

The trip back was spent mostly in silence. They all had things to mull over. They returned the horses, then Viv left Farren on the doorstep of the temple just as the sun was setting. They walked to what she had come to call home.

And to an unpleasant surprise.

Three people waited for them by the entrance. There was the male mercenary with a villain moustache and cheeks pitted with scars who had insulted Marruk when Viv had first met her. He was still wearing chainmail under a leather surcoat. By his side were two other men. One was tall and strong, and looked rather uncomfortable while the other was small and wore an ill-fitting leather jerkin. He was trying to grow a moustache and failing rather miserably.

“Walk in, then stand by the door,” she whispered to Marruk. The Kark looked surprised, but she nodded in acknowledgement.

Her little troop approached the mercenaries, then left them behind as they walked left and through the fence gates leading to their front porch. Viv bent forward to pick up her stuff from the sled, but stopped when the taller mercenary placed a hand on the fence.

“This is a private property,” she told him in a cold tone.

The brawny man turned to his boss, who elbowed the scrawny lad with little discretion. Marruk had taken a step forward and her hand was on her mace. Her eyes scanned the street and the house for more threats. Arthur clawed her way out of her nest, glaring at the newcomers with undisguised appetite.

“My boss says that you speak Old Imperial, so I’ll speak Old Imperial for him.”

Viv waited.

“Right. My boss says that we heard that the tunnel contract was closed. He said that it was bad practice to steal a job from other mercenaries, especially from him.”

“Curious. I was under the impression that he had refused.”

The scrawny one turned and translated. The chainmail boss spoke Enorian, but with a thick accent that made him hard to follow for Viv. She really had to find time to learn the vernacular.

“My boss says that he and Farren were negotiating his wage. He says that you owe him for the lost opportunity,” the scrawny man translated with some hesitation.

A wave of fear went through Viv. It came from the chainmail man and she recognized it well. It was intimidation. She instinctively fought back with her own, but it was not enough. The sense of dread the mercenary emitted was palpable.

Viv had not spent her youth being exhibited by her politician Dad without learning how to hide her emotions. She did it now. She took a deep breath and let the fear wash through her once. When her breath ended, the fear was in the background. It was still there, but it was no longer paralyzing. Just something that gripped her guts and made her want to swallow her saliva.

“Your boss wants money?”

“Yes,” the man said, suddenly hopeful.

Once thing she knew, it was that you could not let herself be bullied once. If you allowed it to happen once, it would haunt you for a long time. She had to act now, so she removed her purse from a pocket under Marruk’s scandalized gaze, took a single iron bit, and threw it on the ground beyond the fence where it plinked against a stone.

“Tell your boss that if he sings me a nice song, I’ll consider giving him another.”

The scrawny mercenary’s answer choked in his throat.

“Tell him.”

The man turned around and translated with visible fear. The boss’ anger leaked from his expression as his smile grew strained. Viv did not understand. Casters were supposed to be scary. Was it because she was inexperienced and the man knew it, somehow?

“My boss says that you are far from your home, and that you never know when something bad might happen and you might need friends. It’s not that filthy Kark who—”

The boss had withdrawn a dagger from a hidden sheath and was checking its sharpness with a thumb. This, Viv could not tolerate.

A charged purge spell shot from her right shoulder, before angling down. As expected, the mercenary saw it come, but surprise and the strange trajectory threw him off enough for the spear to land. The dagger’s tip fell to the ground as the entire blade was severed near the handle. If it could cut through stone, it could definitely cut through half a centimeter of iron.

“If you show me a naked blade again, I will assume that you intend to use it,” she coldly declared. Inside, she felt super giddy because that was definitely on the awesome end of banter. Like a girl Dirty Harry. Speaking of which...

That goon must have thugged vigorously to reach a higher intimidation level than hers, because she was most certainly working hard.

“I think this discussion has gone on long enough. Feel free to leave now, I am done listening to you.”

“You can’t use magic against us!” the young man yelled, “It’s illegal!”

“Feel free to complain to the relevant authorities then. I wonder who they will listen to, a bunch of useless dogs are a church-sanctioned witch. Now scam, or I’ll start aiming for shorter blades.”

“This isn’t over!”

Viv scoffed and walked in with her pack, eyes opened for anything weird. She and Marruk checked every room since she was feeling that her space had been violated, but that was probably just the idiots outside. She checked and they had left. Someone had pissed on the fence by the door though, and Marruk cleaned it with a bit of fresh water.

Petty.

Viv’s attention was captured by something new. By the inner door, there was a box with a slit and a small flag that was currently up.

“Ah, we have mail.”

Inside, she found two envelopes, which she brought back inside. Marruk had lit up the mana stones providing light as twilight gave way to the dark. The Kark woman was already lighting a fire to prepare dinner.

The first missive came from Lady Varska. She invited Viv to join her for tea the next day, if it pleased her. The letter was polite and the handwriting smooth. The paper also smelled faintly of flowers.

