

The rest of the convoy reached the Kazar outskirts mid-afternoon. It had been, Viv thought, a harrowing ten minutes of battle followed by a more harrowing three hours of extremely intensive triage. Neriad nurses had fortunately come with the support wagons to heal and stabilize the wounded. It had been an interesting moment for the medic.

Viv was no doctor. She also had no particular interest in the welfare of her fellow men and women. It just so happened that she was rather academically smart and, at the time, there had been a dearth of medics in her branch of the armed forces. She still felt a rush when managing to save lives, and today had been no exception. The existence of healers and magic added a new dimension to the art of keeping someone alive.

The medical profession back on earth had developed a slurry of instruments to keep death at bay: hemostatics, transfusions, antibiotics to name a few. There had even been talks of using biomaterials, but that was still under development. By comparison, Nyil only had a handful of tools, but by the local gods did they work like a charm. Just the basic life spell, when performed by hundreds of people, could knit wounds closed in a matter of hours.

Of course, some people might still die in the meantime.

And so Viv had labored to introduce the proper tourniquet, which beat 'applying pressure on the wound' by a lot when arteries had been nicked. The nurses appreciated the gesture and, in return, taught her on the spot how to use magic and observations to heal gut wounds. They also knew how to set bones with the best of them. Viv could not deny that they were impressively effective. She still thought that it was bullshit that they could not regrow stuff.

It turned out that limbs could be reattached if stuck back within a short time frame. Even that was a hit or miss with nerves not always reconnecting properly. Lost stuff could not be regrown, that was just how it was. The more advanced healing spells would quickly form a healthy stump and stop. Conversely, they could close, like, fifteen stab wounds at once.

Another thing that shocked Viv. She saw some guys asking for booze holding wounds that had her go "how the fuck are you still alive, not to mention conscious?" It all depended on their "endurance" stat, which was just a representation of how magic-soaked their bodies were when it came to resilience.

All in all, it had been a learning experience. She had apparently garnered a lot of respect and sympathy from the rank-and-file by working tirelessly, and giving out all of her health potions. They were worth their weight in silver, and the temple could not afford to replace them, but Viv would not let people die if she had the means to save them around her belt. Not for some hypothetical future occasion. It would have been an absolute dick move. She did not do those without a good reason.

And so she had become instantly popular. Viv wondered exactly how much was due to her prowess in battle, how much for her healing, and how much for reintroducing the Harrakan word for 'twit'.

Both Farran and Varska had begged off her company for the night's celebration as they had a lot to do on their own. They all asked her to be there and represent them, and so Viv was forced to pass by home quickly to get changed. She also used this opportunity to check her progress.

Willpower +1

Endurance +1

It was the first time that her mental stats had improved since leaving the desert. As expected, the progress would slow down now despite her training. She did not mind much. That was expected. Thinking that it had been a while, she brought up her status.

Current status:

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

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 16.1%

Her attunement had grown again, but it was getting slower. Again, that was probably for the best since she would die when it reached 50%.

Physical		Mental	
Power	13	Focus	30
Finesse	18	Acuity	30
Endurance	21	Willpower	31

Not bad. Her physical abilities were lagging behind. Perhaps she should cram some physical training, just so that she could be up to par with the average teen.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Advanced 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 8
Small blades	Beginner 7	Intimidation	Intermediate 2

That had not moved except for intimidation, and she thought she knew why. You needed to commit to something in order to make it progress. It was not enough to study to improve the polymath skill. You needed active, cross-discipline research. That was not urgent now, however. The next one was.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Intermediate 8	Mana manipulation	Intermediate 1
Mana sense	Beginner 6	Danger sense	Beginner 3
Mana absorption	Beginner 4		

Those lagged behind the average witch, as Solfis had told her. She simply had to keep doing what she was doing and they would improve. They had to be at least at intermediary before she could be considered a true, well-trained caster.

So much to do, so little time. At least progressing felt good. Beyond the world-generated grading system, just getting perceivably better at something made a difference. Back on earth, if you didn't make progress at something you were getting worse at it. That was just the way things worked. Here, progress was set in stone. Viv was sure that there was some leeway and someone out of practice for ten years might need a moment but his number was there and it showed an ability that was not dependent on just muscle fiber or brain patterns, but on magical bullshit. And that was cool.

Of course, there were the monsters. Nothing was perfect.

As the last of the convoy members sprawled on the meadow, Viv noticed that tents and supports had been built nearby, on a square of grass left fallow. She looked at the nearest pavilion and

saw the same elements that defined Kazar's clothes. The fabric was undyed, yet someone had painstakingly woven little flowers on the surface to make it nice. She did not get to see what was inside before Corel strutted by with two men at his sides. He slowed when he spotted her and gave them brief orders, which they scurried off to execute. He made his way to her, only for a certain Kark bodyguard to interpose herself with a 'wachu gonna do' expression. She had heard about their previous encounter. This made Corel stop at a respectable distance with no signs of annoyance.

The leader of the guard had replaced his previously bloodstained tabard with a fresh white one sometimes between the end of the battle and now. He still wore his sword and plate armor. Now that she was no longer uncomfortable, tired, and impatient, she took the time to inspect him.

Corel was a man with an honest, somewhat boorish face except for a pair of keen brown eyes that measured Viv. She got the feeling that he was indulging her by being respectful, somehow, but didn't find the strength to care. Respect was all about appearances. It did not matter to Viv that the man was doing it out of necessity. They were not buddies.

"Thank you for joining us in battle, Lady Bob, and you Marruk. Thanks to your efforts, we saved lives that would have been lost today. I appreciate it."

A peace offering. Viv could work with that.

"Of course, captain, we are all together in the fight against the wild."

Except for the squeaking one at her side, but that went without saying.

Captain Corel took the overture with a light smile and continued.

"The arrival of the convoy was meant to be the occasion for a joyous celebration. Unfortunately. The circumstances have changed, but Mayor Ganimatalo deemed it preferable to go ahead with the festivities. If you are willing, we have set up a high table and your presence would be appreciated."

Viv and Marruk exchanged a glance. It sounded suspicious. Corel did not leave them the time to do much else, as he was already on the way out.

"The offer stays open if you have pressing business. Enjoy your night, you have earned it."

Viv pondered her options.

"I will head back with Solfis. You should probably spend time with the other humans. It's, errr, good for you, I think," Marruk informed her with middling confidence. Viv knew that Marruk had it right. It was an important moment for Kazar and, like it or not, she was part of the community now. Might as well try to blend in a little bit.

"I will return when I am done. Do not walk to the house alone. Those filthy flea-ridden mercenaries are still around," the Kark woman finished.

"Fair enough," Viv admitted, "be careful."

"I am with Solfis," Marruk simply said.

**//Indeed.**

Yeah. She was not in any danger, Viv considered, as the powerful Kark left with their baggage and arms in tow. Viv still wore her armor, which someone had washed and dried for her and now smelled faintly of flowers.

As far as Viv understood, Marruk was a fearsome fighter, possibly on par with the temple guard's stronger members, but not the officers like Corel, Lorn, and a handful of others like that Amazon woman. Those were in a class of their own. The gap between Marruk and the rank and file was immense, however, the contribution of this world's magic was obvious. Viv was not exactly certain how it worked, only that it did.

She moved deeper into the tent village. The biggest one protected a dais on which a high table had been set, with plenty of lower tables before it. Men and women already crowded it. Several of the soldiers lifted their glasses when she passed by and Viv answered with a nod and wave. Only the mayor sat at the high table, deep in conversation with one of her aides. Viv joined her.

The mayor finished her instructions and addressed her as she climbed.

"Good evening, Witch Bob. Would you care to join me please?" she politely asked, a far cry from their previous meeting.

Once again, a vindictive woman would have taken the offer and metaphorically backhanded the cheeky politician, but Viv was pragmatic at heart. She saw an opportunity to repair her relationship with the local head honcho and seized it in the same moment.

"It would be my pleasure," she replied with the smarmy smile of the consummate politician.

Viv sat next to the mayor, and realized that she was significantly taller than her. Corel was tall as well. Viv turned and grabbed a seat for Arthur to climb on. The small dragon immediately busied herself with pushing stuff around with her snout and smelling everything.

The mayor did not show any signs of concern as she poured Viv a cup. They raised their glasses together.

"To the fallen."

“To the fallen.”

It was some sort of fruity wine with a spicy aftertaste and like most stuff here, it was fresh and surprisingly tasty.

“I wanted to apologize for the way we treated you earlier. We clearly operated on wrong assumptions. I hope you can forget about our mistake and start our relationship anew,” Ganimatalo offered.

Viv was not willing to let it go that easily. The woman had offered no compensation. She had to milk the situation a bit.

“Did you not receive reports on me?” she asked with a hint of reproach.

“Yes, but the reports mentioned your, sorry to say, erratic behavior. We feared that you might not be entirely stable.”

That was a pile of bullshit. You don't invite someone unstable for a private meeting in the town hall.

“I had just spent weeks actively fighting undead and seen half a garrison cut to ribbons by higher undead. Don't tell me that you've never had people return from the field with a frayed temper.”

