herself.

Except, everything had gone smoothly. Most of the fauna as well as the most aggressive flora had retreated deeper into the forest, or in some caves or other refuge. No bird calls disturbed the tranquility of the convoy. Small shrouds of frozen breath puffed up from the soldiers walking in their column. They rose into a pleasantly crisp air. It was dry and fresh air — not the smog-filled frigid horror of a Parisian winter — honest cold that kept people cool in the middle of effort. Ban's long white beard was already covered and well on its way to a proper icicle. It was in this moment of pleasant appreciation of the moment that, naturally, Viv's danger sense pinged.

Like a shiver down her spine, the warning spread across her mind and forced her to look around. Ban immediately picked up on her reaction and raised a fist.

“Attention!”

Like a single man, the hundred soldiers grabbed their weapons and turned outward. Nasty barbed quarrels locked in firing mechanisms while steel spears of aimed out, kept aloft by magic-backed muscle. The wagons stopped and everyone looked outward for five seconds.

Nothing moved among the snow-covered boughs. The landscape around her had the immobility of a painting. Viv’s impression did not change.

Then...

//That is the correct conclusion, Your Grace.

Fucking Solfis trying to teach her through self-experiment and positive reinforcement. The enemy was above.

Danger sense: Beginner 9

White and black feathers on a lean body reminded her of a stork, but there was something raptor-like in its fantastic wings beyond their span, a ferocious shape that told its victims that this was a dive hunter. That creature did not hunt fish.

“What is this? I don’t recognize it from the bestiary.”

//A dark-sky kingfisher, Your Grace.

Ok so it did eat fish, whatever.

//They often fly in flocks.

//Some of those can grow to impressive numbers.

//They also tend to migrate north during the winter.

//I estimate that this one was separated.

//There is a more than 85% chance that it is quite hungry.

//Rounded down.

“Yeah thanks, so it’s after our cornudons?”

//They will eat anything, Your Grace.

//Up to and including armored soldiers.

Viv focused and mana came to the forefront of her mind. She could see the gray mana in the air and far above that, the form of the kingfisher. It was too far away.

“How do they hunt?”

//The kingfisher dives and skewers its prey, then it flies back up.

//The last thing most victims see are the shadows of the stretched wings as it slows its descent.

//Hence their name.

“Hmmm”

It was still quite far and circling around them.

“Any chance that we could hit it with a volley of bolts?”

//You should conduct this extermination by yourself, Your Grace.

//It will be good training.

“You could just tell me what the best method would be.”

//You could just practice thinking for yourself in a tactical situation.

“What if people get hurt?” Viv asked with her eyes on her foe, though it was merely banter at this stage. She was already considering her options.

//People will get hurt if you underperform.

//Therefore, do not underperform.

Solfis’ yellow eyes were fixed on Viv, unblinking, unwavering. He would not hesitate to sacrifice soldiers if he judged that it served the cause, she realized.

“You know, you backtalk an awful lot for a weapon of war.”

//Implementation of the ‘sass’ module completed successfully.

//Now, focus.

“Sergeant Ban, what are the chances that our crossbowmen could hit this thing?”

“Pretty good. Not sure if the bolts will have enough strength to take it down though,” the old man grumbled.

The kingfisher was probably fifty meters high, maybe half a football field, more or less. It did not beat its wings. Instead, the creature was slowly circling, seemingly born on a draft they didn’t feel on the ground. Viv had her suspicion but she wanted to be sure.

“Alright. Give it a try.”

Ban turned to his troops around him and bellowed orders.

“On my mark, single volley, free skills. Aaaaaaim. Fire!”

There was a pleasant thrum when all the metal split limbs spat their payload at the same time. The quarrels traveled almost too fast for Viv to see. Only the afterimage of colorful streaks remained, their mana imprints clear in her perception.

The kingfisher beat its wings once and most of the projectiles were brushed aside. Only a few hit it, and the only reaction they got was an offended screech.

“It uses grey mana,” Viv confirmed, “quite a lot of it.”

“Everyone here is second or third step of their path. We won’t have anyone capable of piercing through that sort of defense,” Ban lamented.

//Interesting.

//The penetrative power of your shooters is better than I expected at this stage of their path.

//It appears to come at the cost of range and firing speed, however.

“Nevermind that. It’s still here.”

The kingfisher was still circling them looking no worse for wear. A malevolent cry dashed Viv’s hope that the quarrels would deter it.

“Hungry fucker,” Ban said. “Goodmother, we can do scattered volley? See if it works better?”

“No. We’ll need those quarrels later. Any projectile we shoot up will be lost.”

The truth was that they simply didn’t have any to waste. Those didn’t grow on trees and they also cost a silver talent for every twenty-five. Disgrace. Too expensive to throw at birds willy-nilly.

“I’ll try my own spell.”

Viv jumped down from the carriage and traced a circle in the pristine snow. She inscribed the symbols for range with patient attention, keeping an eye up just in case. Ban set up a circle of soldiers around her just in case.

“It’s still not doing anything,” she remarked.

Solfis answered from his spot above her.

//Kingfishers are patient, Your Grace.

//They can keep circling for days until an opportunity arises.

“That’s fine.”

She finished her circle, taking her time. It was nice and would support her well.

“Blast.”

The kingfisher barrel rolled out of the way before the spell had cleared the top of the tree. That was fine. She was an instinctive caster. Spells were not hard constructs that had to be followed meticulously, they were malleable blobs of mana, alive to some extent. She waxed the construct to make her spell small, leaner. Faster.

“Can you see the kingfisher’s eyes, Ban?”

“Not from here, goodmother.”

Viv refrained from telling him to stop with the Enorian expression but now was not the time.

“I can,” one of the witch pacts said.

“Is it looking at me?”

“Yes ma’am. Intently. Its head is lowered.”

“Right,” she said, moving mana around. “And now?”

“Still looking.”

Viv flexed mana inside of the circle. The construct waxed and waned while the bird-monster circled.

“Still focused, ma’am.”

Half a minute went by. The kingfisher’s attention did not waver. Viv could only see the head clearly because the creature had very small eyes but its head did dip, especially when the power inflated. Black mana purred inside of the circle. It waited, tame and eager. Only she could do something like that at her level, she thought. It required a very high attunement.

“Still loo— ”

The crossbowman’s comment was interrupted when the bird brutally swerved down as if smacked down by some divine hand. There was a squawk of surprise and pain and a gout of fire. A puff of feather was left behind the blazing carcass as it crashed down, trailing smoke.

“SQUEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

Thus was dive-bombed that which thought it would dive-bomb.

“And I am triumphant yet again,” Viv nodded to herself.

//This is the second time that a training exercise gets unduly interrupted.

“Why do you think I would worry about air supremacy when I have Arthur on my side?”

//The purpose of my actions was to lead you to the optimal way of handling this type of creature.

“Let me guess, lay a trap and wait for it to dive so it gets in range?”

The golem kept to a sulky silence for a second.

//Yes.

“And did I not do just that?”

Viv stood with her hands on her waist and all the smugness she could manage.

//You are technically correct.

“The best kind of correct!”

//I hope that a time will not come when you only have yourself to rely on.

//Nevertheless, you demonstrated quick-thinking.

//I shall have to be content.

“The all is well that ends well. Now let’s go get the thing. I bet it tastes like *chicken*,” Viv said, using the earth term.

Behind her, one of the soldiers whispered in his neighbor’s ear.

“Arlen, can drakes do that?”

“I don’t think it’s a drake.”

“Then what is it?”

“You really don’t want to find out. It’s beyond the two of us anyway. Better to keep our eyes open and hope for the best, you know what I mean?”

“I hear you.”

Viv found the carcass next to a tree missing most of its branches. It did not, in fact, taste like chicken, but Viv plucked the small feathers and made herself a pillow.

They left the forest the next day in the afternoon almost by surprise. The end of the Deadshield Woods left Viv's mind roiling for an instant as she tried to reconcile her mind with the notion of perspective. The road under her feet disgorged into a deep valley broken far in the distance by another patch of forest. The break was not obvious by sight, but her perception of mana allowed her to feel the frontier between the woods and 'normal' Parram land with brisk clarity. In front of her, the wind picked up and sound traveled more openly. Wheels creaked and groaned again as the strange restriction lifted while more than a few men breathed in relief as they crossed the boundary. That smile froze on their face when they took in the landscape before them.

Anelton had always been a border village. Caravans to and from the deadlands stopped there before attempting the crossing. It had subsisted on some basic trading and the sort of activities that proximity with a large forest allowed. Even now, Viv could see hunter cabins with skins still hanging to dry. Some gaps in the treeline hid logging camps, currently silent and deserted.

The place was destroyed. The hand of man had descended upon it, sweeping aside a palissade designed to stop beastlings and gutting it of its inhabitants. A corpse pile still smoldered in the ruin of the town square, visible from up high despite the distance. Trees and posts bore bloated fruits pecked by dark birds. Some of the structures had utterly collapsed in an uncontrolled fire. Not a soul remained.

There was, however, a camp. It sprawled over snow-covered subsistence fields like a skin rash.

Now, Viv had seen some shit in her years, including a brief and ill-advised trip to a humanitarian camp when she was sixteen. There were usually guards and some neat tents set up by the Red Cross or Crescent or whoever was on hand for the refugees to gravitate around. Plastic containers and off-brand shirts offered some bright colors to contrast with the endemic poverty of those who had left everything behind to survive. It was missing here. The few erected tents sagged under a thin layer of snow while the wisps of dying campfires dispersed quickly. Masses huddled around the campfires, idle and bent. She could see the shapes of haler men laying corpses on a pile. The more she looked and the less she liked what she saw. The camp was clearly split between two factions with some resources and a gathering of dying folks that spread with no structure to the edge of the dead village. It did not take a genius to see that this was a powderkeg with its fuse lit. Viv was suddenly happy that she had brought so many soldiers.

Ban stopped by her side.

"Your orders ma'am?"

"Stay in formation. Let's get down there and put some order to that chaos."

The column made their way through unbroken snow at a snail pace. Even the lethargic refugees saw them arrive long before they arrived. A few started running around but most stayed where they were, prone and despondent. Two groups started to put on armors without enthusiasm. When Viv's detachment kept going as a column, despair turned to hope. Viv got close enough to reach the most miserable members. A child munched boiled bark from on top of the frozen corpse of his mother. He was skeletal.

One part of Viv's mind recoiled in horror at the sight of someone who looked as alive as a horror movie prop, sunken eyes following her with eerie intensity. Another calculated the number of refugees and their state. No matter how bullshit magic was and how high their stats were, there was not a snowball's chance in hell that they could survive a two weeks trek across the woods, much less walk through it. They would have to recover and reorganize.

There was a father holding a truncheon to protect the rest of his starving family. He glared at anything that moved.

Had to start with soup. Use cauldrons to make a soft congee or those people would die trying to digest solids. Organize the refugees in a column and feed them. Secure a better location, like the village itself. Why were they even out in the open? They had more than enough grain and dried stuff to last them for a month but she guessed that with food and restoration magic, a week or so would be enough to get moving.

A woman was hacking at wet wood with a rusty knife in an attempt to break it. She struck once every five seconds in order to recover, gasping for air as she went.