The second letter was much more formal and sort of summoned her to meet the mayor at her soonest convenience. It was signed by the head honcho herself, Resh Ganimatalo.

“Looks like we poked the hornet’s nest.”

//Your Grace?

Viv turned around to see Solfis deployed and operational. His yellow galre fixed something at her back.

Someone knocked on their door.

Marruk jumped around at the same time as Viv. Irao stood in the room with them, one fist on the gate.

Bong bong bong.

The assassin lowered his hand and waited politely.

“Errr. Come in?”

Irao smiled and bowed, the gesture strangely graceful.

“Hellow.”

“What do you want, Irao?”

He stopped and seemed to give it some thought.

“A safe haven for my people.”

Viv massaged the bridge of her nose and tried again.

“I will consent to it when I am the undisputed queen of my own country. Now, what can I help you with right here, right now, and within reason?”

The man pointed at the door to one of the empty bedrooms they had kept as is.

“Spare space?”

Oh fuck no.

“You want to... live with us?”

He nodded.

Ok ok, that was weird. That was definitely weird. And creepy.

On the other hand, she was looking to improve the security of the place. There was no doubt in her mind that Mr. chainmail would come back at some point to annoy her or something, and the presence of a legendary assassin could help? If Solfis was not around? Maybe?

Actually, there was another reason to accept. It felt like a test, or a challenge. The cave, then showing his face to her, then now? He was testing her. He was... testing her acceptance.

Farren had said that Irao was bad with people, not that he was a manipulative asshole.

Ok, so far, Viv had gathered as followers an arcane terminator made of bones, a small pantry-raiding pocket dragon, a big exile from some non-human steppes people, and now there was the possibility to get a weirdo assassin as well. Was she growing a collection? Would she get a prize if she got ten of them?

In the end, it was Irao's patient face that decided her.

"Base rules: you clean after yourself, no noise at odd hours and no stealing stuff. If you absolutely need something, you ask me. And don't spook Marruk."

The assassin nodded. He walked to his newly designed room and... disappeared.

Viv wondered for a moment how he knew which room was empty. Better not dwell on it. She turned to Marruk, only to realize that she had been quite rude.

"Sorry, I should have asked you as well."

Yet, to her surprise, the strong woman merely shrugged.

"It is your home. Also, I cannot blame you for giving him a chance. You gave me one as well. If I refuse it to others, it makes me fake-hearted."

"Ah, err, thank you."

The Kark's unexpected generosity surprised her. Arthur, however, was less enthused. As for Solfis, she feared the worst.

When the meal was ready, they were surprised to see that Irao joined them. He brought only pickled vegetables. Viv tried and thought that it was acidic enough to sand wallpaper off, but for some reasons Marruk loved it. She crunched it between her large teeth with obvious delight. They shared the rest of the food. Irao piled a little bit of everything on his plate and excused himself back to his room. Viv and Marruk wished him good night, and the door closed with a whisper.

It was a bit weird to Viv, but more like the normal weird of getting to meet quirky people and less the new 'undead abominations and bolts of pure darkness' weird, and that was refreshing.

Since Marruk had cooked, Viv said she would handle the dishes and the tall woman retreated to her own territory. Arthur settled in his covers and Viv started to charge the core.

"I may have acted a bit hastily."

//One must seize the moment, Your Grace.
//Learn from your choices, but do not regret being decisive.
//Sometimes, a good choice taken too late is worse than a bad choice taken in time.

“Hmm. Yeah, well, are you not worried about him?”

//Irao is probably at, or close to the fifth step of his path.
//Most people branch at some point, for example, Lady Varska is a court mage, according to Farren.
//This means that she is on the third step of spellcasting and the first or second of a courtly path.
//On the contrary, Irao is extremely specialized, from what I have discerned.

“Does it mean that I will have to branch out as well?”

//Sometimes, it can be productive to do so.
//The requirement to improve one’s path increases dramatically with each new step.
//It can be profitable to branch out on the third step and return to your main path later, while still practicing the relevant skills.
//For example, novice, apprentice, mage, court mage, court archmage.
//Or novice, apprentice, mage, court mage, arcane advisor, council archmage.

“Ok. Hmm, you moved a lot today, how are you reserves like?”

//They are at 13%.
//In terms of time, I only moved for less than four consecutive seconds.
//Do not worry overmuch.
//We should still make sure that my energy levels are at least at 30% to guarantee several minutes of autonomy.

“Of course. I was invited, though invited might be inadequate, to visit the mayor and the resident mage tomorrow. Any advice?”

//You were wise to answer Farren’s call, Your Grace.
//Now, you will meet them because they requested your presence, not because you have something to ask.
//They will want to know where you stand, and what your goal is.

“Should I tell them that I need help for my wounded soul? Perhaps the mage knows something.”