The mayor realized her mistake, as Viv expected. However, she made no concession.

“Known knights coming back are one thing, unknown casters are another. Please understand, I have been looking after Kazar my whole life, trying to develop it into the nexus of the west, the frontier heart of the reconquest. I have so many things on my mind that I sometimes make mistakes. No matter how far in the path I am, there are still only so many hours in a day. Once more, I apologize.”

Time to be more heavy-handed.

“Shall we say that you owe me one?” Viv dared.

“My door is always open to those who help Kazar, and you have done so today,” Ganimatalo replied noncommittally. It was still an indication that Viv would be listened to, and the caster decided that it would have to do for now.

“You know, I budgeted this convoy two years ago,” she added, probably eager to change the subject. It worked. Viv was interested.

“You have to pay to get a convoy here?” she asked with some surprise.

“Not so much pay as encourage. Many traders are scared to do business with us, but things suddenly become better if we pay a third in advance. I had to offer preferential treatment to the local branch of the Manipeleso bank to make sure that we were not fleeced by our associates. Are you familiar with Mornyr metal weave?”

“I am not.”

“Every piece is added on something, and the next on the previous, and so on and so forth. Building this city block by block has been the labor of my life. We built barracks and amenities to attract soldiers, then used the soldiers and their spendings to attract trades, then trades to attract the bank. Every new threshold of prosperity, in turn, brings more. If carefully handled.”

There was a brittleness to Ganimatalo’s speech. She smiled, but the edge of her eyes had that forced contraction that Viv had learnt to detect. The other woman was suffering inside, and quite a lot.

“I sense a but coming.”

Viv could see the hesitation, just as she could see when she was dismissed. That would not do.

“Has the attack hurt your bottom line? We recovered most of the goods,” she said.

That got the mayor’s attention and she gave Viv a measuring smile, probably reconsidering her. It was a good thing to be underestimated by your enemies, but not by your allies, and the mayor was turning into one. Hopefully.

“Have you identified the creature that drags the carriages?”

“Hmm. No?”

“Ah. You see, they are called centennial cornadons. They are a particularly stout kind of animal, and they are incredibly difficult to raise. The convoy lost two.”

“They will not return?”

“Not without extreme insurance on our part, but that is not all. Please keep it to yourself for now, since I will make an official announcement tomorrow. The soldiers should be passing the information already. The reason why the convoy had insufficient guard, is that most men have been dragged away to a more urgent fight. War is upon Enoria once more.”

A cold chill crept up Viv’s spine.

“The civil war, you mean?”

“I see that you have kept yourself apprised of the current events. Good. Yes, the old conflict is flaring again. It appears that the rebel nobles and our dear esteemed king, who is technically our sovereign, have decided that the blood has dried enough to apply a brand new scarlet layer.”

“A disaster never comes alone,” Viv commented.

“An apt sentence. War means refugees but without convoys, refugees mean monster food. Those few who make it will discover a saturation of our arable land. It will be a mess, and I will have to fix it myself. Again.”

“I see. Any chance of available land further west, by the sea?”

“Of course, prime shares in fact. And those who settle there might as well stand with their ass out in front of a scale-beast lair and scream, ‘eat me, eat me!’”

“Ah.”

“I did not mean to sound so bitter. With any luck, the profit from the convoy will be enough to clear out entire sections of forest in the winter. Perhaps there is a chance to turn this into a boon, yet. Would you mind doing me a service?”

Viv raised a brow at the non sequitur.

“Depends on what it is?”

“I need to make the rounds, show people that I care, but the dais must not be empty. Could you stay there while I do so?”

“You want me to look all important while drinking free wine and eating free food?”

“Are you up to that daunting task?” the dark-skinned woman asked, ringed braids clinking behind her.

“I think I can manage.”

“Wonderful! Corel and I will be around. Feel free to leave whenever, but do give us a few minutes first, if you please.”

“Can do,” Viv said, refocusing on the table.



There were assortments of stuff already there by her plate. She saw pitchers of juice, fruits, breads and pastries aplenty and a few slices of what looked like cured ham. She helped herself to a little bit of everything and turned to Arthur.

“Arthur. Food.”

“Squee!”

“I’ll feed you. Say aaaaaa.”

“Eeeeeee.”

Magical status modification: draconic surrogate mother.

The meat disappeared in Arthur’s maw. She chewed it thoughtfully, then gave a strangely human nod. Her serpentine head swivelled on her flexible neck.

“Hmmm what was that...” Viv mumbled to herself. The new thing had added itself to her magical thingies list, right below the divine spark note. She inspected it.

Draconic surrogate mother: many have tried to tame dragons and failed. The richest and most insane madmen have kept some as pets. You, however, have raised a dragon like a child. No one had tried that before.

Your soul has received a mark for the attempt through the grace of Maradoc, God of Travelers. It will serve you well.

Okayyyy?

Somehow, the inspect skill was behaving differently. Normally, it was like magically inferring things from observation. You looked and sort of learned and deduced things. This time, it felt more like someone had purposely left a message for her. It was most unusual.

At least, it didn’t hurt.

Viv considered it as she mechanically placed another slice into Arthur’s waiting maw, uncaring as the serrated, lethal fangs closed a hair away from her fingertips. Arthur already ate like a proper gourmet by savoring her food. That was all that mattered.

Someone dropped grilled meat on the other side, a young peasant woman who gawked at Arthur before blushing and hurrying away. Viv realized that she was ravenous, and went to town on the banquet.

It was a nice banquet.

She eventually looked up from her plate after the worst of her hunger had faded.

The scenery before her had a funeral party mood to it. There were the locals, who had lost three guards, and had many more wounded. Even such a one-sided battle had taken casualties. Three dead did not feel like much in the grand scheme of things, but in such a tight-knit community as Kazar, it mattered. Everyone either knew the fallen or someone who knew the fallen. Then, there were the convoy members who looked a bit shell-shocked but were still kicking. Those were drinking hard.

Finally, there were the bereaved.

Viv saw a woman with two children being led to a seat at the edge, her eyes sometimes looking for a third kid that she would never find again. She was immediately surrounded by local women who did their best to give her some comfort, while their kids greeted the newcomers. She saw a spirit of help and cooperation there that she knew would hold until food grew scarce, if it ever did. Shortly after, members of the spotted feathers arrived and added their social skills to the struggle. Drunk soldiers were dragged out of their funk by shrewd conversationalists, others were lured away to private, distant tents to celebrate survival through the ancient custom of lovemaking. The integration and grief handling was a smooth process in which Viv saw the touch of someone who knew when to order and when to delegate.

At some point, a few musicians grabbed flutes and a lute-like instrument to play traditional songs. Viv found the performance absolutely fucking atrocious and decided to take her leave, joining Corel to tell him. He gave her thanks for holding the line of the food front and she headed towards the exit after stockpiling a few things in a basket. Viv found Marruk near the entrance of the camp as she was fending off a horde of curious kids with a lost air, and rescued the poor door/shieldmaiden from her cruel fate. They made their way back together.

#### Twenty minutes earlier. Viv and Marruk's home.

Marruk kneeled by the backdoor and considered her findings with a contemplative gaze.

The Kark did not eat much meat as a general rule. They could only digest a moderate amount every day, any more disturbed their stomachs. What they did eat mostly came from small plain creatures they caught in their many traps.

There were the monsters, of course, but you did not always want to eat that kind of meat.

No, the Kark were trap-setters when it came to finding sources of food, and Marruk had a nice field to practice in. And a skill to make it better.

There was a small lawn on the front, narrow bands of grass on the sides, and a modest courtyard at the back. Those were surrounded by a small fence with all the dissuasive power of a wet hankie. Every time they left, Marruk secured their house with an assortment of patiently made pits and snares, expecting to catch some disgusting, filthy rodents coming to snoop around. And it had worked! This one had even left a bloody shoe behind.

She took it and checked. No toes. A shame.

Marruk rearmed the trap (because why not? City rodents were stupid and did not share information between themselves). She cleaned her hand on her armor and walked back out with a whistle. She had a caster to get and perhaps, on the way, there would be more rodents. She couldn't wait.

Five minutes earlier, the city of the gods.

In the hall of secrets, where a thousand archways led to many more places, a tall man with dark hair strode to his pulpit. He glanced at the text before him, and judged the contents acceptable.

With a last flourish, the god of travelers and many other things besides sent a note to Nous. The dead one was not as defunct as the others believed, and he still had a sense of humor. Maradoc's request was accepted.

Yes, indeed, taming dragons had always had catastrophic results for several reasons. The first, and most obvious, was that dragons could not be tamed. It was impossible. It could not be done.

The second reason, as Vivane would discover at some point in the future, was that the other dragons took exception at the attempt. Great exception, in fact. And if you could count on the dragons for one thing, it was to make their displeasure known in unambiguous terms.

Maradoc anticipated their puzzlement when their assessment spells would return the tiny human's signature as 'mommy'. That was going to go down in the annals. And he had access to all of them.