"Useless. We should just leave those wretches behind," someone muttered.

"Who said that? Who the fuck just said that?" Viv yelled.

"Company, halt!" Ban ordered.

The soldiers were as unmoving as statues. Viv placed her hand on the pauldron of the man who had spoken. Her voice rang in the frigid air, so that the refugees themselves gathered. Viv was a little bit annoyed.

"Let me make one thing clear. I became Kazaran by choice, a choice I made when the city fell and we traveled through the mountains with nothing but what we had taken with us. I stayed because folks needed my help. Because *you* needed my help. If it were not for me and a couple others, most of you would be Baranese indentured servants or worse right now. The armors you wear, the weapons you wield, those come from my deal with the Yries. The training you follow was taught by Solfis. I gave us a chance, and I'll keep giving us a chance come spring when those bastards come back with a war mage. Those starving people are at their lowest just as you could have been if we had even less of a warning. If you had been less lucky Now, the god who lets us regrow limbs has said that we should save those folks and so they are ours while we do so. And we will put them down on their feet and then see if they are worthy of becoming Kazarans too. They will get their chance

just like you did. In the meanwhile, I order you to help and you will do so or you will leave the army. We clear?"

Ban took a step forward and bellowed.

"Company, *are we clear?*"

"Yes sir!"

Viv did not ask the column to move on because two groups of people were heading her way. The first was led by a military man in the armor of a temple guard. He had dark wavy hair that reached his shoulders, surrounding an angular face. Most of his followers were missing limbs.

A beautiful woman led the second group. Viv noted that part of her long hair was dyed green and she wore clothes of good make. Her followers were the only ones to have fur and jewelry, though they were emaciated. Everyone was.

"Hello," the woman started in a smooth voice, "my name is Amehe. Reigan and I are in charge of this camp," she said with a forced smile. The man scowled.

Arthur landed gracefully on the snow by Viv's left. She raised her horned head and huffed with pride. Viv heard the ominous clicks of Solfis deploying to his full height somewhere behind her.

Both groups took a collective step back.

"Not anymore. Now, what the fuck happened here?" she asked.

This time, it was the man who answered, He stomped on the ground and Viv realized that his right foot was actually an elaborate prosthesis. His voice was rugged.

"What didn't? We have raiders on our asses, there are aberrants in the woods, and something's been stealing folks at night."

Viv stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Why couldn't things ever be easy?

Chapter 80: Standing alone

Viv sighed. In her mind, the three problems added themselves to her original purpose, turning the refugee camp into a viable caravan. Her mind had been altered by the magic of Nyil with all mental stats in the high thirties. Concretely, she could process things faster and more clearly. Parameters like the distrust of the various factions and the state of the weakest link turned into conditions then into first steps of a simple, yet achievable plan. The swirl of thoughts gracefully resolved itself into a list of questions that would need answering before she could start giving orders.

The errant consideration lodged itself into her brain, begging for her attention. The clarity of her felt intoxicating, somehow. So easy. It would take deep mental training and some specific chemicals to reach that level of serene purpose back on earth, and then other aspects would be neglected. She wondered what would happen if she went back now. Would she lose her progress immediately? Gradually? Would she regret it? Hell yeah, she would.

Did it affect her mind in unexpected ways?

How much was it changing her?

Could she improve herself even more by... optimizing how she used her brain? Had to ask Solfis later. For now, it was time to focus on the problem at hand.

“First thing first. The raiders. Explain.”

Reigan the temple guard explained. He had a measured diction that made his report clear and sober.

“First things first. This is the end point of a caravan that started around the capital. We joined up with Amahe’s merchant caravan on the path and picked up the starving folks just yesterday. Many of them are survivors of the village. On the way, we were beset by a group of marauders and deserters led by a young man who introduced himself as Elix.”

“That’s a fake name by the way,” Amehe interrupted. Both Reigan and Viv glared at her.

“Elix was an Enorian rogue turned noble. Not important. Sorry, go on.”

“Right, Elix and his men asked for half of our food in exchange for safe passage. I agreed. The reason why I agreed was that we had not met the starving people and we were outnumbered five to one when it happened.”

“And you think that they are still after you?”

“Most likely. You see, the people on the ground are Anelton survivors. The village was put to the sword for acts of treachery by a great patriot.”

“Elix?”

"In the flesh. Supposedly, Anelton dealt with 'traitors to the throne', you of course. It was just an excuse of course. With most regulars and all the levies dead to the north, entire baronies are ripe for the taking. I heard that entire families were wiped out. We stand on Elix' hunting ground and his kind is never sated. He will come back to finish us off. You can imagine why."

Reigan threw a disparaging look at the jewellery the merchants were wearing.

"You could not use those to buy food?" Viv asked out of curiosity.

"People are scared. They would not open their gates to travelers, much less sell to some. You could not purchase a bucket of wheat for the king's crown right now," Amehe explained with a bitter smile.

She was trying very hard to please Viv. Viv could feel the effects of a skill tracking her emotions just as the trader herself was nervously watching every last of her reactions. It felt weird and a little bit invasive but the woman was trying to survive and Viv thought a little bit of terror might grease the wheels of productivity.

"Any idea where they are right now?" she asked.

"No, sorry," Reigan answered a bit sheepishly, "it shames me to say so, but we don't have the food to send scouting parties right now."

"Right."

She didn't have Hadal scouts right now. A pain.

"Squee?"

Fly

Track

Return!

"You would?"

Three

Silver

Talents

"Ugh you mercenary. Yes please, anything for the assistance of the mighty Arthur. it's a deal."

"Squee!"

The dragonette took off with a happy 'skra', a bit deeper than normal. Her departure was witnessed with a mix of fear and apathy.

"Right. We'll get back to that later. Now the aberrations."

"We see them at night moving through the woods. Several that look like each other."

//Every aberrant is different, Your Grace.

//This is probably a cluster type.

//They are much weaker than their counterparts.

//However, they can easily swarm unprepared fighters.

"Any chance that it could suddenly attack?"

//Unlikely.

//I shall elaborate later.

"We'll have to lure it out. Next, the disappearances."

"Right. We arrived three days ago and found the town devastated as expected from what the survivors told us. The lads and I, we put the bodies on a pyre... some of them were starting to reanimate..."

His eyes grew clouded by the memory. For the first time, his deep anguish pierced through the veil of professionalism. Viv beheld a man at the end of his wit trying to keep things together.

"None of us are far enough on the path to bless an entire fucking town. Even then we could not have dug enough graves. Too exhausting."

He searched Viv's expression, looking for condemnation, perhaps? Viv didn't care. Even if that man had fucked up, he had done it protecting his people against impossible odds. That deserved some recognition in her book, especially on Nyil.

"And you used the houses to protect everyone at night?"

"That was the idea. Obviously some of the buildings were destroyed but there was still room for everyone. We spent the entire day taking bodies out. Men, women and children. Dogs. Who the fuck does that?"

"Reigan, look at me," Viv said, and she felt something shift in her mind, the parts of her that the interface called 'leadership'.

"You have done a great job keeping everything together so far, yeah? We are here to help now. The worst is behind you, but I still need you to hang on for a little bit longer. Can you do that for me?"

“Yeah, of course ma’am. Won’t happen again. The disappearances. We made sure the village was decently secured before nightfall. We put everyone near the east gate and repaired it as best we could. We put a lot of debris in front of the west one and had two sentries keep an eye on it. I thought it would be enough.”

“We didn’t expect anything,” Amehe adds, “the whole village was deserted.”

“The next morning, an entire house had been cleaned of its inhabitants. We didn’t hear anything. There were no traces of struggle. They were just... gone.”

“You didn’t see anything?”

“I... Neriad forgive me. I was one of the two sentries near the main gate. We fell asleep.”

He looked horrified. Viv resisted the urge to frown. It wasn’t abnormal for sentries to fall asleep, especially after a long and difficult day. Starvation also made people drowsy. It could be nothing.

“I doubled the sentries the next day but we still had a couple disappear during the night. Same as before, no one saw anything not heard anything. After that, we decided to camp in the open with lit fires and a circle of guards. Nobody disappeared last night.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“No... nothing that I can think of for now... Please, sorry to ask but... do you happen to have extra food?”

“Yes. Here is what we’re gonna do. Kazaran troops will form a perimeter and watch over the camp while cooks prepare a broth. Nothing solid or those people will die, understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” Ban answered.

“Make sure everyone lines up in an orderly fashion. Nobody gets near the forest. While people eat I’ll take First Squad and clear the town. Reigan will guide us. Solfis comes with me as well. Amehe and the rest, make sure your people are packed up and ready to move long before nightfall. Is everyone in agreement?”

Nods all along. Ban and Reigan left immediately to get things started but Amehe stayed behind always with that large smile and slightly panicked eyes.

“Excuse me, are you perhaps the, ahem, the person in charge of Kazar?”

“The Great Black Whore you mean?”

The woman blushed.

“I am sorry, this is how you have been painted. Trust me, I have faced defamation as well. I know how it can be.”

“You are an Enorian trader?”

“Yes, born not too far from here actually. Life has been difficult for those of us who refuse to conform. Goodmother this, goodmother that. The merchants have thankfully resisted better than most and success erases every sin. Ah, but we are not here to talk about me, sorry. Am I correct in assuming that you can negotiate an agreement with us?”

“I can say yes, doesn’t mean I will, and we have much to do that is urgent...” Viv said.

“Oh it’s going to be fast. We just want to join you across the forest.”

That made sense to Viv. The grass always looked greener on the other side, especially if the people living there looked healthy.

“Tentative yes.”

“We can pay our way across, of course. Prove that we can contribute.”

“Tentative yes,” Viv insisted. “We can discuss more later.”

Viv felt another shift in the world’s mana, something subtle and invisible that she associated with intimidation. The merchant was doing something but it didn’t feel intrusive. More like... receptive. In truth, she knew she would most likely say yes but it was good practice not to immediately agree with a consummate negotiator.

Viv moved aside while men and women removed cauldrons from the wagons. As Amehe left, she felt a little bit of emptiness as if the merchant brought warmth with herself. Again, nothing intrusive. Perhaps the path of the merchant had more depth than Viv had first assumed.

Ban and his subordinates had things well in hand. Viv could also tell that Solfis had something in mind. Or in his processor, whatever. It was the way he loomed a bit more than usual.

“You know, I always wonder why people who’ve never met you don’t run screaming when you appear.”

//Herd instinct.

Viv blinked, not expecting the equivalent of a horror movie antagonist’s final form to have contemplated his own aura.

“How do you figure?”

//If I appear and the majority of humans present act unaffected,

//then the rest will not react either.

//Because the herd does not acknowledge me as an immediate danger.

“Oh. Ok.”

//The same applies to Arthur.

//Although, at stable growth, she will grow too large to pass as a marsh drake by the end of next year.

“A problem for another time. Any advice in that large database of yours?”

//Camp management best practice includes entire paragraphs on the dangers of unclear hierarchies in a camp.

//Due to the small nature of this one, expected issues are few.

//However, you may still clarify who may give order to whom.

//And who is in charge of what.

“Right.”