//I would advise you to listen and remain evasive.
//They will seek to bind you to their cause.

//The more we know about their respective agendas, the better we will be able to navigate the treacherous waters of frontier diplomacy.

“Fair enough. I don’t think I can have you attend though.”

//You should ask Marruk to strap me to her back.

//Your meeting with the mage is a risk.

//She is the only one who can disable you with certainty.

“Fine. How about protecting this place? I know that runes can be placed on stones. Is there any way to secure the house while we live here?”

//Although I possess advanced knowledge on training, my spell collection is much smaller.

//I can, however, propose several alarm constructs.

//They will remain basic, but you should be able to create them.

//I will teach you now, and you can cast them tomorrow when you leave.

“Good idea.”

//There is something else, before we start with your evening practice.

“Do tell?”

It should be impossible to perceive Solfis’ mood, seeing as he had no facial traits, and yet, Viv found herself thinking that the Golem’s shining yellow eyes assessed her.

//Farren will fail.

That was unexpected.

“How do you figure?”

//When Irleven was young, he designed a canal network project for one of the capital’s premier engineer guilds.

//His team leader took credit, and got promoted as a result.

//Farren is brilliant, but naive.

//He left the political center of the church seeking opportunity, instead, he should have stayed and found a patron.

//Then, he could leave.

//As he is, a successful project will be taken over by his superior in the church.

“You expect the local church leaders to act in such a way? Farren himself seems mostly honorable.”

**//He himself admitted to leaving Mornyr because of a lack of political support.
//Those who create new supply lines are administrators, not knights.
//The project will be taken over as soon as it looks promising.
//Although he may take some credit, the majority of the glory will fall to another.**

“You seem confident.”

//From the databanks I have access to, this is by far the most likely scenario.

“I should warn him.”

//Absolutely not, Your Grace.

“But... why?”

**//Observations show that the carrier of bad news shares part of the resentment.
//We might also be wrong, though the chances are slim.
//Finally, Farren has the mental profile of an idealist.
//Idealists show the most distress when betrayed by their own factions.
//After it is done, he will be ripe for the taking.**

“What do you mean?”

**//It means that we will be able to attract him to our cause.
//Although your... unique charm... has certainly attracted... interesting profiles... to our banner, you need talented administrators to handle the day-to-day operations.
//Farren will do nicely.**

“Still on about the genocidal maniac skill?”

//It will merely be a beneficial side effect of my ultimate goal.

Viv froze in her tracks, her eyes going from the core to Solfis' cold glare.

“Solfis, what's your ultimate goal?”

She felt a smile.

**//I could tell you if you ordered me to share.
//However, I would prefer to tell you at a later date.**

And that was it. Viv drew the line at ordering Solfis to do stuff he did not want to do. To compel someone hard-wired to obey was closer to brainwashing than she was comfortable with. She

finished charging Solfis and considered using the black mana core to keep going, then reconsidered. Charging Solfis would be a matter of months. She would go to the edge of the deadlands to charge the core on occasion, then use the energy trapped within to help her practice longer. Tomorrow. She would keep it charged as an ace in the hole in her meeting with Lady Varska and practice perception and absorption until it was time to sleep.

She missed the internet.

Her bed was reasonably warm after purchasing heavy sheets, and she mediated there for a while. Later, she was disturbed by a small form tapping something on her left knee. It was Arthur.

“Is that... the bestiary?”

The dragonling was holding the book in her front claws, using her opposable thumb to good effect. The sharp ends dug a bit in the leather cover, but Viv found it hard to get angry. It was so cute! And slightly disturbing.

Once more, the tiny monster bridged the gap between animal and toddler, really. She was not sure how to handle this.

“Sure, I’ll read it for you. Give it here.”

Arthur climbed on her lap. Wings brushed against Viv’s nose. The skin there was smooth and warm. Actually, her entire body was like a heater, nice and toasty. Viv started in her softest voice as if she was reading snow white.

“Beastlings are some of the vilest, nastiest creatures to walk Param, spreading filth and stealing children wherever they go. Those debased monstrosities live in diseased dwellings...”

It was like telling a story to kids until they fell asleep.

Arthur watched her human, with her flappy mouth, who had done her usual soft borgle bargle sounds as she collapsed against her pillow. Her breathing was light and relaxed.

Arthur grabbed the precious image-thing between two light fingers, but the white flat things flipped and showed a different image.

She picked the item again and stopped when she saw something that piqued her interest.

There, on one of the flat things, wings spread wide, there was a massive scaled creature roasting a contingent of metal-clad humans. The form was familiar. She counted the appendages.

Two front limbs. Check.

Two back limbs. Check.

A pair of wings. Check.

A tail. Check.

A majestic muzzle filled with proper teeth. Check.

Somewhere in her growing brain, connections were established.

She looked at the size of the humans. They were so tiny!

And the creature was so big.

“Squee?”