Viv walked back into her main room and placed the basket on their eating table. She removed a covered plate and went to Irao's door, where she knocked.

"Yes?" a voice said behind her.

"OH SH — err sorry didn't see you there."

"I know."

"I came to give you this. In case you haven't eaten yet."

The assassin stared at the plate for one long moment. Viv wondered if he was not, you know, on the spectrum or something. Not that she minded, it was just that it would help dealing with him if she understood what made him tick.

After a while, Irao took the offered food in his leathered-covered hand.

"Farren said I had to respect boundaries and personal space."

"Okay?"

"But he said shaking hands was a way to convey respect."

"If you want to tell me that you are thankful for the offering, I think you just did. You don't have to shake my hand if you don't want to."

"Good, because I don't like shaking hands."

"I understand. Would you prefer eating alone?"

"Yes."

"I will leave you to it then. Don't wait too long or it will get cold."

"Yes. I know how food works. Thank you, Viviane. I like food. Goodbye."

The door opened and closed. That's how she perceived it.

Viv decided that things had gone very well.

She turned around and walked back to her room. Marruk was outside checking stuff out, or so she said. Arthur had gone to grab the bestiary.

**//You certainly have a way with borderline personalities.**

"Pot, meet kettle."

Viv opened the door to Varska's tower the morning after. Farren had begged off the morning's language lesson as he was too busy, and she thought that it was a good opportunity to rest for half a day. The rest of her group had stayed back, except for Arthur, who jumped out and found a couch as soon as they were let in.

The grouchy maid mumbled something about Viv living here now, before retreating to her own apartment on the second floor. Viv climbed up and found the usual study empty. Varska had told her to show up whenever she wanted, so she was not too worried about overstepping, but she did believe that Varska's apartments on the fourth floor were off-limits.

A voice was singing above. Viv decided to climb up. The door to Varska's bedroom was locked.

As she moved up, the tower's interior grew more light. She climbed the last step to the fifth floor and planned on knocking there to announce her presence. She did not. What she saw had stolen her attention.

The top of Kazar's mage tower was a greenhouse.

Viv was reasonably certain that it had not started as one. Half a cupola of steel blocked the light, hinting at the presence of an observatory, but the other half had been covered by a transparent sheet of something that let in most of the morning's sun. Shelves covered the wall, filled with a colorful kaleidoscope of plants and flowers of many different essences. There were carmine beauties staring haughtily from arched stems, stoic cacti with modest white flowers, and even a bulbous carnivorous plant with a fat belly, waiting patiently for its breakfast. The very air tasted of that earthy brown and green mana that Varska used so well. It tasted of life. Spring. It was gorgeous.

“Wow,” Viv said.

“Do you like it?” Varska replied with undisguised pride. She wore a white and green dress of a comfortable cut. Her dark wavy hair fell freely upon her shoulders. She used a small sprinkler like a wand, pointing at some of her more unique possessions.

“This is an Enorian Scarlet Lady, one of this land’s only poisonous plants. You will notice that it is mostly blue, but when it blooms properly, the edge of its petals turns a vibrant crimson. And so do the people who touch it. Shortly before they die. Oh, and this vine is called a verdant creeper, and it makes some of the best natural ropes you can find. The northern city-states use them for their ships. And that is the prize of my collection. A suncult marea. It will take another six years to grow to its full size. I have had the plant since I was seven.”

Varska was cute when she was nerding it out, Viv judged.

“It’s amazing! How long have you been gardening?” she asked.

“Pretty much my whole life. My family, that is, well, their specialty...”

And just like that, the mood turned somber.

Viv moved forward and took both of Varska’s hands between her own.

“Hey. It’s alright. We’re here, now, in this place, and it’s one of most beautiful things I’ve seen since I arrived into this world. I don’t know anything about Nyil gardening, and even I can tell that it’s the result of time, effort, and talent.”

“Yes...”

“So forget about the rest and let’s enjoy our moment together, right? Just relax.”

Viv massaged the poor girl’s arm. Once again, Varska showed a brittleness that she never let out in public.

“Relax and enjoy the moment,” the woman repeated in a tiny voice.

“Yep!”

Varska took a step forward and kissed Viv on the lips.

“Hmm!”

‘Oh!’ Viv thought.

That caught her off guard.

Varska was quite daring.

The little Vixen.

Also, she smelled really nice and her lips were soft and Viv liked the lithe body pressed against her own. Varska was one of the nicest things to happen to Viv, and she could still not believe her luck. Viv had spilled everything and Varska had helped her instead of backstabbing her or selling her to be vivisected.

"I'm... I'm sorry!" the mage said before pulling away, mortified. Viv had not reacted to the kiss. She had just been too surprised.

"I apologize. It was—"

But Viv did not want the tiny smiles to stop, and so she grabbed Varska by the shoulders as the woman tried to pull away.

"Not so faaaaaast," Viv whispered in her ear. The smaller woman shivered, and Viv delicately flipped her around. They were face to face, with Varska captive in her arms.

"You surprised me, stole a kiss, and now you expect to flee without retribution? I think not."

"I just wanted to live."

Ouch. That came from deep within the heart, Viv could tell, so she said nothing and simply leaned closer.

Their second kiss was more tentative. Viv took the lead and enjoyed teasing and exploring, closing her eyes. Varska was breathing hard against her and she was very warm too. She tasted of tea and smelled of green things and sunshine. Viv leaned more into the kiss and Varska sort of reached a melting point. The tension in her body left completely and she practically collapsed, their embrace turning more frantic. Viv moaned as the other woman frenched her with an awkward passion that felt more genuine than anything else she had ever said. Shortly after, Varska pulled out, out of breath.

Viv licked her flushed lips and savored the moment, but soon her friend's terribly flustered face begged for some ribbing.

"Feeling alive yet?"

"Hm. Not sure. Weshouldtryagainjustincase!!!"

Varska had brought a couch up into a greenhouse at some point in the past, and they made use of it. Varska lacked experience, though she certainly did make up for it with enthusiasm, and so Viv refrained from going too far. They simply snogged and snuggled until the smaller woman rested her head on Viv's shoulder. The outlander caressed Varska's shock of dark curls slowly, and wondered at the change in her companion. Varska had deflated, there were no other words for it. Her composure had fallen apart, and even now she was letting out deep sighs of contentment.

"I am lucky I found you," Varska finally said.

"Err no, pretty sure I'm the lucky one. I mean, you helped me, guided me, and you did not even sell me even though I'm an outlander."

"Well, I did consider it."

Viv frowned and looked down, meeting Varska's amused gaze. The mage smiled mischievously. It gave her a much younger and happier look. Viv realized that Varska was probably, in fact, a bit younger than her. It made her decisive action that much more impressive.

"Oh, do not look at me like that. We scions of the glorious city-state of Helock are trained from birth to wield magic and influence in equal measure. I had to consider it, but I dismissed the option immediately."

"Can't resist my charms?"

Viv's brows danced up and down. Varska pinched her flank.

"Ow!"

"Nope. The more charming, the more valuable. No, it goes beyond that. You cannot know because you are a foreigner, but the mark has left me... tainted. My presence would be shunned in any court or school of the continent, and you would be condemned by association. In fact, I should perhaps..."

"Tatata, no backing out now. You've helped me a lot and you are still helping me, and I like you. If people are pissed about it, I will gladly sit backward on a tall chair, so that they may all kiss my ass."

Varska considered the expression in silence.

"An entertaining image. Thank you. As I was saying, this shame is mine to bear until I die. I was made by Helock's environment, I followed its rules, and here is where it led me. I do not deny my own responsibility, but I will not fall to their ploy again for the pleasure of being someone's



shameful, shadowy servant. Never. I will keep whatever strands of honor I still have and make something out of it.”

Varska nodded with determination.

“Damn, girl, that was inspiring!”

“You... think so?”

“I do like when you look so confident. Oh, errr, while we are at it. What’s Param’s view on, you know, our kind of attraction?”

“Girl and girl you mean?”

“Yes.”

Viv watched as the mage triggered her ‘lecture mode’, growing suddenly serious.

“It will depend on the culture. On our continent, Param, there are several different approaches to it. In Enoria, any pleasure of the flesh is frowned upon because it was one of the excesses of the old king. Nobles and commoners alike are supposed to be focusing on rebuilding the land and, ahem, repopulating it. It’s not a crime, but it’s discouraged. Let’s see. The kingdom of Baran is pretty lax when it comes to it. You can marry up to five people regardless of gender, I believe. It’s the only place to allow that. Err, then the northern city-states each have their own rules. In Helock, for example, you are supposed to marry and produce heirs first, then every couple is left to decide what they want to do according to their proclivities, as long as it’s discreet. The norm applies to men as well. Halluria is the only odd one out. Most of their administrative body, high merchants and so on are women, so same-sex intercourse is the norm.”

“I think I’ve heard about Halluria before. From Farren. He did not paint the land in a favorable light.”