Viv did just that while her troops set up a cordon and started moving people in line. Some of the refugees were so skeletal that they had to be placed in a row on the ground. They would have to be fed by hand. Volunteers among her soldiers organized an improvised infirmary in an act of mercy that gave her some measure of hope. Very soon, Ban came at the head of the First Squad, the elite of the elite of the Kazaran forces. All of them were already on the third step of the path.

Apparently, one could sacrifice their progress in their current step to change to another one. In their case, the sacrifice had allowed them to progress faster.

[Harrakan Heavy Infantryman, dangerous, one who follows the path of the empire’s core forces. Expert close quarter fighter]

“We’re ready,” Ban said as he came closer. “Lead on.”

Viv thought he would stay to monitor his troops but she saw that things were moving smoothly and she wasn’t about to question him in public. She took Reigan and herself at the center of a protective circle with Solfis by her side.

They walked along the simple palissade surrounding the corpse of the town that had once been named Anelton. She had not died easily, Viv realized. Now that she was paying attention, the signs of battle were clear as day on her pockmarked skin. Guard towers still stood above the edge of the wall, showing traces of impact and, sometimes, the rusty stains of arterial blood sprays. Broken arrow shafts covered them like bristly ornaments. It was when they reached the gates that Viv felt it clearly.

“A lot of people died here,” she said.

Errant strands of black mana remained. It was thicker here than any place she had seen since leaving Kazar. The strands permeated the air like old regret permeates a mind. The bodies had been cleaned but the earth was cracked and rancid. The large wood panes stood

open with clear signs of abuse hastily repaired. As they were, they would not withstand a determined attack.

“This is where Elix’ troops broke through the militia. Elix found horses somewhere, that bastard. Some even had barding,” Reigan said.

“Wait. They have heavy cavalry?”

“No, of course not,” Reigan huffed. “Only nobles do. They probably stole it from some keep that lost all their male fighters. Doesn’t matter though. Try stopping a charging warhorse with wooden sticks.”

He glared then, to Viv amusement, remembered himself.

“Beg your pardon, ma’am.”

“That’s fine.”

The gates led to a main road that crossed the town from one end to another. The wood buildings all showed signs of damage. Many doors hung from their hinges, if they were still attached at all. Blood stains and broken windows remained as mute witnesses to the carnage. Even now, the air smelled of iron and corpses, with the stench of burnt meat carried by a light wind that came from the forest. Viv could follow the events from how thrashed the place was. The barracks by the entrance had been smashed and set on fire. Some of the logs that made it up showed deep gouges, probably made by a skill.

Shops lining the main path had been ransacked. Farther up, only doors and windows showed much damage but the blood, the blood was everywhere. Brown and rusted now, pecked by crows, washed out by rain, it did not matter. The tide of crimson liquid shed here possessed a terrible weight that settled on Viv’s shoulders like a wet cape. The most curious thing was that it also empowered her. The black mana in her conduits stirred, uncoiling like a waking snake. Viv resisted the urge to sniff too deeply, lest she unsettled her companions.

“You will show us where the disappearances occurred then we will search the place,” she said calmly. Reigan moved them to a nearby structure, the nicest around. It even had a porch. A hanging sign announced ‘The Last Drop’ in flowing letters above an upturned tankard.

“This was here. Three families, or what was left of them anyway.”

Viv kept her eyes open but there was nothing to feel or see. Her danger sense remained quiet. It was only when they entered the inn’s dark interior that she felt something.

The previous occupants had removed the tables and replaced them with beds, some of which still had remnants of torn covers on them. The place smelled terrible and she was suddenly grateful that the refugee camp was in open air. What attracted her attention, however, was the black mana.

Something had touched it.

And it annoyed her.

Black mana was such an exquisite and versatile power, despite what the few books she had on the matter said. It was a quiet and sharp thing akin to a scalpel. It was not a vulgar branch to be smashed and yet that is exactly what had happened here. The fabric of the world was still twisted by the attempt. Viv's first thought was of the way Irao camouflaged himself.

"There was a lot of black-mana based magic thrown around here. It could explain why no one heard anything. It doesn't explain what happened to the bodies. Reigan, what have you tried to find the missing?"

"Not much," the man replied, increasingly ashamed. "I gathered the other crippled, I mean, the other combatants with me. We scoured the village, found nothing. We asked everyone to stay put the next night and all stayed awake. The other warriors and I, I mean. We had torches. It didn't help."

"Let's have a look around."

They walked around the inn. Those people were dead or captive, Viv thought. There was no way that someone would leave in the middle of the night, in a war-torn land, and without stealing food. It made no sense at all. They had been taken away for food or for other reasons she didn't know. It was likely that the point of egress would be the back. They found an inner court with a small well and a vegetable patch. Viv checked the well but there were no bodies there.

"Right. Solfis, could I get some help with the tracking?"

//Yes.

//The bodies were not dragged out.

//However, the amount of recent footsteps is not consistent with the reported activity.

"Wait, are you saying that they walked out by themselves?"

//You will have to draw your own conclusions.

Viv engaged in a staring contest with Solfis for exactly one second before she remembered who she was dealing with. How could a featureless bone mask look so smug? It made no sense.

"Is it part of training?"

//Yes.

//You drawing conclusions by yourself will be extremely valuable.

"Whatever. About those tracks..."

//They join the nearby backstreet.

Viv followed and found a line of fresh prints in the mud, moving in a single line. It angled back towards the main gate.

“Okay. Now this is weird.”

She had an idea, but it would require some verifications. They checked on the house of the disappeared couple and found discarded clothes in a nearby shed. No bodies though.

“They decided to isolate themselves for some intimacy,” Viv realized.

It was incredibly stupid. It's like they'd never seen a slasher movie before. Ah wait, they probably hadn't. It still surprised her how a lack of common sense could get people killed so easily, especially in a world as dangerous as Nyil. Guess humans were the same everywhere, which was a little strange come to think of it. How did they have humans here?

Convergent evolution?

Some nasty god decided to punish an entire planet by importing the only invasive species capable of bureaucracy?

She had to ask about the local cosmogony at some point. Right now her religious knowledge extended to 'Neriad is a swell guy and Gomogog can suck it'. She had to remedy this. It would distract her from the skeletal survivors and the blood-stained childrens' toys lying in the streets.

Viv led her merry band of muscle men on a circular inspection of the town, but decided to stop after an hour of search. There were no anomalies in mana or anything else anyone could spot. They did find one hidden, intact cellar with food, wine, and a smokable leaf which they confiscated for later. Everything else had been thoroughly looted. Reigan looked ashamed after all the questions and for having missed food and he now walked with his back bent. Viv considered that it might switch the balance of power in favor of the merchants and decided that it was suboptimal. She dragged the man aside before they left the palissade.

“Look, you made mistakes. We can both agree on that.”

He hung his head dejectedly.

“How many refugee caravans have you handled before?”

“What? Hmm, none. After I lost my leg, I was mostly in charge of supplying iron for the temple armories. I did my best to keep fit, of course, but I wasn't ready for... what we've done.”

She nodded.

“Right. Here is a lesson I’ve been teaching quite a bit since I arrived in Kazar. There are external and internal reasons why someone would fail a task. Some of the stuff is not their fault, some of it is. People tend to either focus completely on blaming themselves or completely on blaming circumstances. I think, sometimes, it’s also good to realize that the mission was problematic to begin with. Suppose you’re supposed to source iron from an Yries tribe. You decide to send a trainee with no experience to do so. They fail. Who is to blame?”

“I would never take such a ridiculous decision.”

“Because it would be your mistake, right? You would be at fault.”

Reigan scratched his stubble.

“You understand what I’m getting at,” Viv continued. “You are way in over your head, but you did your best and never gave up. There will be a time to reflect on your own errors later but this isn’t it. For now, I need you to straighten your back and pretend like everything is under control. When those people look at their leaders, they should only see confidence.”

“Of course. As the scriptures say, a guard showing fear is a sword aimed inward. I will not fail you again.”

“I will be relying on it. Let’s go.”

Viv returned to the camp with a much reinvigorated Reigan and marveled at the progress made in such a short time. Both merchants and handicapped guards had packed up efficiently, then a few had started to help the starving survivors who now made a noticeable third group.

On a hunch, she walked to them and stopped when she got harangued.

“It’s all your fault, you bitch!”

She turned to see a spindly man with a dirty long beard gesticulating. Two guards immediately moved to intercept him but Viv held a fist to signal them to stand down.

“If you hadn’t rebelled, we would still be well and alive.”

“Oh? Did I attack you?” Viv countered immediately.

“You might as well have,” he grumbled. Viv ignored that.

“Did my men ram through the gates? Was it us that stole your food and killed your people? Do you think the raiders would have just gone to your village and said ‘oh well those are law-abiding citizens, we’ll leave them alone unlike every other place we’ve raided so far’? Or are you just full of shit?”

Viv did not let the irate man reply. Instead, she nudged the part of her that linked to intimidation and smirked. The man recoiled, though she felt a strong resistance. He was too weak, starving, and isolated to oppose her.

“If you are displeased you can stay behind with the raiders and the aberrants when we leave.”

The unknown man retreated into sullen silence. That was fine, she had no patience for him.

“Make sure he’s at the end of the line for food. Same for everyone who thinks they’re too good for us,” she ordered a nearby corporal.

“As you say, Lady Viv.”

She could get used to that shit. Oh yeah. Wait no. Bad Viv. No bullying the starving sad folks.

She turned just in time to see Solfis glare at her latest victim. Each of his knuckles extended then retracted his claws in a gesture that should have sounded like ‘schwing’ but regrettably didn’t because physics didn’t work like that. She gave the go ahead for everyone to get in town for the night.

“I want two thirds of the soldiers to be in armor and ready at all times. Those that are off shift can have one glass of the wine we found each, no more. Make sure you move in groups of no less than seven.”

“You are not coming?” Ban asked.

“I want to see if I can handle the aberrants today while there is still light. It would be bad if they come down on us while we’re evacuating.”

“Fair enough, I’m coming with you then. Ma’am.” Ban said with a face that plainly said that he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Well...” Viv hesitated.

//The Heir must have an honor guard.

//An honor guard must have an heir.

//You must send the right signals to your future minions, Your Grace.

//Of course, they will stand at the edge while you hunt the aberrant alone.

A shiver went up Viv’s spine.

“While I what?”

//Naturally, Your Grace.

//Two of our past exercises were cancelled due to scaly, flame-spitting intervention.

//It is time for you to learn how to fight by yourself.

Viv stopped and thought.

Had she ever fought alone before?

At all?

“Hey I killed that dark baby dr—”

//Finishing that sentence would be inadvisable.

“Oh yeah.”

//According to the description given by Reigan, I estimate that the aberrant presents an excellent opportunity to give you experience facing multiple dangerous opponents while alone.

//It will exert your ability to move, delay, and disengage.

//I will be monitoring your performance of course.

//I will not allow you to die.

The subtext was clear. He would let her get hurt. It annoyed her a bit that he would insist on an escort for the sake of appearance but not mind her getting hit. A leader who got wounded fighting alone sounded bad, right?