“That’s because they’re a bunch of twits. The only reason why they still exist is because of their military. They have a path called Hallurian warborn, that only the sickest minds could produce. Trained children from infancy, forced to kill their friends in bloody games and so on. The fiercest and canniest join the ranks of nobility, while the losers die in some ditch in one of their many civil conflicts. They only unite if attacked, or if they decide to launch an invasion. It happens from time to time. There is a tacit understanding among all nations of the continent that they will immediately unite any time Halluria starts something.”

It reminded Viv a bit of ancient Sparta. The education of children was supposedly quite rough, though she did not remember anything about killing each other. Those Hallurians sounded like nasty buggers.

“Ok enough about horrible people. How about lunch!”

“Excellent idea. Then, we can start today’s lesson. Do not think that I will take it easy on you just because our embrace sent tingles right to my toes. You will still apply yourself!”

“Can I hope for rewards if I behave?”

Varska’s light green skin grew darker, which Viv interpreted as a pretty blush, though you could not tell from her poise.

“I shall consider it. Results first, rewards later!”

“As you say.”

The next morning, someone knocked on the door as they were having breakfast. Marruk opened the door, and turned to Viv with a curious expression.

“It’s for you.”

A plump woman with her hair in a ponytail was waiting before them, holding a broom. She wore a plain dress and an absent expression. Viv could not help but assess the woman’s beauty. It was at ‘bulldog’ level.

“I’m Gogen the cleaner. I clean for you.”

“Errr, you do?”

“Yes.”

“Did... someone send you?”

“I sent myself. You saved my son so I clean for you.”

“You... want me to hire you?”

“No. I come in, I clean. Every three days. Can I come in?”

[Housekeeper, not dangerous, follows a path dedicated to turning a house into a home. Meticulous. Patient.]

Nice resume.

“Alright. Thank you?”

“No need to thank me. I am Gogen, the cleaner, and you saved my son.”

Viv watched with curiosity as the strange woman went through their large home. Viv had the time to warn her to stay away from Irao’s room and Solfis, but it was a close thing. Two facts soon became apparent.

First, Gogen the cleaner was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. In fact, she was not the sharpest spoon.

Second, she was damn good at cleaning. It was literally magical. In fifteen minutes, their rented mansion was left sparkling clean and smelling faintly of pine. She had done in minutes what would have taken hours for Viv and Marruk to achieve.

Then she left without a word.

Viv wrote herself a note to ask Irao if the woman truly was who she claimed to be. You never knew.

Viv soon left to see Farren and noticed a change in the city. She had a good reputation now, and people naturally greeted her and cleared the way. The clearing the way part might have been Marruk though.

Two weeks passed without incident.

In that time, her Focus and Acuity both rose by one point, which was encouraging. As expected, it took effort and dedication to make progress in terms of statistics after the low-hanging fruits had been plucked. Nyil rewarded effort and commitment over time, or maybe it was just magic itself being shaped by repetition? Viv did not know.

Viv’s Power and Endurance also raised by one point each, thanks to her practicing forms to enhance her mana perception under Solfis’ strict supervision. She expected that those would

slow down as well before long. In any case, the results of her training showed mostly in runes and magical skills.

With one or more rune per day mastered, her versatility improved with blinding speed. The problem was that understanding was one thing, using in the heat of battle was another. She focused on a select few, and managed to combine spread and direction together with the annihilation meaning to create a flamethrower of sorts, which she nicknamed the 'werfer' after the German word. The werfer was far from being as powerful and... definitive as the blight spell, but it had the merit of being much faster to cast, and it did not linger with the risk of rending allies into their component atoms.

Hopefully.

It would be kind of fucked up if blight destroyed matter completely. She did not think that it had that sort of physics-fucking power. Physics-defying was a thing. Eliminating the very blocks of the universe was another.

Probably.

Besides that, she managed to make the purge spell thinner and faster, which meant that she could essentially throw lasers that cut through stone and use them as whip. The range was average but it did pack a punch, and it was fast and cheap.

Another thing Viv noticed was that black mana was poor in terms of defense and utility. Varska could erect protective walls that stayed there even after her mana had been spent. Brown and green mana had plenty of tools to work with while black mana could basically destroy and that was it. Arguably, it did that last part pretty well.

Varska mentioned useful spells that used colorless magic that Viv could add to her bag of tools. She demonstrated it by erecting a transparent shield that blocked sound, which was super neat when your neighbour snored or something. Unfortunately, it required the ability to manifest colorless, or neutral mana, and Viv could not do it reliably yet. In fact, her extreme attunement worked against her in this instance. Solfis and Varska both judged that it would be better to focus on her strengths right now, as her progress would eventually lead her to colorless manipulation as a natural consequence of a better control.

Viv also got the hang of placing enchantments on surfaces. Those were rune-triggered spells that lasted for a while and could be employed as traps, early warning systems or alarms that blared when a scaly hand tickled the meat drawer.

Her skill progress spoke for itself. Except for danger sense, they all made rapid improvement.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Intermediate 8 - 9	Mana manipulation	Intermediate 1 - 2
Mana sense	Beginner 6 - Advanced 1	Danger sense	Beginner 3
Mana absorption	Beginner 4 - 9		

Besides training, there were other things to do. Farren had a small library of books, including legends of mighty heroes and heroines and their many deeds. This gave Viv a good outlook on the culture of Mornyr, at least, and she was absolutely certain that if she ever went there, she would make a fucking mess of things. Values and etiquette were just too complex. It was already a miracle that she hadn't offended anyone yet, or at least not anyone important.

Then there was Varska.

Viv was living the dream. Varska was cute, smart, and really into her. She was also fragile in a way that Viv did not know how to manage. There were periods when the proud mage would grow moody and despondent, and there was little Viv could do besides being there. She suspected that it would take a therapist to handle the massive wound on the girl's psyche. As such, she had never pried into her past. It made conversations a bit awkward sometimes, but Viv judged that she had to wait for Varska to open up about her past. In the meantime, they snuggled and kissed and Viv had even baked her a cake. There were few dating options in Kazar, and Varska was shy, but they did manage a nice picnic in a nearby meadow on a particularly sunny day.

Viv was taking things slow. Varska clearly lacked experience with the physical aspect of things. There was no need to rush. Viv even thought that the girl was a virgin, as she had mentioned that it was considered better to remain chaste before marriage in her culture, and also that her fiance had understandably broken things off when she fell from grace. Viv had never broached the subject, of course. She only let Varska set the speed.

Viv was not the only one to keep herself busy. She had managed to push Marruk into joining the temple guard's sparring sessions every morning while she was learning Enorian. As expected, the stout Kark woman could hold her own against any but the most able opponents, though she grew a reputation for being a frustrating partner. Marruk's style was slow and vicious, relying on

counter-strikes and other quick, efficient movements to capitalize on the enemy's mistakes. At any other time, she would huddle safely behind her door, occasionally bashing it into someone's face. Viv once asked her if this was a Kark tradition, or if Marruk was an outlier.

"Shield lines are a Kark tradition, yes, but I learned the style by, errr, fending off mobs."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes, humans would see me and get ideas. When that happened, I would find a place to cover my back and fight like this until the assholes grew tired or they would run out of intact tibias."

Viv let the topic drop. The more time she spent with Marruk, the more amazing it was that the Kark had not lost it and massacred a bunch of people before being put down.

Arthur was also progressing in her own way. She was still tiny, but she was growing fast. Like a kitten. The dragonling could now reach Viv's waist when standing on her back legs, though she was still quite light. Arthur could now understand simple instructions. She also liked to disobey them. Viv took things patiently and took some time to explain why destroying the furniture was a bad idea, though she doubted that Arthur understood her. She spent a few iron talents on toys for the small one to test her claws on. Viv had experience babysitting her cousins. Arthur was a strange mix between a toddler and a tiger cub. The new 'surrogate mother' skill did not seem to be doing anything, so Viv just did her best to stimulate and educate Arthur. It seemed to work. For the rest, her instincts guided her. Arthur took to hunting small game and flying by herself.

A month after the caravan attack, Farren came to her with a new request as they were wrapping up the day's lesson. Viv was now fluent enough in Enorian to hold most conversations.

"Preparations to explore the tunnel are well on their way. I will have enough supplies and personnel to start after the seeding festival at the end of the month."

"Seeding festival?"

"The local spring celebration. In any case, there is something I would like you to do. Against payment of course. Are you familiar with the mountain tribes?"

"There are mountain tribes?" Viv asked, surprised. She had never heard of them.

"They seldom travel during winter. You will see more of them as summer comes. How should I put it? The tribes are one of the hardest and poorest people in all of Param. They cultivate the mountain flanks using a specific kind of agriculture that employs basic earth manipulation to create flat planes. Quite clever. Anyway, I can explain more during our trip. Suffice to say, they

rely on ward stones to keep black mana away from their crops, and those stones need to be recharged. Normally I could request support from a squad of hybrid fighters, like those arcane blades, for that task, but it would be cheaper if you handled it. We would also get a few more benefits.”

“What kind of benefits?”

“Well, first, I want to use one of their villages as a base camp to search for the mine entrance. Mountain people do not trust outsiders easily, so your help might win us a lot of goodwill. You are... easily recognizable.”

“Fair enough.”

“You would also know what to expect from the deadland mountains. Lastly, the church is one of their crops’ main purchasers. You see, due to the overabundance of black mana, the veggies and cereals they grow last for ages. It’s perfect for military rations. By securing our supply, we can get in the good graces of my Enorian counterparts. The gods know that they will need food in the months to come. The war, you see?”

“I get it.”

Viv was reminded of Solfis’ words, about how Farren would be used by his colleagues. She hoped that the golem was wrong.

“I am authorized to pay you two gold talents for the entire operation, plus whatever undead you kill on the way. Would that be acceptable?”

“Yeah okay. When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Preparations for the expedition took a surprisingly small amount of time, now that Viv knew where to get what she needed. Her past experience as a soldier had served her well. She even managed to find half-dried tree leaves that left a pleasant, refreshing feel on your sphincter when you wiped. Truly, the wonders of magic were without ends. What would they think up next?

With food and water packaged and ready, Viv visited the newest addition to their town: the alchemist.

The balding man, whose name Viv had not quite caught, was a dour person with an aggravating personality. His demeanor conflicted with his admitted goal, which was to help the frontier and Neriad's work. She purchased a few flesh-knitting potions from him, as well as a vial of general-purpose antidote just in case. He just kept bitching about inferior ingredients the whole damn time. Viv was already used to working with assholes, so she just endured. He was being helpful after all.

Finally, they were ready. On the dawn of the next day, they secured the house, and placed everyone including Solfis on a church-provided carriage. Arthur was still clutching a book borrowed from Farren called "The Desolation of Aristan", a blood-chilling account of the utter destruction of the mighty city by a massive black dragon. Arthur loved it, of course, particularly the cover that showed the monster melting down an entire district.

The convoy was made of only two carriages. Viv and company occupied one with a rented horse, while the other was larger and supported four knights plus Farren. Captain Lorn had not joined, but they were accompanied by the Amazon woman Viv had seen several times but never talked to.

Marruk decided to handle the horse despite her aversion towards the beasts. Like other rented horses, this one was unnaturally docile to Viv's untrained eyes. It was all rather weird.

They left immediately.

Rather than heading straight into the deadlands, the two carriages traveled along the settled plains heading east, towards the mountains. Viv observed that there were already locals working the fields, preparing them for seeding probably. She also spotted small cow-like creatures and the ostrich-like birds that provided the weird blueish eggs they often ate. Viv suddenly missed bacon. And chocolate. Especially chocolate.

**//Now is a good time to practice mana control, Your Grace.**

Viv sighed and agreed. The trip was super boring anyway. You could only watch fields so much before you got fed up.

The trip was different this time. There was no black mana, and no revenants around, only the fields and pedestrians who saluted the knights as they passed by. The first distraction came in the late afternoon. One of the knights pointed at the back and shouted something.

Viv turned to see a revenant stumbling at the edge of the forest, making a beeline for the deadlands. The nearest farmer spared a glance towards the miserable creature, apparently a



woodsman of sorts when it had been human, and returned to his duty. He was too far to be attacked.

The convoy did not even stop.

“Most revenants will pass through the field during the night. They prefer to travel in darkness. This kind of passage happens all the time, all over the edge of the Deadshield Woods,” Marruk explained in a small voice. “At least that’s what the Temple Guards say.”

The deadlands replenished itself. Every man and woman who fell eventually joined it.

“Don’t the monsters in the woods kill the things?”

“Only the deviants,” Marruk explained, “most monsters will not engage something they cannot eat. It’s the same in the steppes.”

Something finally occurred to Viv.

“There are Kark revenants?”

The woman nodded, her large head bobbing up and down.

“We would see more of my kind north of here. The revenants cross the mountain ranges as well if they do not find an obvious gap.”

“I see.”

It started to rain. Viv pulled her cloak around herself and settled Arthur on her lap. The dragonling enjoyed having the thick scales of her chest caressed. She was very warm too.

The trip turned miserable. They stopped at nightfall in a roadside cabin made for traveling soldiers. There were basic beds, and a roof to keep them relatively dry, but it was as Spartan as it could be. They all ate together from rations and some clean water they drew from a small cistern.

Later, Viv stood outside with the Amazon woman, piling the logs the woman chopped. She was offered the opportunity of opting out on account of being a caster, but that was too dickish, and besides, the entire cabin smelled like wet socks. Like most things in Nyil, they were mostly what she would have seen on earth with a few significant differences. First, the tall Amazon woman was wearing heavy armor that must have weighed a ton, but looking at her plain, happy face, you could not tell. Second, she was chopping the wood with her bare hands.

That was quite a sight.

“Hah!”

A log split in two under the edge of her hand. Viv kneeled and recovered both parts before they could get wet.

“My name is Koro,” the Amazon finally said. She grinned. She was missing one incisor and that gave her a slightly insane look. She also had very long black hair she wore in braided strands. They looked a bit oily.

“Well met. I am Viviane.”

“Viviane!”

“You can say the Vs as well?”

“Yep. I’m from the south, so we speak a different language.”

“I have not heard about the south yet. What kingdoms are there?”

“No kingdoms. The south is wild and untamed, like a good woman. Like me! There are marshes and dry, low mountains. Deep forests! Old things. We are a hardy folk, what with the monsters eating those who aren’t. Like five of my siblings, may Enttiku welcome them in her bountiful bosom.”

“It... sounds like a harsh environment,” Viv replied, a bit at a loss for words.

“Yeah, but that’s not the problem. It’s also very big and empty. I kind of got lost in a hunt. I ended up in south Enoria.”

“You left your land because you got lost?”

“Yeah! You ever have a hunt and that little fucker of an Orfaune keeps running away?”

Viv remembered the Orfaune from the bestiary. It was a massive bear-like creature with a spiked ridge on its back and long limbs it used to dig into burrows and eat its occupants. It was marked as very dangerous and rather durable.

“Can’t say I have.”

“Anyway. Got the fucker but it took me two weeks and by then, it had rained and my trail was erased. So I joined the church. Good fighters! Decent lovers. Not like Yan at the Spotted Feather. You met Yan?”

“Yes, he really helped me the first time I arrived.”

Viv realized too late that her words could be interpreted in a different way. Koro nodded happily.

“Yes. First time I came to town he helped me as well, I had gone a week without orgasming!”

“Errr, dreadful.”

“I knooooow. He is so good with his tongue, and he knows how to move those hips. When I am ready to settle down, I will ask him to be my husband!”

“Wow, congratulations! I hope it works out,” Viv added, not really eager to explore the subject. “So, would you mind telling me about the south? I’ve never been there.”

Koro was successfully distracted from her thoughts and Viv learned a lot about Param’s more remote lands. The south was sparsely populated and those who endured had turned into insane trappers and hunters, as far as Viv understood. Koro was clearly remembering her homeland through rose-tinted glasses, because from what Viv gathered it was a merciless world where only the strong survived, with some tribes even preying on newcomers. She added it to the list of “don’t go there” along with Manchester and North Korea.

When they had enough wood, the pair headed back in and Viv settled on the bed closest to an open window. Arthur had the right idea by placing her nest inside and her snout outside. The place stank to high heaven.

The next day began like the previous one, except that it was still raining. Viv climbed onto the carriage and complained in her mind about the lack of distractions. Training was all well and good, but she could not cast because it made her companions nervous, and there was only so much rehashing you could do before growing bored. Arthur quickly started to fly through the air, apparently unbothered by the droplets of water rolling down her white scales.

Out of ideas, Viv crossed her legs and meditated, trying to sense mana. The constant noise and moving wagons made focusing difficult. She took a break mid-morning when they paused for everyone to ‘attend to natural needs’ as her mom would have said. She ended up striking another conversation with Koro, whose main sources of interest were hunting and shapely ballsacks. Viv learned more about scrotum in ten minutes than she had during her entire sex ed classes. The laugh she got kept her going until early afternoon, when a horrible shriek distracted her from counting the clouds.

“SQUEEE!”

Viv was out of the carriage and sprinting before her brain registered it. Marruk stomped by her side a moment later.

Arthur surged from behind a small valley, flapping her wings as fast as she could. A creature like a large puma was galloping after her. They were about a hundred paces away.

The caster was about to scream at the stupid dragon to fly up when the puma-thing jumped and Arthur veered away. She was holding on by the skin of her fangs. Viv's vision turned red.

Power answered.

As eager as ever, black mana flooded her conduits and burned in her palms. It twisted into a ball as time slowed down and Viv's Power ability allowed her to overcharge a purge spell. The ball grew, and grew. It rose above her right shoulder like a thundercloud.

"PURGE!"

Black mana was mostly silent, and that made the hiss in the air that much more terrifying when a spear as thick as an arm shot forward. Viv had aimed slightly too high. It did not matter. Black mana moved for her, and the spell angled down by her will to carve into the puma-thing like a nail through a piece of balsa. The monster's leap was interrupted when it died, falling into a hollowed-out carcass. A few intact organs spilt on the ground in a steamy, bloody mess.