Except, it was Solfis' advice. He had never led her astray when it came to training. She was just nervous because aberrants were horrible, smelled bad, and were fundamentally fucky to her senses.

She had to do it.

Her reluctance and fear were all the reasons she needed. She had to face her demons head on or the fear would drill deeper into her heart. She was a trained soldier. Her weapons literally disintegrated stuff. No excuses.

“Alright, let's do it.”

The late afternoon sun cast its pale rays through the deserted woods. Snow-covered leaves littered the ground and squelched underfoot. Only the creaks of branches broke the silence of the moment. No birds, no animal cries broke the peace of the woods, because this was the territory of an aberrant and they suffered no company.

Viv breathed in from her circle and took a last look behind her where twisted walls of changed earth stood higher than her. Only a single passage had been left in its middle, gates of hell in a wall of reaching limbs. She was ready. The construct under her activated and she settled in the relaxed mood that meditative trance brought.

Pulse after pulse spread throughout the empty air, a bait that her mana-hungry quarry would never fail to follow. In order to make her trap, Viv resorted to the most logical measure she could think of.

She had taken an alarm spell and reversed it. Now instead of a trigger that sent a signal to her, she was the trigger sending the signal, well, everywhere. It took all of her focus to manipulate the colorless mana but that was fine. She only needed to maintain it until the first of the aberrants arrived. They were one. If a single creature found her, they all would. Viv forced herself to keep breathing deeply. The air was crisp and cold, for now. It would change very soon.

There was a crash in front of her and slightly to her left. A thin trunk fell to the side, brought down by something heavy. She caught a glimpse of red. The foul stench of spoiled meat and twisted mana warned her long before her target came into view. It was a chittering, skittering mass of insectile legs under the ovoid body of a tick. Barbed lances emerged from the creature's front around a cluster of mismatched, cancerous eyes. It moved front and side at the same speed with its multitude of appendages, some too short to even reach the ground. The abomination zeroed on her with rabid focus. She shivered when she spotted a single brown human eye the size of an apple. It was crying.

"Blast."

Black mana roared in her veins but whispered in the air. The artillery spell took the creature cleanly in the middle. At this range and with this power, even the aberrant's mana-sucking power could not offset her refined construct. Hard work and talent had turned the spell into a leg-thick javelin as black as a cave at night.

The eye disappeared, consigned to oblivion but Viv did not rejoice. Another was following, this one to her right. It spotted her and dove into one of the many depressions that made the rough terrain in front of her. Viv waited for it to emerge again. She could feel in her soul where the vile being gnawed on the world by its very existence. It jumped over a stump and she caught it mid-flight, her spell bending to cleave it in two. Gore splattered the rotten wood. Two more showed up. She cycled the blast again. It was easy with the circle, and this variation sacrificed a lot of range. She could keep going. She had to.

Two of the ticks slowed down. One of them was abnormally large. Perhaps it was smarter? No, Solfis had said that they shared one mind. They knew what she was capable of.

They were also creatures of instinct.

With a supreme effort, Viv forced the beacon to pulse one last time while keeping the blast ready. The things greedily launched themselves forward but they also moved unpredictably to the sides to stop her from aiming clearly. They were fast. She was smarter.

Viv turned to the larger tick and spent her spell flying at the other as it eagerly rushed her. It took the creature by surprise. It lost its body and crumpled with a nauseating sound of squished entrails.

The last one was very close now but it was alone.

“Blast.”

Again, the spell took the monster dead center and shredded through it. The circle was running dry though, and the rapid casting was taking its toll. She could already feel a bit of tension when reaching for more mana. It would be fine. Probably. Had to force at least one last spell.

She spotted three distant clusters of red eyes shimmering in the distance. The rest of them then. Solfis had reported seven different creatures. His only concession.

The carcass of the large tick twitched.

With a ghastly sound, the upper carapace split in two and the surviving half of the tick uncoupled from the dead one in a shower of blood and pus.

“Oh fuck that,” Viv said, with feeling.

The blast fizzled with her fear and she immediately ran to the gap in the eldritch wall behind her, horrors in tow. She unsheathed her knife and channelled the Excalibur spell. Despite the urgency of her situation, she could not help a tiny smile of excitement. After all, it wasn't every day that one could splatter abominations with the fantasy equivalent of a lightsaber.

With her heart pounding in her chest, she turned.

Time slowed. The aberrant tried to jump at her. She saw a nightmarish collection of razor-sharp broken things under the creature, ready to mince her on contact. No spell could save her because it took a critical mass of mana to break through the aberrant's all-encompassing hunger. No spell except this one.

Excalibur was a simple spell. It sacrificed all of the good range the artillery spell had for one thing and one thing only.

Might.

A void blade only slightly shorter than herself surged from her knife with a distinct hiss. Where the focused beam of destructive black mana existed, nothing else could. It felt like handling a living, enthusiastic thunderbolt. Viv sneered and swung down. Angle didn't matter. Martial prowess didn't matter. The spell slid through the creature with deceptive ease. Viv dodged to the side and let gravity carry what was left of the carcass forward. Three to go. They were almost on her with two clambering over the wall and the last sprinting. She grabbed her roundshield in her hand and cast again. The tick on her right collapsed with the wall it thought would support it. The other two jumped on her in quick succession.

Time slowed.

Viv used her burst of strength to smash through the wall on her right, killing yet another tick with the spell. She rolled on herself and brought the roundshield up, stopping a lunge through the wall. A stinger and two separate serrated legs smashed against it. The shield held.

Her arms didn't.

Viv grunted when her own defensive equipment hit her on the side of the jaw. She rolled back to absorb the shock and readied her next spell. The aberrant had scrambled through the wall to try and follow her but it had hit a snag. Viv had picked a place where she knew, thanks to her perception, that the wall was paper-thin and already crumbling. The aberrant was struggling through what amounted to concrete. It was almost through.

Three different sets of teary brown eyes met hers. The thing wailed and retreated. She let it. She knew what would come next.

Her danger sense screamed and she slowed down her time perception again, diving backwards. Her spell triggered just as the last tick, the one that had fallen down, smashed through the wall right in front of her. Things wracked against her shield with a shriek of tortured metal while one caught on her enchanted robe and pulled. Viv was almost carried by the sheer, absurd strength behind the creature's limbs.

Her excalibur cut it in two.

Only one tick was left. It glared balefully through the wall, dodging away when Viv noticed it.

For one moment, Viv thought that the creature would retreat to fight another day. It could obviously duplicate its bodies to replenish its numbers like a nightmarish amoeba. With stingers. It would make sense for it to retreat. But it didn't. It was an aberrant. It existed to consume, and Viv was strong and filled with mana. It jumped over.

Viv closed her eyes when the thing clawed the wall and threw sand in her face. She didn't need sight. She could feel its presence against her soul.

It died.

Viv held her breath and retreated out of the maze she had created, away from the steaming guts of the ticks. She climbed the path back towards the village where her escort was waiting.

//New option, shield training.

"Hey it worked."

//Your shield is supposed to protect your face, not hit it, Your Grace.

“You were waving that sword all around,” Ban said. He looked... offended.

“That wasn’t a sword.”

“No form at all!”

“I’ll show you form,” Viv retorted, not thinking clearly. She frowned and focused. It took a few moments for her to shape black mana into the Kazaran word for ‘twat’. Ban blinked.

“How about now?” she sneered.

“Your Grace, I can’t read.”

Goddammit.

Chapter 81: Second and Third.

Danger sense: Intermediate 1

Mana Mastery: Beginner 7

Focus +1

Viv felt little different as she watched the first squad move bodies to a pyre. The only exception was danger sense. Somehow, she was able to pick the direction from which the danger would come, or at least it had worked at the very end of the fight. She thought that it would prove invaluable in the future just as she expected people like Irao to have ways to circumvent her new instincts. It was still amazing. She wondered how skills worked for others.

“Solfis, do you know if people experience skills the same way?”

//Your query requires a complex answer.

//Mana mastery allows mages to see, absorb, and manipulate mana more easily.

//Some mages will still absorb mana more easily than others.

//Additionally, the skill will have more impact for those farther on the path.

“How does it work for Ban who changed path? Does he get different skills?”

//In Ban’s case, his original path was close.

//Most of his skills transformed after rigorous retraining.

//Path changes can improve one’s circumstances when appropriate.

//They will always be costly.

//Fortunately for Ban, he had the best drill instructor he could hope for.

//Progress towards the next step is always lost, no matter what.

“So someone who would go from a merchant to a mercenary...”

//Would be better served earning enough to hire a mercenary instead.

//Incidentally, you will have difficulties developing any sort of shield skill.

//However, merely being taught how to hold it properly might help.

//We will train you back in Kazar.

“Lesson one is not to let it hit you in the face,” Bann said from the edge of the pyre as he handled the malodorous remains.

“How about next time we switch roles and you handle the aberrants?” Viv suggested, somewhat miffed.

“With all due respect Goodmother there’s no way you have enough power to lift those things.”

“Ugh.”

//Less talking more piling.

//Due to our lack of fire magic, it will take some time before the remains are fully burnt.

Viv looked down and noted that the mana was returning to normal but that the carcass was still somewhat resistant to the burning flames. They would have to return tomorrow, it seemed. There was a lot to get rid of.

“Is there any risk if we leave the bodies overnight?”

//Aberrants do not rise again.

//However, they poison the earth.

//The question is inconsequential because we cannot finish before the sun sets.

Viv turned and watched the last of the refugees disappear back into the corpse of their city. Viv wondered how hard it was for them to see the streets they were familiar with now empty, populated by the ghosts of their lost friends and relatives. She had no choice, of course. Safety trumped mental health in this case, but, well, shit, that had to be painful after all that loss.

“We’ll not lose anyone tonight,” she declared.

//No.

//We will not.

“You know what to look for?”

//Do you?

“Yes and I’ll be making preparations.”

The first squad retired as the sun set. The rest of the army had established a perimeter with amateurish enthusiasm despite their grim appearance. Solfis had to give a lesson on how to secure a part of town. The gate’s mechanism was repaired with salvaged components while the streets were blocked with barricades. Witch-pact marksmen took four rooftops and dug in. Heavies patrolled the streets in number. Solfis had the remaining houses closest to their fortified square collapsed and all windows barred. The place was soon turned into a whole fortress by paranoid Kazarans expecting the worst. Somehow, the order and discipline displayed by Viv’s soldiers improved the morale of the survivors, to the point that the local smith even offered to help with repairs. Most people went to bed with confidence and a full belly under the unwavering vigilance of Solfis himself.

Viv went to bed at the heart of the inn and missed Arthur dearly. The dragonling had not returned. Viv knew in her heart that she was alright because... she just did. It did not help with the feeling of loss. It felt cold and empty without the scaled cutie around.

They woke up the next day to find out that no one had gone missing.

“Not so easy when it’s not two exhausted and malnourished templars ey?” Viv cackled, feeling vindicated. Anelton looked even more desolate under the grey light of the early morning. Solfis dropped himself down by her side as she walked to a general store reconverted into a mess hall.

//No anomalies, Your Grace.

“I see.”

They found Ban inside. The man had a skill that allowed him to function well on four hours of sleep, which Viv thought might be a staple of the ‘student’ path if there was one.