Arthur finished her trajectory in Viv's arms. The weight almost threw her to the ground.

"You're fine. It's fine. It's over."

"Squeeeeeeeee."

Arthur fixed her gaze on the dead creature as the temple guards approached it. They were not too worried.

"A rathclaw. Good spell. Good range. I wish I had my bow," Koro said by Farren's side. She had not left her charge during the commotion.

"It's a mountain and forest medium predator. Normally, they avoid humans," Farren added.

That was medium? She would hate to see good-sized ones. Or she had, with that giant tortoise. Anyway, Arthur was safe.

Viv was a bit curious so she moved closer, with Arthur hanging around her shoulders and Marruk by her side. One of the temple guards was kneeling by the body and removing the skin with a knife.

"Rathclaw meat is decently rich in mana, so we should not let it go to waste," he said.

"I can cook it in clay tonight, at the camp," Koro said with a smile. A little drool foamed on her lips.

"But what pushed it to engage?" Farren asked, a bit worried.

The first temple guard pointed at the creature's back. The fur there was intact, save for a small space matted with blood. The wound really matched a certain flying creature's jaw.

"Seriously?" Viv asked.

"Squeeee..."

"It's at least fifty times your weight! Glutton!"

"Squee."

"You can't just run around attacking everything you see! What if I'm not there? Isn't there something above squirrel that you can try first?"

The rest of the group watched mesmerized as the caster headed back to the wagon, bemoaning her creature's appetite and apparent lack of common sense. It was, to them, inexplicable.

"She's talking to it like it's a person," one of the guards said.

"How long has she spent in the deadlands again? Mana poisoning is a dangerous thing," another added.

Marruk vocally and deliberately cleared her throat, then turned the carcass. It squelched. There was perhaps half of the original body mass left. The rest had been vaporized by a spell that had cut earth to its very bone, leaving behind a deep furrow of glistening grey rock.

It certainly put things into perspective.

"Not that there's anything wrong with, you know, being eccentric," the first guard finished in a timid voice.

It was all well and good to be a highly trained fighter with some fancy path. Most of the people present knew they could take a rathclaw alone and win. They could not trounce the thing in half a second and only leave a butcher shop accessory behind, however.

"Less talking, more cutting," Marruk finished. They obeyed, with Koro being the most efficient. They managed to salvage most of the meat in a reasonable time frame. Eventually, the ex-hunter led the loaded group back, chewing on a piece of raw liver.

They reached the foothills shortly after.

Dinner that night was delicious.

They spent half a day climbing to the next village. The rain came and went, killing conversations and dampening the mood. The temple guards had given Viv strange looks the night before as she was trying to teach proper table manners to Arthur. The worst thing was that you could hear the louts smacking their lips and swallowing through a concrete wall and they threw the food down their gullets like it was going to escape. Not to mention the burps. They were animals. It took all of her self-control not to make scathing comments on their abominable table manners. Farren felt the tension in the air and he tried to distract everyone, but it just led the guards to talk, which sent droplets of saliva and half-gnawed gobbets of meat across the room. Viv had retired outside after that.

Around them, the green grass and brambles progressively gave way to lichen and hardy growths clinging stubbornly to cracked stone. The massive mountain range encircling Harrak started there, before them, its many peaks snugly covered in eternal snow. A green band expanded horizontally across the full range as spring struggled against the deadlands' grip. The first signs of civilization came as they passed by a rocky outcrop and the air suddenly felt wetter. Viv recognized it immediately. It was terrace farming.

The mountain tribe had painstakingly created terraces of horizontal terrain, forming steps climbing up and down the edge of the mountain. Green buds were already popping from the brown earth with surprising vigor. Viv could look left and see the deadlands expanding to the horizon, but the black mana had little hold here.

They followed a well-traveled path large enough to accommodate their carriages, quickly coming across people in brown and red garbs working the field. The locals shared the brown hair, brown eyes and slightly greenish skin of everyone, but they were also taller and a bit too thin. There were men and women and children seeding the rich loam, and they toiled in silence with their eyes downcast. Viv almost thought that they were sad, but as they turned a bend in the road, the sound of a distant song proved that she and her companions had been the problem all along.

"Mightily hostile for people we're supposed to help," she remarked with some annoyance.

**//Your Grace.**

Solfis spoke for the first time. His voice was low and she thought she detected excitement, or at least animation in the artificial tone.

“Yes?”

**//I recognize the facial features of those people from my time.**

**//They harbor strong resemblance to the Harrakan southerners I met.**

**//Hypothesis: those mountain tribes are descendants of survivors who refused to move on!**

“That would make sense. Is there any way for us to use that piece of information though?”

**//Not at the moment, no.**

**//Keep in mind that their language could be close to an imperial local dialect.**

**//Hence, they might understand our conversations, should they overhear them.**

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

The trip went on. The terraces were expansive, to say the least, and those working the fields lived in small villages dotting the flank of the mountains. The houses looked barely more than hovels. It was a deceptive look. In truth, a glimpse through an open door showed that the locals had dug into the earth to protect themselves from the cold.

All of the houses were half-troglodyte dwelling, and the roofs were thatch and brick. Wood was scarce in everything.

Viv also noticed a lot of tiny red flowers the exact same dye as the locals’ clothes, hinting at natural pigments.

They arrived at a major settlement by nightfall, coming across another convoy of several families moving in silence. Farran had joined Viv in the middle of the afternoon to distract her from her constant training.

“The mountain tribes gather in their winter quarters to endure the cold season, but also whenever they celebrate a major event. When spring comes, they return to their individual villages. Most couples meet during the cold days. It’s one of their cultural specificities.”

“Interesting. Is it for safety?”

“Yes. They leave no food behind, so even roaming, hungry monsters will leave their abandoned houses alone. Winter in the mountains can also be boring and depressing, so it’s usually better to spend it together. Lots of games, and uh, many kids will be born in early autumn.”

“I see.”

Viv remembered the old joke about what one's grand grand-parents used to do in the days before the internet. If one wondered, they could just ask the ancestors' seventeen children.

"So what's the plan now?" Viv asked.

"We will meet with some elders and there will probably be a small feast. The work begins tomorrow."

Viv winced, and Farren jumped on the occasion.

"I meant to ask, what's with you and table manners? Even poor Marruk eats as daintily as a Baranese countess these days. You know that you can relax with us, right?"

Viv shot the poor boy the most scathing, haughty look she could. She knew from previous feedback that her green eyes had a distant quality that some could find intimidating. She used them now.

"Manners are not about relaxation, they are about respect. You know that, right?"

Farren was a bit chastised.

"You remind me of my etiquette teacher."

He grimaced.

"Look, I can't help it," Viv finally said, "it just annoys me. I don't say anything because, in the end, it's my personal reaction, and they don't owe it to me to behave the way I want. But don't expect me not to be pissed about it, it's a visceral reaction."

Farren nodded thoughtfully.

"Good of you to tolerate what you could prohibit instead."

For a moment, the temptation was strong to force the temple guards to sit straight and bring their food to their mouth instead of the contrary. She was a caster. She could threaten them. It could work. It would also be a massive abuse of power.

Chewing noise had always been the bane of Viv's mom. Her dad had told Viv that he had made a fortune in business and investments but he was still a 'nouveau riche', a mannerless oaf, until he met Viv's mom. She had taught him how to eat, how to speak, even how to dress with understated grace. Her dad instinctively understood fitting in, but it was her mom who had given him the veneer required to blend in the particularly hermetic southern upper class. Viv had inherited her Mom's tendency to be annoyed at organic, repetitive sounds.



It made her miss her family.

Farren eyed her, considering. Viv noticed him lick his lips.

“You never talk about your past. Were manners important for your family?”

He was trying to get her to open up. It felt like genuine interest. Farren was safe.

Viv talked a bit about her parents, but they were interrupted before she could tell much. They were entering the settlement.

Viv looked with interest at the large village, nestled as it was between two flanks of the mountain. There was a dip in the ever-present wind that gave the place a warmer feel, and several sources of light cast white radiance on colorful walls. With red and brown paint, the walls of large buildings depicted important scenes of hunt and migrations, using a primitive art that gave every scene a transparent meaning. Here were families fleeing from the wrath of a large, winged predator. There, they found a cave to settle in. Finally, a warrior covered in beast skins returned and slayed the monster. Dyed pieces of cloth attached to ropes hung over the streets held aloft by the weakened gales. The mood here was more curious than circumspect as they entered the place. Several people pointed them to a central plaza.

The two carriages stopped in a tiny central square, with a few villagers rushing out to take care of the horses. Farren and the temple guards climbed down with Viv and company following closely.

An old man wearing the most outrageous hat Viv had ever seen strode out of the largest building with his entourage. The entourage was interesting in itself, and so was the man, but not as much as the hat. Viv could only watch with amazement as the massive headdress bobbed along its proprietor. It was a mix between an Ushanka hat and a turban, massive and glittery with ornaments. Here, it said, was the person in charge. Viv had to force her mouth closed and actually pay attention to the people once they stepped almost right in front of her. Fortunately, Farren acted as a buffer.

He and the old man started a conversation in hesitant Enorian, giving Viv time to rectify her diplomatic faux-pas. The mountain tribe leader had a long white beard dotted with little pearls which were, Viv realized, pierced transparent rocks. He wore a large red sash and heavy clothes. Two of the men around him wore chainmail made dull by age, of a kind that Viv recognized with great surprise. Those reminded her of the few intact statues she had seen in Harrak. They were Imperial garbs!

Besides the two guards, she also noted tall men dressed in layers of animal skins covered with primitive runes. She easily recognized black mana shields. The men all had quarterstaves strapped to their backs, and kept their faces covered.

The conversation finished, and Viv found herself face-to-face with Mr. big hat.

The elder turned to one of his aides and muttered a few words in a language that Viv recognized, and that sent her mind reeling.

When Maradoc, the god of secrets, had granted her the knowledge of the Old Imperial language, she had obtained the entire breadth of variations and cultural references that went with it. She could recognize the man's tongue. It was a strange mix of Imperial southern dialect and something else. She could follow it in the same way as someone with good knowledge of BBC English could understand a strong brogue.

He was asking a tiny old woman by his side how casters wanted to be greeted.

"Oh! Uh..." she said eloquently.

What to do?

Her well-honed instincts told her that hiding her knowledge could reap benefits, but also that the price of being found out would be steep. On the other hand, she could let them know that she understood them, and see where that got her. They showed a certain distrust of foreigners. Even when Farren and the elder had talked, the latter had never lowered his guard.

Viv considered it and realized that she had no real way of knowing what was the best option. She had to rely on her instincts.

She went with honesty. Besides, her understanding was not good enough to pick up whispered secrets.

"Do you speak Harrakan?" she said, trying to sound as close as possible to the southern accent.

The old man's eyes went wide. So did every other tribe members' for that matter.

"How do you know the old tongue?" the old man asked, surprised.

"I learned Harrakan through a skill and you sound just like it."

"Amazing! Do you know what I mean when I say "as useful as skis in Harrak?"

"Yes, it means completely useless, because Harrak, the city, is perfectly flat. It was designed to be level."

"Yes. Yes! What else do you know about us?"

“Not much. I received the skill when I was teleported into the Imperial palace. I almost died too.”

“You saw the Ziggurat with your own two eyes? Can you describe it?”

Farren and the rest watched with bemused expressions as Viv and the elder, who introduced himself to her as Marredyn, conversed with animation. His wife joined in when he started to speak too fast and Viv lost the trail.

“Oh, but where are my manners? Come in, come in!” he finally declared, and led everyone inside.”

Viv turned to Marruk. The Kark woman’s mouth still hung open.

“Big hat!”

Indeed.

They had a party.

The main hall of the mountain tribe village was almost completely open to accommodate a banquet room filled with long tables across a massive hearth that could roast a hippopotamus — or the local equivalent — with room to spare for a piglet. Heat was provided by coals, not wood. They glowed red in the semi-darkness.

Attendants busied themselves preparing food while the old couple grilled Viv on her knowledge of idioms. She could get most ancient references, but anything related to the mountain eluded her. Apparently, southern and northern Harrakan had enjoyed ribbing each other before the disaster struck. The elder also shared that most survivors had integrated into other societies, but a few had become nomads, and only returned a century ago when the black mana saturation had suddenly dropped to the current levels.

Viv found herself at the seat of honor to the speechless surprise of Farran and everyone else. The food they got was nice as well. There were sauteed vegetables, fresh and tasty, and triangles of hard cereals that reminded her of rice, held in long plant leaves and steamed until they were tender, with a heart made of either eggs or fatty meat. It was delicious and filling.

“Why is that food replenishing my mana?” she asked with wonder as she felt her core heating up.

The elders were excited to learn that she was a black witch, and reminded her that their food had a high black mana content. It made meals very attractive to Viv as they were not only delicious, but also possessed a rejuvenating quality that only she could truly appreciate.

“Will you recharge the ward stone?” the elder asked towards the end as they were drinking a powerful digestive to ‘dissolve the fat’.

“Yesh, that’sh why am here,” Viv seriously told them. That liquor was so naish! It really warmed her from top to bottom, it did! She wished Varska was here. That shy cutie.

They went on to explain that some of the ‘walkers’, whatever that was, would escort her and to be careful of revenants.

“Don’t worry about ravenee, errr, reva, errrr, those dead motherfuckers. I got zhish.”

Viv stood with all the majesty she could muster, which was not a lot, and promptly fell on her face.

### The morning after.

“Owwwwwwww.”

“How did you manage to down so many glasses? Mountain fire water can be used to clear wounds of corruption!”

Farren was a bit mad after spending an evening playing second fiddle, or so Viv thought. They were walking down the edge of the mountain following a well-traveled path. The black mana was growing thicker, but it was still manageable. They had left the terraces behind. Only small plants and other enduring growths offered some color. The rest was grey rock, then the dusty bleakness of the deadlands extended to the horizon.

“High affinity,” Viv replied, not trusting herself to move her lips too much. She was suckling on her water flask everytime she thought she would not throw up. That was some premium hangover. Viv usually downed water after getting a buzz and before sex if applicable to avoid this kind of headache. This time, the treacherous booze had caught her off guard.

She should get a few bottles to bring back.

“We are not far now,” one of the walkers said.

It turned out that the walkers were a specialized path that pretty much only existed among the mountain tribes. They were scouts meant to operate in the deadlands. On top of heightened black mana resistance, they benefited from a range of skills including the ability to escape revenant perception, and skills with a heavy quarterstaff that allowed them to disable multiple opponents at the same time. It would not work as well against human fighters, but most deadlands creatures could operate without issue with a sword planted somewhere, while a shattered limb would slow them down.

Once again, Viv was amazed at how adaptive paths were. It reinforced her opinion that they were just an interface for people to handle how they wanted the magic of the world to change them.

Something else that she should have guessed was that paths offered defensive skills. She had assumed that Marruk’s ability to block stuff came from a shield skill or something, but apparently some simply increased the general resilience of the beneficiary. It was just that Viv’s path did not have anything to make her more solid. She had danger sense and the ability to vaporize any incoming threat.

Come to think of it, that was pretty cool as well.

The walkers had been unusually open to explaining their abilities and Viv had also deduced another important facet of magical reinforcement. The more mana she had, and the more resilient to foreign effects she became. That meant that powerful mages could be just hurt by her spell instead of disintegrated. Viv suspected that it might be more relevant for other aspects. Black was in a class of its own when it came to destruction. It also meant that powerful monsters were well-protected against her. When facing them, she would have to take their resilience into account.

It took them only an hour to reach the first ward stone. It sat, lonely, at the edge of the dead plains proper. Before it, plants and lichen still struggled to cling to the ground in fading, but colorful blotches. After it, there was only dust, and the occasional black dot of deadland brambles.

Although they had called it a ward stone, Viv believed that ‘obelisk’ might be a better term. The rock rose from the ground in defiance of the surrounding flats, its surface glowing white with a network of runes. Viv could not detach her eyes from the construct. She almost slipped in a shower of gravel.

“Wow, this is the thing? It’s much more complex than I thought!” she admitted out loud.

“Of course,” Farren sniffed, “the network of ward stones was established by a famous mage from the Helock University as commissioned by our church. It was a grand endeavor.”

“Well la-di-fucking-da, fan-boy. Where is that thing’s battery?”

Farren grumbled while the entourage of soldiers and walkers made a show of not paying attention to them. The ‘battery’, as it were, was a circle with a handprint at the back. Viv placed her own there and recognized the familiar feeling of connection she had when feeding Solfis’ core. She pushed her mana in, and the construct drank it greedily. The closest runes shone with more energy.

“Simple enough, simple enough,” Viv muttered, but the glyphs caught all her attention. There were some she recognized, like “if” and “transfer”, and “black” of course, but others that escaped her and bounced around at the edge of her consciousness. She got the general impression that the stone absorbed ambient black mana and turned it into energy to repel the black mana. As far as designs were concerned, she thought it was a bit stupid. The construct was starving itself of the resource it needed to keep going, and then when the black mana increased in intensity, the runes were too weakened to function properly. It was a secondary concern, however. The important part was that the glyphs to self-sustain an enchantment were here, before her eyes.

Something tugged on her then, and she realized that her conduits had dried up.

“Shit.”

She pulled her hand and fought off the deeply unsettling sensation of being too low on mana. The obelisk was a third full, she judged. She could recharge fast on the edge of the deadlands. They would be done quickly.

Viv walked away a bit and started working on the forms Solfis had taught her, taking great care to feel the black mana overcoming the other hues as the world’s life crossed boundaries between the outside and her true self. The strange experience made her go over the edge.

Mana absorption: Advanced 1

The message was nice but it was barely needed. Viv could feel exactly how mana traversed the immaterial membrane between the outside and herself, and with minor adjustments, she started to increase the speed.

Mana absorption: Advanced 2

She got the impression that it was the first part that had been the hardest, and now things were going to go faster again.