“How long until we are ready to depart?”

“Another two days should do it, Goodm— I mean, Your Grace. Most of those folks will be strong enough to move on their own by then. The rest we can carry in an empty wagon with the children. It will slow us down though.”

“If we can leave safely before Elix’ force arrives we will, otherwise we hole up here. I do not relish the thought of a slow-going trip through hungry beasts’ territories. Anelton can withstand a siege from a band of marauders.”

//We take the risk of being actually besieged.

“I don’t think that they would bring enough food for that.”

//They might take the risk, considering the following parameters.

//Your head is worth five hundred gold talents.

Viv opened her mouth, absolutely scandalized.

“That’s it? Five hundred? I got half of that in assets, easy! Five hundred? The fuck is wrong with those people.”

“It’s a lot of money,” Ban said reproachfully.

“Not to cross the forest twice on an assassination mission against someone as protected as me it isn’t. No wonder no one... wait.”

Viv narrowed her eyes.

“Solfis, did any assassin try to get to me?”

//No assassin reached Kazar.

Viv stared into the world’s most horrifying poker face and failed to get through.

“Ah whatever. Let’s just wait for... oh!”

Something heavy landed in the square with a muffled squee. The survivors panicked for an instant before remembering that they had seen Arthur before and were still alive to tell the tale. Viv rushed out and patted the proud dragonette on the shoulder. She held a broken shaft in her mouth, and a shabby flag hung limply from its saliva-soaked wood.

Stole image.

I stole back!

On the flag was either a particularly malformed ant or a poor attempt at drawing a dragon. Viv assumed the latter and made sure not to voice her observation. Arthur bumped her on the chest and wriggled her head which was the unspoken request for a horn petting. Viv

made sure to indulge and shivered when excess mana discharged from the onyx-black surface.

“Seems a bit arrogant to choose a dragon as sigil.”

Dragon.

Says yes?

“I doubt it.”

I knew it.

Image thief.

“I think so too. Now how far away are those who bear the thief flag?”

Five valleys!

“Errr how long did it take for you to return?”

Much long?

This was going to take some time.

“Was it night or day when you took the flag?”

Day!

“Did you return here immediately?”

Ate.

Elk.

Alright so there was no way to be absolutely certain but it had been no more than an hour and a half, earth standard, since sunrise and Arthur flew at easily fifty kilometers per hour cruising speed. Assuming a short delay for eating since Arthur could be voracious when the food was raw, they were definitely a bit above sixty kilometers away.

“Did they have horses?”

Yes!

Many.

“Did they have wagons?”

Yes.

Slow!

Lots of metal.

“Hmm that’s not good but assuming that the wagons move at a fast walking speed they will be here before tonight.”

Viv nodded to herself. She needed a better way to measure distances with Arthur.

“In any case, let’s make sure everyone rests well today. Understood Ban?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Viv walked out with Arthur to find her some meat, leaving the Heavies commander behind with a blank face.

“What the fuck just happened?” He wondered.

Elix arrived late afternoon, because of course Viv forgot to account for stats again. A solid seventy riders crested the western hill far in the distance on a strange assortment of mounts. Some were the same docile creatures they had in Kazar, others were solid and slow-moving. The last and rarest kind were chargers clad in heavy barding. Those must have weighed half a ton each and they formed the vanguard.

At the head of the column came a group in plate armor surrounding a man with an impressive helm. The rest of the cavalry followed behind and, farther away, infantry marched in tight ranks. She counted a bit less than two hundred of them and they had made a token attempt at uniforms. Many of the soldiers wore colored tabards over eclectic armor and sometimes even no armor at all. Green dominated with spots of white everywhere, including the dragon on his flag. Viv knew that dragons tolerated their image to be drawn here and there or Arthur’s favorite book would not exist. She just thought that it was ballsy to claim such a dangerous heraldry. Even the green young adult she’d met would roast all of those assholes in a single napalm-fed drive-by if it felt offended. Foolishness.

The slowest part of Elix’ army came last. Viv had feared that ‘lots of metal’ wagons referred to some sort of armored thing but she had misinterpreted the dragon’s report. Elix had cages drawn by cornudons. They already had occupants that she could see.

Viv climbed down from the guard tower with Ban in tow. They reconvened in the mess hall, now cleared to display a tactical table with a basic map of the village. Reigan was invited as a courtesy and so was Amehe and the local smith, whose last name was also the Enorian for ‘Smith’.

“There are many more soldiers than last time. Why would they bring so many people?” Reigan wondered with obvious worry.

“They already have captives,” Viv observed.

“Then Elix has taken Reixa,” Amehe declared. She brought another map on the table, showing the Enorian west. Viv noticed with some interest that the border was closer than she expected. There was only one large town on the map and it was Reixa, the capital of the local barony.

“Only Reixa has enough supplies to sustain him. He probably has enough food too but he would need more soldiers and more workers for his fields. I think his purpose is to become too expensive to get rid of.”

“Wouldn’t the local family object? The Reiners if I remember correctly,” Ban grumbled.

“If you can commune with Enttiku I’m sure that their shades would have something to say. They all died at Third Regnos.”

“All of this is fascinating but we should focus on the current battle,” Viv said, and Amehe blushed.

“We have the place locked tight and we’re as ready as we can be without wooden walls. We have drawn plenty of water from the well. Just the same, maybe everyone should pack up and get the wagons ready in case we need to force our way out. I don’t think that Elix would follow us too deep into the forest.”

“Alright but not now,” Ban said. “I want the ground clear to move troops around.”

//Your Grace.

//All our preparations are complete.

//To act more is to create an unnecessary burden.

“Alright,” Viv admitted.

She was letting the pressure go to her mind but she knew why. She had messed up. There were far more soldiers than she expected and if there had been double that number Viv’s group would have been done for. The worst thing was that she could have just asked Arthur how many humans there were. The little one knew how to count. Viv had just made assumptions, which was one of the things she had been taught not to do and that pissed her off. Stats were no replacement for common sense, it seemed.

“Right, let’s see how they deploy. We are good as we are, we just need to avoid surprises.”

Just then, a heavy knocked on the door.

“Sir, someone is coming bearing a flag of truce.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Viv said. Ban was a competent leader but he was no politician. She made her way out with the three civilian representatives and stopped up the walls by the gate.

//I will remain below, out of sight.

//If I perceive a threat I will pull you down.

“Thank you,” Viv whispered.

Elix had come with his retinue. He was quite handsome in a darkly charismatic sort of way with a close-cropped, impeccable beard and warm brown eyes. His escort looked reasonably impressive in clean, heavy armor and proper tabards. It felt all very medieval, which Viv found appropriate since she intended to go medieval on their pillaging asses. She briefly inspected the lot.

[Robber baron, dangerous, one who follows a path of opportunity and social ascension.]

Inspection: 4/5

Ah, about damn time. She frowned and kept looking

[Leader of men, expert melee fighter, slayer of men]

It wasn’t much more but it told Viv what to expect. The rest of the supposed knights gave answers like mounted raiders. One was a mercenary leader and the closest thing to a proper rider was a pair of hedge knights. Despite their ominous paths, their shiny appearance did grant them a certain aura of respectability that no amount of inspection could tarnish. She suspected a skill at play and did indeed feel a certain pull on her own leadership skill. His was paradoxically softer, more subtle.

“Greetings, Anelton. Allow me to congratulate you on repairing the gate and securing the place. You did a tremendous job. Now as the rightful ruler of the Reixan marches, I would like you to open them and let us in.”

“I didn’t know raiders had a sense of humor nowadays,” Viv deadpanned, and the influence decreased.

She had to fight it. Her men didn’t budge but she could feel Reigan and Amehe look contemplative and even hopeful. That wouldn’t do.

“And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“You can address me as ‘milady’.”

A few of her men chuckled, and the influence decreased further. Elix grit his teeth. That was a good sign.

“Very well miss milady,” he replied with a sneer. “Allow me a chance to convince you. We are all reasonable people here, no reason why we couldn’t come to some sort of agreement. You see, the land is not safe.”

“Indeed not,” Viv noted with a glare. Once again, the interruption sort of broke the rhythm Elix was trying to set up.

“As I said the land is not safe but I am changing things. My companions and I have established a safe haven around Reixa, a place where people can eat, work, and live safely, a place protected from the depredations war has wrought on this nation. We are building the kingdom of tomorrow around the white walls of this noble city and you too can be a part of it.”

“And the people in cages will be a part of it as well?”

“Those are ruffians,” Elix said through an increasingly forced smile. “Bandits and rebels.”

“Just like we’ll be if we say no.”

Viv leaned forward and let the venom drip in her words. She’d had enough. There was nothing to work out here because the man was not taking them seriously. He wanted his workers and he would have them either through the easy way or the hard way, and she certainly did not intend to make things easy.

“The pyre of corpses you left is still warm, you know? Sometimes I look west and see a volute plume of smoke rising from the ashes of the hundreds of people you slew.”

“They resisted. Sometimes, — “

“Women. Children. The fucking dogs. Their blood is still on the walls. I saw the broken toys, you monster!”

Viv was screaming and she didn’t care.

“You are a glorified murderer and an upstart, but I see clearly through your polished garments. You can sprinkle flecks of gold on a turd but it won’t stick any less. That’s what you all are, you degenerates. Trash rolled up in fancy metal. And that’s what your words are as well, all lies to have us lower our guards, lure us in a false sense of equality. You didn’t even hide the fucking cages. You didn’t even send someone else to do it. You just came here with your courtesan moustache less than a week after slaughtering the entire city expecting people to have forgotten? Fuck off.”

“I only want what’s best for everyone. Do not make me do something we will both regret.”

“Oh, you will try. And you will regret. Go back to your festooned cutthroats you prick. I’ll see you soon.”

Viv turned around and dropped down. It appeared that Elix was trying to speak more but witch-pact marksmen aiming their crossbows with malicious intent dissuaded him. He returned to his lines and they soon moved parallel to the walls along the fields, north of the city, where the camp used to be. Viv climbed a guard tower and looked on.

“They can’t be leaving,” Ban said.

“No they will get in through the second gate, correctly assuming that we cannot have fortified both.”

Viv considered giving them a volley but decided against it. She didn’t want to move her soldiers from the fortified houses to the walls and give up the surprise. Elix’ band trudged their way to the second gate and opened it unimpeded. Viv heard more than saw them form up and moved forward with Solfis. Ban excused himself to order his men around.

“You two should get indoors,” she told Reigan and Amehe who were still following her like lost ducklings.

“I can fight!” Reigan said.

“And I need you as a last barrier between the survivors and Elix. You get in there and you catch stragglers. We can’t afford to give them hostage,” Viv said with confidence.

The temple guard saluted and departed, just as she knew he would. She was half-honest. He really would serve best by getting out of the way.

Viv found her place next to the barricade and waited. Lines of solid heavies blocked the passage while marksmen covered the roof in a deadly crossfire. She could only see the main square from ground level, but she could hear the rumbles of hooves beating packed earth. It felt... exhilarating.

Ban screamed at everyone to keep it steady so she had nothing to do except stand on one of her prepared circles. She blinked and turned to Solfis, who had remained unusually silent.

“You’re too quiet.”

//You need to experience this.

//I shall keep you alive.

“Right.”

His training thing again. Viv focused on the coming cavalry and prepared her spell.

“Loose!” Ban roared.

Twangs and whistles cut through the noise of the charge. Viv finally saw mounted riders charging down the street with the heavy cavalry at their head. They moved... too fast. Her other senses soon confirmed what her eyes were telling her. The head horses were surrounded by a halo of grey mana. It made them move more quickly, somehow.

A grey shield rose before the formation. The quarrels shrieked through the air and penetrated it easily. Horses shrieked while men fell to their death. Viv spotted the caster responsible at the back of the vanguard, hunkered behind the two hedge knights. He was a young man with a wild look and free flowing dark hair. He had to die.

The mage pushed his hand forward and cast. A veritable wall of air shot forward, sending debris and dust flying straight at the barricade. The mana stayed behind, but the wall kept going, which Viv had to admit was pretty neat. She didn't bother blocking it. It would be too wasteful.

The guards hid behind their shields when the wall impacted. Crossbows stopped firing as visibility was reduced to nothing. It didn't matter to Viv. She knew exactly where the enemies were coming from.

Blight had changed a lot since she first cast it on the walls of Fort Sky. It had been a visceral spell then, something that expressed her despair and fury. The current version was mature and considerably more destructive. It was also shaped to expand along the central street in length.

Such a shame that diminished visibility worked both ways.

Viv almost sighed when the perfect ball of destruction left her side on its merry journey. Unfortunately, the mage immediately noticed that someone had unleashed enough mana to melt a block. His cry of alarm sent men rushing away. Viv heard screams left and right, hinting that the attackers had rushed into side streets.

Of course, there were only so many side streets and with the spell hidden, some of the formation had not reacted in time. The first screams of horror rose and were abruptly silenced. The cloud of dust slowly dissipated to reveal a tunnel of black smoke, hissing and spitting like a furious snake. Cries of consternation came from the sides, quickly silenced. The spell dissipated in time and Viv saw that men were shuffled around, forced to hide behind houses as they progressed forward.

Viv felt the attack come before it manifested. Foreign grey mana permeated the air. She reacted almost without thinking. Black tendrils spread in every direction, dispersing the concentration around her. Then the line of soldiers closest to her started to choke. They grabbed at their throats with rising panic. Raspy breaths merged with the cries of panic. Viv closed her eyes and waited, feeling the tendrils, tracing them back.

"Where are you?"

One of the heavies kneeled. Infantry rushed the barricade and started to climb under continuous fire from the two roofs that had escaped the spell. Desperate heavies repulsed the attack. Ban was there, silently pushing people up.

Viv found her quarry, or at least close enough to calm him down a bit.

“Blast.”

The spell went through a very surprised enemy soldier and the building behind him, and more behind out of sight. She felt something connect. The choking construct harrying her men relented an instant later. Its power faded like mist under the wind. Heavies recovered and mauled the lighter infantry trying to overwhelm them. The enemies were just bandits, milling and aggressive as they tried to dislodge the well-equipped and disciplined close combat specialists.

It was a massacre. The assault faltered as fast as it had begun.

“Are they regrouping?” Viv wondered as the last of the runners took a quarrel between the shoulders.

//It appears that they are retreating, Your Grace.

//At least for now.

//An impressive shot.

“What do you mean? I got the mage?”

//Yes.

//The dispersion was too abrupt for a mere dispel.

//He was most likely killed.

“What should we do, Your Grace? Stay put?” Ban asked.

Viv considered the question. She felt like she had to make a statement, but at the same time she didn’t want to risk her fortified position. The Kazarans were still heavily outnumbered. She didn’t feel like risking the lives of her men to save Enorians even though the captives certainly didn’t deserve such fate. She would need every one of her soldiers to repulse the spring attack.

She couldn’t save everyone.

Even assassinating Elix at this stage might backfire. Some could try to avenge his loss while, right now, the enemies were retreating in good order.

“We stay put. There are people in those cages but... we stay put.”

//Your Grace.

//Send me.

“Solfis?”

//You made the right choice.

//Now use me.

It did not take long for Solfis to rush to the cages. He made short work of the sentries and freed the prisoners with the Kazarans staying where they were. By the time Elix' force had left the way they came, Viv had gained another grateful thirty survivors. The crying, underfed group was given to Reigan for care and she asked Amehe to join her in the main square with the other merchants.

"Elix is in full retreat," she informed them.

"Oh good, then we can soon depart!"

"There is, of course, the question of the disappearances."

Amehe's pleasant face made a little 'o' of surprise though she recovered immediately.

"Oh yes, of course. I just assumed... since we haven't seen anything in two nights..."

"Yes, if it were an animal I would have expected to at least have them roam close to the walls, look for a flaw in our defenses, yet Solfis detected no presence."

"Perhaps it has gone to greener pastures."

"Or perhaps it has no more need for bodies at least for now. I found it curious that the disappeared would move on their own accord, unless, of course, they were dead and reanimated. Strange how both sentries fell asleep at the same time on the first night and could not see anything happen. Almost like someone spiked their food."

Amehe's smile turned into a frozen rictus. Green light erupted from her right hand then an excalibur spell split her in two. Viv cleanly severed the woman. She blinked once on the ground, her beautiful face intact over the steamy ropes of her innards. All around, the sound of quarrels hitting flesh spelled the end of the entire merchant crew. Some also cast, far too slow to make a difference. Others threw themselves on the ground asking for mercy and finding none.

Viv cast a second time when a dark cloud rose from the woman's body to exert her spite. It faded away with a wail.

"Didn't even get the time to finish. Amehe, I suspected you so I had him check your quarters while you slept and he found the unholy symbol of Efestar, God of Scorn as well as necromantic texts."

//Gloating is a poor habit, Your Grace.

//What do we do with their possessions?

“Keep the gold but burn anything related to the worship of Efestar. Any suspiciously marked jewels get on the pyre of corpses as well. I wonder why they didn’t kill all the villagers at once?”

//Necromancers, especially Efestar’s servants, will attempt to sow dissent before striking decisively.

//Perhaps she was not sure that she could kill all of the temple guards without significant losses.

//Additionally, revenants provide great security when crossing the woods.

//Most living creatures dislike their stench.

“And what’s with the green light I thought they used black mana?”

//They do.

//Necromantic spells granted by the God of Scorn take that specific hue.

“Enough delays. I can’t wait to get back to Kazar. The prince will be there soon. It’s time to finish what was started.”

Chapter 82: To Quell a Rebellion

Viv sat at her desk back at the tower, at a loss. The wind brought in the fragrant perfume of the Kazaran tree’s lilac blooms. The apothecary had dropped off a large vat of powerful poison, then left with a huff. Not only did he have a prickly personality, but he also saw himself as a healer and disapproved of Viv’s tactical choices, or so it seemed.

And now she was having doubts.

Viv took out a piece of paper and made a list of the change she had brought to the expanding town.

- Every layer of society has been mobilized for war
- Nationalist ideology fed by a hatred of Enorians
- Partially planned economy
- A powerful, indoctrinated military
- Backed by massive industrialization (driven by owl-people but still)
- Three different kinds of chemical weapons.

Arguably, the third chemical weapon was made by the Yries so it didn't really count. It was also the most gratuitous act of dickery she had ever witnessed on a land that enslaved people to fund wars. She was going to use it.

Where was she? Ah, yes.

- Three different chemical weapons
- A ruthless approach to conflict that would make Vietnam look like a prank.
- Small cult of personality, although to be fair it was made by kids and aimed at Arthur.

That was more than enough to draw a conclusion. Viv sighed and bent forward, massaging her tired eyes. Then, she looked up at Solfis' quiescent form.

"Solfis."

//Your Grace?

"... are we the baddies?"

The golem's yellow orbs dimmed in what felt like a smug, satisfied half-lidded smile, like a relaxing cat.

//Scruples.

//I have always found the human's fascination for honorable underdogs curious.

//You fleshy beings often root for the one at a disadvantage.

//It is a phenomenon I can observe but not understand.

//Like altruism.

//I believe that it is born from your species' fascination with constructed beliefs.

//Which you call stories.

//Let me ask you a question in return.

//Can you accept what Prince Lancer will do to the people living here, should you fail?

"No."

//And how far are you willing to go to stop this possibility from happening?

"That's the thing. If I stop questioning myself, if I'm ready to go to any length, then am I better than him?"

//I would argue that being better should not matter.

//This is not a contest of virtue.

//But I know that your fleshy mind does not work like that.

//So instead, I advise you to go out and talk to one of the survivor's of Lancer's occupation.

//The main west street baker's widow will do.

"The one..."

**//With that scar on her cheek, yes.
//Talk to her, hear her story.
//Then you can decide how far you are willing to go.**

Viv felt like she had been trapped, somehow. Solfis was using emotions.

“Not like you to make me decide based on my heart.”

**//Your emotions influence your mind.
//It is unavoidable.
//That same imperfect mind allowed you to come up with all new and exciting ways to hurt people.**

The golem deployed with skeletal grace. His horns reached the ceiling without ever touching it. The glow of his orbs shone ominously in the wall's shadows.

//No matter what, I wanted you to know that, regarding your preparations...

They narrowed in vicious pleasure.

//I am extremely proud of you.

Author's note: change of focus.

Fifth day of the third month, Reixa, west Enoria.

“To quell a rebellion is not an act of punishment,” the prince said.

His baritone voice rolled smoothly over the assembled troops in Reixa's main square. Enorian commoners watched from the windows and balconies, enraptured by the royal presence. The collective attention drifted from the prisoner on the gallows to him, their sovereign, their prince. The rightful heir to the throne.

“No, it is an act of healing, a corrective act. To quell a rebellion is to reconcile a people with their rightful ruler. To stop a rebellion is to cure a sickness by suppressing the disease before it sours the body.”

The prince spread his arms and Talan felt the caress of his goddess. Truly, the young questor could not have prayed for a better leader. Prince Lancer was just, frugal, and

avaricious of the lives of his men. He understood the nature of power as well as its pitfalls. He had led them to victory at Third Regnos, cutting down the rebel cavalry's retreat and slaughtering the better part of their nobility. Enoria would be safe under him. Enoria would be powerful and whole once more.

"Order, gentlemen, is the key to peace and prosperity. It does not suffer compromise, nor exceptions. It must be imposed equally and justly across the land. Our task here is nearly done and we will move out soon to pursue this most noble of goals. We will go to Kazar and bring this lost city back into the fold. We will cleanse it of the witch, her followers, and her influence. Order will return to that respected pillar against undeath. First Kazar, then, the kingdom. I know that some of you would prefer to concentrate on the rebels and I hear you. Their time will come, but for now, we must finish this task laid in front of us. It is not a chore, it is an obligation."

Cheers rose from the ranks. The Bridgers roared first, they who had been the first at his side, then came the line battalion. Talan's chest filled with the fervor of his cause and the great duty they had to perform. Ah, such a sight they were, the prince and his lieutenants. There was Goodmother Eteia, severe and reserved, she who had sacrificed the joy of motherhood for the cause. Bishop Ereon the brave surveyed his flock with a fatherly smile. Talan's superior had always championed Maranor's cause with unwavering faith, eager to see his beloved homeland resurrect from the ashes. The Royal Champion was the last, a tall and silent man handling a greatsword as easily as Talan wielded a toothpick. He stood by the prisoner with the grim expression of an experienced executioner.

It was time. Prince Lancer turned to the kneeling man and called to him. They offered such a poignant contrast, the true blood and the usurper, the silent silver and the gilded gold. The fallen robber baron looked up and sneered. The gash on his handsome face yawned and blood seeped, dying his teeth red.

"I met her, you know?" the fallen man said, and the prince stopped. Talan's warmth faded a little bit from his chest, because something had gone... off-script. The prince frowned and signaled the executioner, who pushed the prisoner down.

"You, the criminal who stole the name Elix, you have been found guilty of treason, robbery, kidnapping, rape, and murder. I condemn you to death."

"She's nothing like you think," Elix retorted, uncaring.

Talan saw the glint of a vengeful eye in the shadow of the Champion, one last ember of defiance. The voice was muffled, and yet it carried over the silent assembly like a dirge.

"I will be seeing you soon."

The blade fell.

For all his flaws, the robber known as Elix had turned Reixa into a well-supplied hub of activity. It had come at the cost of villages, as well as the town of Anelton. Those would take two generations to recover from the devastation he had wrought, at least! But Prince Lancer's group had all they needed to launch the expedition.

It was said that the rebels had defeated a garrison of two hundred men. To defeat them, the prince would be bringing four times that number, plus a war mage and the champion. Talan thought that it was too much, but he also knew that the expedition would keep the men on their toes in preparation for summer, when they would finish off the rebels once and for all. For now, ranks upon ranks of soldiers with their gear walked along the dirty road west, many complaining that the men at the center 'had it too good'. Sergeant walked up and down the line, chastising those who complained and reminding them that their turn would come. Kazar was such a lost place, away from everything. The prince was right, however, it was a matter of principle.

The light wind of Enorian spring brought the scent of sap and wet earth to Talan. It covered the more pungent aroma of his traveling companions, the squad he led as questor. Talan shivered as he recalled the hell that Regnos had become after the third day, when it seemed like the entire world stank of shit, rot, and smoke. Summer would come again, but for now he enjoyed the simple pleasure of a morning stroll. He was so absorbed in his step that he almost missed the late addition of another wagon to their already large caravan. It bore, to his surprise, the sword and shield of Neriad.

It was no secret that the two churches were sometimes at odds on philosophy and the conduct of war, yet the alliance between light gods was too precious to be sacrificed on details and so the newcomer was received with courtesy. Talan heard the whispers spread through the ranks and finally learned the truth in the late afternoon, as they were already well on their way. They had been joined by a Bishop of Neriad. Their expedition had two bishops. The men were too wise and jaded to rejoice, however. There had to be something going on. The mystery only grew deeper when they were informed that night that the Neriad party would join them 'in healer capacity' and under certain conditions. The prince had to accept a 'peace talk' with the witch before continuing. He had accepted.

Talan didn't think the negotiation would lead to anything. Kazar had been forced to submit to the laws they had avoided for so long and some of the population had not shunned their tasks, like true Kazarans. The others had risen against the kingdom, led by the accursed witch and her inhuman followers. Talan didn't expect that someone who would lead a rebellion against order because their privileged treatment had ended would willingly submit to execution. The witch had to be selfish and manipulative. She would let the large town die before sacrificing herself.

On the third day, the army reached Anelton.

“This is what a world without order looks like,” Talan told Regor, the corporal in his squad. The old man did not reply but he nodded wisely. Elix had put the town to the sword. That night, they camped under the stars within walking distance of a massacre. It put Talan’s teeth on edge but they were mercifully left alone.

At dawn the next day, the formation narrowed to enter the Deadshield Woods.

Talan had heard much about the place, the way it seemed to play tricks with the mind. All of it was true. Only ten minutes into their trip and he was not quite sure where the edge of the forest was. The road twisted and turned, but by how much he didn’t know. The squad huddled together and kept their eyes on the dense foliage while they listened to every bird call, every monster screech breaking the muffled silence. Groups of archers were ready at all times to pepper any incoming beast with serrated arrows, but their greatest deterrent was Eteia. Vigilant and somber, the war mage surveyed the land from atop her armored wagon like a queen. But no, it was wrong to be thinking that. Her attachment to the prince was well known, yet so far they had refrained from founding a family. It was not for him to consider that she would rule.

She did look majestic, and her presence comforted him.

Talan shook his head and returned his attention to the road. The column made their slow way on the ancient path even as it resisted the all-consuming green expansion. Sometimes, boughs covered the sky and they walked under a green, luminous arc of intertwined canopies. The union of the breath-taking and deadly muddled his mind. When they stopped at a clearing in the late afternoon, he addressed a quick prayer to Maranor.

“Let me see my purpose through the haze of mortal concerns.”

Talan’s vision cleared and his mind grew cold and focused. The Deadshield woods were an obstacle, nothing more. It would be surmounted like the others.

That night, Bishop Ereon summoned him to his tent.

“Tomorrow, we will meet with the witch for parlay. It will fail, of course, but you will be present and learn what you can.”

“Of course, Excellency. My inspection gift will not fail us.”

“Let your men know that they must not attack, even if the witch is a lawless destroyer. We cannot stoop down to her level. Let the servant of Neriad play his strange game, and do not interfere.”

“Yes, excellency.”

“Good. I will see you tomorrow, Talan. Rest well.”

The questor retired to his cot with some trepidation. The witch. The, and may his ancestors forgive him for mentioning it, Great Black Whore. Would she really come? He could not wait.

Sleep did not come easily that night.

Morning in the Deadshield Woods was a strange affair. It crept upon people like a stalking scalehound, sneaking between the thick trunks. By the time the sun rose above the treeline, the sky was blue and cloudy. Talan made his way to the front of the army and the armored wagon where Goodmother Eteia and Prince Lancer waited.

It was a strange sight, seeing all those important people standing early in the middle of an empty road. He himself came to wait near his own bishop and the older man clapped him on the shoulder with a light smile. The champion was his usual stern self. Neriad's bishop was different. He was clean-shaven, revealing angular traits and a pointy chin. Black eyes glared at the trail with clear disapproval as if daring it into summoning the witch. For some reason, it seemed to work. They heard a horse coming.

The woman who had caused it all trotted along the path on a powerful horse. She stopped at twenty paces and calmly dismounted, never breaking eye contact.

Elix had been right, she was nothing like he expected. He had been tricked by the many humorous drawings made of her. There was no abundant cleavage or free-falling lush hair. The woman approached and a nightmarish construct of bone unfolded behind her, as tall as two men. Before Talan could recover, a white, scaled form landed smoothly from above. No one reacted in his party and so he believed that they had been warned.

The peculiar trio stopped only a few feet away from his party. Talan had his first good look at the one who had caused it all and realized that his preconceptions had been as numerous as they had been false. She wore a war robe covered in runes that showed signs of wear in several places. A dagger hung from a sheath on her chest while a round shield covered her back. It was a warrior's attire. Her hair had been tied and held back, and felt natural despite its strange color. It didn't feel like some artificial coloration but like the real deal, as were her eyes. They matched her cold expression.

Talan got a first taste of her power. Mana coiled gracefully around her, alive and quiescent yet the might was undeniable. By comparison, Eteia was both warmer and more composed, more structured. The war mage held a staff over a crimson robe of office, while the Prince had picked a brigandine under a doublet. Both the bishops wore robes and the guard was in full plate with their helmet closed. It made things... a little bit awkward.

"Surely you do not intend to take those things in?" the mage blurted, outraged.

The witch shrugged.

"We can talk here. I do not care either way."

She had an accent he could not place. Her voice went up and down as if she were singing and her 'r' possessed a strange, raspy quality. It made her more exotic.

"We will all sit inside," the Bishop of Neriad intoned with thin patience, "and we will all behave according to the rules of war, with Neriad as my witness."

"Fine by me, I'll sit," the witch said.

Prince Lancer inhaled in a great effort to control his anger before so much arrogance. Talan had no idea how he managed to tolerate so much abuse from that upstart. Despite the pressure, his answer was fast to come.

"Agreed. And if anything happens..."

"Then you die first," the witch concluded without care.

A chill went down Talan's spine before the finality of the statement. The delivery had been casual but the soul power behind it was absolutely overwhelming. If anything happened, the prince would die first. It was an inescapable fact that left no room for interpretation. And the prince just accepted it with a nod.

Unheeding of Talan's confusion, the party walked into the armored wagon. It was quite nice inside. A central table going the length of the wagon offered basic food and refreshment, though Talan had no doubt that they would be left untouched. He and his side shuffled down with the champion standing guard. The witch gracefully sat on her side, while her marsh drake padded close to her and the skeletal creature kneeled. It looked excessively intimidating.

They were so strange like that, like characters from a tale, not political figures deciding the fate of a city.

The Bishop of Neriad sat at the end, taking the judge seat and starting the negotiations in a low drone. Talan tuned him out to complete his main task: inspecting the foe. It was his speciality, his pride and achievement. Years of inspecting everything until his head hurt had finally yielded a specialized skill which his path had then reinforced. The time had come to use it for the good of Enoria, starting with the witch.

Mana flooded his mind and eyes, a casting subtle enough to be lost between the powerful movements of the other people here. At first, he felt an opposition which meant that the status was occulted. Someone or something blocked his skill. Talan persevered but felt like pushing against a brick wall.

Then there was a susurrus of fabric, the whispers of lost things staring through dark portals. A distant chuckle froze his breath in his chest, and the veil lifted. He could see everything.

She had been protected by Maradoc, god of secrets. Talan felt sweat pearl on his brow but he continued anyway.

[Lost Heiress. Extremely dangerous. Third stage of her path. One who has forfeited other hues in favor of a deep understanding of black mana. Highest stats: all mental stats (late fourth tier) Highest skills: meditative trance, mana mastery, intimidation.]

More information filtered through his mind as the occultation unravelled.

[Decent melee combatant. Proficient battle caster. Smart. Slayer of men. Undead nightmare. Lucky. On the rise.]

And then the cause of the veil made itself manifest.

[Leader. Revolutionary. Born for magic. Outlander.]

So that was it, the reason why a god had intervened. Outlanders were always the catalysts of great changes and not always for good. Halluria had taken to kill them as a matter of principle. Other countries kept to a more merciful approach. Enoria might change that after the current crisis was over.

An outlander leading a rebellious city. Her special status would not save her though. The interface had revealed that she was no powerful otherworldly mage, and there was only so much one could achieve in so short a time.

He almost stopped there, but curiosity needled him. He could not help but look to the side, to what appeared to be a drake. Such creatures were often kept as pets by the nobility, especially in the north. It would be a waste of time to inspect a mundane animal and yet there was something in those malevolent red eyes that gave him pause, a sort of vicious intellect that no beast should possess. Beasts and monsters could be cunning. They could even hold grudges. They would not, however, patiently inspect a room and check for weapons and exits.

The creature glared at him and bared its teeth as he activated inspection again.

[Juvenile dragon. Extremely dangerous. Highest stat: Finesse (late fourth tier). Highest skills: draconic combat, flight. Others: awoken intellect. Gourmet. Truce. Flame breath. Mana coating. Nascent caster. Adopted daughter.]

Neriad's.

Hairy.

Bollocks.

Fuck.

The questor froze in his spot, causing a few curious glares and not giving any shit whatsoever because there was a fucking dragon in the room.

A dragon.

Arguably, it was rather tiny.

Arguably, it was too young to affect the outcome of the conflict but if there was one thing that was certain in Nyil, it was that killing a dragon always carried a cost and usually that cost was other dragons taking a short and incendiary interest in you, your extended family, and anyone else in a fifty leagues radius who wasn't aggressively fireproof. It was the sort of victory that disintegrated like ash between your fingers, and the prince would taste it, unless he could spare the thing.

Yes, that could be doable. Kill the revolutionary upstart but leave the monster alone. The revolt would be crushed easily anyway, they just had to be careful.

Talan turned to the last member of the party. In for an iron, in for a gold. It could not possibly be worse than realizing one was fighting a dragon, he thought.

He was, of course, completely wrong.

[HX-013 Experimental Strike Golem, designation, Solfis. **LETHAL**. Apex being. Irlefen's Masterpiece. Artificial soul. First of his kind. Ancient. Dragon bone frame...

The description went on, and on, until his mind buckled under the torrent of information. A Duke had fewer titles than that. Gods, the Headmaster of the Helock Academy of Magic had fewer titles than that. And it only got worse.

[Last Defender of Harrak. Rebellion crusher. Undead nightmare. Monster nightmare. Aberrant Nightmare. Human Nightmare. Kark Nightmare. Kingslayer. Walking cataclysm. **TEN THOUSAND DEAD.**]

Two baleful orbs of yellow light captured his mind as the skill broke and he was caught in a vortex of data and impressions. He was hopelessly swallowed into the crystalline mind of the entity known to the world as Solfis, incapable of resisting its tempestuous pull. There, the soul unfolded like a lotus. It was an immense forest of data slabs, filled with rainbows of light flickering in many hues as streams of thoughts passed through them. It was an impossible labyrinth of logic gates and information rivers. It was a star pulsing in the void. It beat with a frigid aura, and at its core, kept under control by chains that wouldn't break before the world did, hidden in a well of infinite depth, was the fuel that had kept that adamantine mind going for centuries.

It was rage.

Solfis was animated by an endless, unyielding, and inexhaustible fury, a dark pit of sheer hatred that would melt the soul of a god grain by grain, strand by strand, over the eons, until there was nothing left. The strangely pristine emotion radiated its glacial presence throughout the entire soul. He knew then, that under the creature's merciless gaze, he was nothing but variables around a squishy, soft target. The entity would grind him and the others to dust on the road to Kazar. He, a questor, would never amount to anything more than a —

//PATHETIC.

//USELESS.

//FLESHBAG.

Warm liquid dripped on Talan's ungloved hand. It was red. The atrocious pain woke him up from his funk. The others did not react. Was it because they were ignoring him or because they missed the event? He didn't know. The argument was picking up.

"I will now allow the prince to express his sentiment on the matter. Listening to each other is the first step towards reconciliation."

The heiress snorted but she did not stop the prince.

"Thank you Bishop Erland. Then I shall begin. Kazar was granted a tax exemption to grow, and it has done so, taking profit from the passing troops and developing thanks to their protection. When I came to ask you to join the war effort, you fled and returned to destroy the garrison I had left behind. You revolted against your king and for this, you must atone. You and your lieutenants will surrender to me and be judged for your crimes. The population of Kazar will lay down their weapons and be subjected to our laws, paying a tribute as a compensation for the lives taken during the event. Do so, and I shall be merciful."

The prince leaned back. Talan found the terms generous. It fulfilled the prince's purpose and didn't involve a siege, mass execution or any sort of sacking. The innocents among Kazar's government would even be spared. He wondered if the witch would see that.

"Are you done?" the bishop asked.

"I am."

"Then, Witch Viviane will be allowed an answer."

The witch took a few deep breaths. Talan noticed the deeper coloration on her strangely pinkish skin and realized that the woman was absolutely livid. When she spoke, her tone was clipped by self-restraint.

"You came to Kazar asking over two thousand gold talents as back payment, barring which you would invade, which you did."

Talan's eyes widened. That couldn't be right. No, she was probably exaggerating, although his questor powers detected no real falsehood. The prince had probably offered incremented payment. For future taxes. Yes, that had to be it.

“You sieged the city, enslaved those who had stayed behind and sold their women to your followers. You took the rest as slaves and sold them Maradoc knows where. You slew all those who resisted and threw their corpses into the desert where they rose as revenants.”

The Bishop of Neriad hissed. Ereon remained quiet and even Talan himself balked at the outrageous treatment. Such measures should only be used on the most despicable of foes. Surely... but he was not there. He didn't know, so he wouldn't judge. It was not his place.

“And now you come expecting submission. This is pointless, because we do not matter in your eyes. We are just one more trial on your path to the throne. Everything you have done and will do to us is worth it if you can ascend the throne. We're just trash you need to get rid off. You have no interest in anything I might say beyond 'yes'.”

“If you understand,” the prince said, “you will do the right thing and surrender. The Kazarans will be treated fairly. They will have a future under Enoria, one they will certainly not have under you.”

“You will understand if I do not take your word for 'fair' and it doesn't matter anyway. Those of us who lived in caves talked to the survivors of your occupation. The whole of 'Kazar'...”

She said the word in a way that arose suspicion in Talan, as if Kazar was only part of it.

“... is eager to meet you again.”

The threat hung in the air between the two. Once again, Talan felt absolute confidence in the woman's demeanor. Her soul flared, backing the statement with the ghost memories of past deeds. Deadly past deeds. He did not know how much blood it took to obtain the title of slayer of men, but he did know that no one in his squad had it. It was a bloodsoaked prize at the end of a sequence of butchery. And she had it.

“At the very least you did not waste my time,” the Bishop of Neriad said. “Now, Your Highness, it is time to fulfill my purpose as we discussed.”

“What do you mean?” the witch asked.

“I am here to heal your soul. That is one of the two purposes of my visit.”

She raised her eyebrows and, to Talan's lack of surprise, the bishop indulged her. Those Neriad followers were always too soft on lawbreakers.

“The rest concerns an internal affair related to the temple in Kazar. I will make my way there with Prince Lancer and talk to the administrative staff. This is not something to concern yourself over, especially considering the circumstances hmmm?”

“We shall see. How do you intend to heal my soul?”

“It will only take a moment, at least down here. You will be disabled during the process.”

Talan looked to the side and, apparently, some did others because the horror spoke for the first time. Its voice was an organic snarl over a monotone, unnatural drone.

//By all means, try.

//I do enjoy enclosed spaces.

“For the last time we are still under the flag of truce. Behave. Now, please give me a moment while I collect myself.”

The bishop closed his eyes and golden light flared under his pale skin, gaining in intensity until the interior of the carriage was lit by a second dawn. As a divine caster himself, Talan knew that the energy the man was weaving was absolutely tremendous and he gripped the table to stop his shaking. There was enough divine mana to burn down a manor.

The bishop placed his hand on the witch’s forehead. The light blinked out. He stumbled back to his seat while the witch tilted forward, held up by the dragon’s sudden presence.

Meanwhile, in the in-between.

Time was meaningless in the in-between since matter did not exist, but it did take a relatively large amount of... experience, for lack of a better term, for Viv to regain a sense of self. It was the second time she was a pure soul, though she had not realized it, and the sudden absence of a brain left her disoriented. None of the usual ways to process things were available to her. She was also hurt, and this increased her unease.

When Viv came to, she found herself in the embrace of something far greater than herself. This sensation of being helped and protected was the first coherent feeling she understood. Then, slowly, the core of who she was coalesced from the tiny white orb that was her soul.

“WE MEET AGAIN,” said the large presence.

“Neriad?” she thought.

“YES.”

Things that felt like hands but were not folded her, closing the tears and placing pieces that had been split back in their natural position. Viv wriggled, feeling that there was something outside like a current, and thoughts. She was currently in a vast void that felt like an oasis of calm in a moving sea.

She bounced a little bit.

“STOP FUSSING.”

“Oh, sorry.”

It took a long time for the god to finish, but when he did Viv felt an intense relief flood her mind. She was whole again.

The restored part of her returned some measure of control and she perceived Neriad by her side for the first time. The god was absolutely massive compared to her, incomprehensibly so. He pulsed golden and radiant, a pillar that would never give up. She felt solace in his presence, and she also felt humility. His as well as hers.

“HE WHO NEVER DOUBTS IS LOST, I THINK. NOT VERY GODLY, OR SO I HAVE BEEN TOLD.”

“Well for what it’s worth you’re probably one of the best things to ever happen to this shithole of a planet.”

“THANK YOU. THIS MEANS A LOT COMING FROM YOUR KIND OF MIND.”

“Oi. Oh, by the way, could you tell me...”

“I DO NOT KNOW OF YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES. I CAN TELL YOU ONE THING, HOWEVER. DO NOT TRUST MARANOR AND HER SERVANTS.”

“Well, she is your competitor.”

“IT WAS NOT ALWAYS LIKE THAT. WE USED TO BE LOVERS. NOW SHE IS LOST, AND YOU CARRY THE MARK OF HER HATED HUSBAND.”

“... the divine spark of luck?”

“DO NOT MENTION IT TO ANYONE. UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. DO NOT TAKE THAT RISK.”

“Well, alright.”

“I WILL SEND YOU BACK. AND ONE LAST THING.”

“Yes?”

“KICK HIS ASS.”

Back at the tent.

Talan saw the witch's eyes open. She brushed back her head with two hands with a deep breath, then the part of her soul that promised death withdrew. This did not comfort him. She was merely hiding a knife back under her cloak, but it was still there, sharp and naked.

"I guess this concludes our little conversation. If you will excuse me."

She stood up and the dragon coiled at her side, lazily tracing her shin guard with its serpentine tail. Everyone walked out and watched her mount her horse like some horrific dysfunctional farewell.

"The truce ends in fifteen minutes, was it?"

"Yes," the bishop replied.

"Farewell then."

"We will meet again," Prince Lancer said.

"We will," she confirmed.

The assembly returned to the wagon where they availed themselves of the displayed victuals, no need to let those go to waste. It was not the Enorian way. Talan's input was not solicited and so he listened to the various people's opinions. Eteia judged that the witch was powerful and talented but still relatively green. The champion said that she was clean and freshly bathed, and that the Kazarans probably had a base somewhere in the woods, and that they should be ready to deploy at any time. The prince finished by reminding them of their duties. Talan followed Bishop Ereon outside while they walked to the camp. He wanted to share his findings, but Ereon was in no hurry.

"So, the talks have failed. It has begun," the old man said bitterly.

Talan wanted to reply but he was interrupted by a hiss, an unnatural sound that sent men scrambling for their blades. Not a moment later, a spear of black as thick as a tree trunk landed in the middle of the camp, killing three men and annihilating their water cistern.