Her routine was over soon, and she returned to the obelisk to resume the charge. It took a good ten minutes for her to be exhausted again. This time, she decided to take a short break. She had been at it for over an hour and a half. The others had scattered around her, settling down on the ground. Three of the knights and two walkers had started a game of something that looked like dominos while Marruk was by her side, keeping an eye out as always.

Viv wanted to bring the glyphs back to study. If she could find a better way to drag mana from the air, she could recreate a basic charging station for Solfis, the same as she had seen in the golem staging bay back in HARRAK.

More importantly, something that could drain black mana could expand the patch of arable land around Kazar, pushing back the sea of undeath that covered this once prosperous country.

Think of the possibilities!

All excited, Viv turned to Farren.

“Hey, do you have paper and a pen? I want to note this down.”

Farren looked at her like she had grown a second head.

“Lady Bob, besides the fact that copying runes without authorization is a major crime, I think that you may not understand what you are trying to do.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, I could probably copy those, but you cannot. It would be better if I let you attempt it.”

Viv frowned.

“I am not trying to trap you. You are just a strange mix of scholarly and wild. Here, have my notebook,” Farren offered.

She grabbed the small, leather-covered book and opened it towards the end. Farren also handed her sharpened charcoal and she began to trace the glyphs.

And stopped immediately.

The glyphs were alive, at least to her. They were separate and distinct and writing them down without understanding them was impossible. Her hand faltered. Her mind swam.

“What the fuck?”

“Casters write runes as runes, while we only draw squiggles that resemble the real thing in the same way a stick figure resembles a human. You will not be able to reproduce the pattern unless you are able to cast it yourself.”

“Fuck.”

“Why don’t you just commit it to memory instead? I do not know about your Focus, but from what I saw, you should be able to do it.”

Viv closed her eyes and visualized, then she swore.

The tapestry of glyphs glowed in her mind, each piece intact and waiting to be delved in. She did not understand them, but they were there. The result was... disturbing. Remembering something without understanding it felt alien to her. It was still better than the alternative.

“This is weird.”

Farren looked unimpressed by her realization, but his expression turned appreciative when he glanced at the obelisk. She was almost done.

“It would have taken a crew of six over two days to restore the enchantments to functionality. You will top it up before lunch.”

And she did. The wards were fully operational by the time she sat to eat a simple porridge with the rest of the group. The walkers paid her compliments, eyes smiling behind their leathery masks. The knights looked pleased as well.

“Looks like we’ll be home sooner than I thought,” one of them said.

It felt good to be appreciated.

“The next obelisk is two hours away from here. Do you think that you could fix it as well?” the head walker finally said.

“Yeah, sure why not?”

They walked along the edge without issue, Viv only yanking the occasional revenant. All the while, she was thinking about another enchantment, one that had lasted for decades by itself



back in the heart of Harrak, in the campfire where she had spent her first night. It had been able to create a neutral mana area in the very core of the deadlands.

It was still there.

Waiting.

They returned to the village for the night. The visitors were housed in guest rooms behind the town hall. After a more subdued dinner, one of the walkers approached Viv as she had gone to wash her hands.

“You know,” the man said, “we walkers suffer from an unfortunate condition. We cannot have children unless we stay away from the deadlands for a full season. On the other hand, we are renowned for our stamina, and cannot catch diseases.”

Viv turned and came across a pale smile and amused brown eyes. The man was handsome in a lanky kind of way. There was also acceptance there. A polite distance.

She considered his words and decided that, as far as invitations to fuck were concerned, she had received worse.

“I would test that stamina of yours, but I am courting someone in Kazar, and would prefer not to stray,” she answered with a smile.

The walker nodded.

“It is a wise woman who waters her oat before helping the neighbour.”

It probably meant something but the walker just bowed and left. She returned to their table as Farren was standing up. A fact had just occurred to her.

“Hey, Farren.”

“Yes?”

“How come nobody ever tried to flirt with me back in Kazar? I mean, no false modesty, I know I’m attractive.”

“Well,” the young man answered with a guarded voice that heralded a carefully diplomatic answer, “you read some of the stories from my books, yes?”

“Yeah?”

“In those tales, the hero has to face either a mighty champion, a deadly golem, or a powerful drake to rescue their princess. Never the three at once.”

“Huh.”

“Also half of the town thinks you’re crazy.”

“Now that’s just rude!”

Viv spent one week going from stone to stone, spending her evenings in the underground dwellings of grateful villagers. The walkers had spread the word that she spoke the local language, and also that she had recharged the stones to full capacity which other teams often failed to do. It was a classical case of ‘good enough’ caused by exhaustion. She also set a record by finishing in half the usual time.

There were no real attacks during the operation. The dozen revenants that came to her every day got handled by a group that could have held the line against twice their numbers. The loser of the latest card game was in charge of undead disposal, disabling the creatures until Viv could yolk them. One of the temple guards was even able to set his sword on fire, killing the creatures for good in one blow.

They returned to the main settlement after she was done. Other tribes lived further along the mountainside, but her guides said that they lived in valleys between peaks, not so close to the deadlands.

Viv considered the trip to be an investment. All the stones shared the same inscriptions, which showed that what the engraver lacked in ingenuity, he made up for in consistency. The pattern itself showed ways to use ambient mana as fuel. That was what she needed to make Solfis more mobile. She still wanted to get a good look at the ward stone in Harrak, but that would have to wait.

In the end, Farren got his wish and the elder agreed to assist him with his expedition, going so far as to offer guides to the most likely locations.

The trip back was as boring and uneventful as ever, with the addition of Viv really looking forward to a good bath. Her hair had regrown to pixie length, though kind of messy, and the group was dirty and dusty. She took comfort in her own progress.

### Meditative Trance: Expert 1

It was her first skill reaching such a high level. It had suddenly improved as she was done with the last pillar, and had moved around while focusing on each rune one after the other. The improvement stunned her. Her consciousness relaxed and flowed with her movements in a serene dance, turning her mind both sharp and detached. She could understand every rune she envisioned and knew on a fundamental level that involved more than her body or her brain. It involved her soul as well. The world, Nyil, talked to a part of her that she had never been aware of back on earth. She caught a glimpse of damage, but it was thankfully localized, and did not pain her at the moment. This new perception gave her a deep sense of wonder. That something as unfathomably vast as a planet could be somewhat alive defied her comprehension. She could put a number on the diameter of the planet. It was slightly larger than earth, so it was probably between thirteen and fifteen thousand kilometers. She could not comprehend it. You could see a kilometer, especially if the land expanded around you. You could not see, or even understand, ten thousand. Even her improved mind failed to envision the sheer size of it. And this being interacted with her, lent her strength.

That was incredible.

She had also improved in terms of raw mental abilities.

### Focus +1

### Willpower +1

It was amazing progress for such a short time, but it had a price. She had learned no new runes. Only her mana absorption had progressed to Apprentice 4. There was always a tradeoff.

What interested her as well was how a large variety of tasks made progress and focus easier. Charging the obelisks had become a bit tedious towards the end because it was so repetitive. When Solfis trained her, he and Varska always alternated tasks to keep her mind fresh. She was in good hands.

They came into view of Kazar in the early afternoon, and split up by the gates. There was no welcoming committee waiting for them, though Viv was greeted by Head Investigator Tars, the woman who had interrogated her the first time she arrived in the city. They split up near the gate and Viv headed straight to the Spotted Feather for good food and a bath.

“The women here make me uncomfortable,” Marruk rumbled, “they proposed a lot of things that I did not care for,” she continued, turning an interesting shade of purple.

“Oh? So you do not enjoy having humans serving you?”

The Kark’s face turned contemplative.

“If you put it like that... Hmm. Do you think they would agree to another foot massage?” she finally asked.

“Of course. They probably have skills related to, err, massage. Just be respectful and ask.”

Viv spent a pleasant few hours under the care of one of Yan’s apprentices. Once more, she declined sex, though this time it was also due to a sense of loyalty towards Varska. She also considered diseases as she was soaking in the bath. Technically, she had been disintegrated and recomposed here, on Nyil. So maybe no virus had come with her. On the other hand, she had not shat herself to death in the first few hours, so clearly her gut flora had traveled with her, most likely? It was all very confusing. Honestly, if she had brought diseases with her, Kazar would have turned into a plague land already.

So.

Yeah.

Lovemaking.

It would probably be weird to cross that line from someone from another world, yet another thing that made Nyil more real and the possibility of returning to earth just not more distant, but also less desirable.

God she hoped there was a way to stay in touch or something.

Shaking her head, Viv dragged Arthur to a second, quicker bath and made the tiny dragon’s skin lustrous. Arthur was self-cleaning or something, but she still enjoyed soaking if the tongue lolling out and closed eyes were any indication.

“This is a bath. A bath is comfortable and warm, is it not?”

“Eeeee.”

They departed soon after, Marruk visibly yawning despite a nap. The stalwart door wielder had remained vigilant for extended periods of time and, if Viv remembered their arrangement, she owed her three days of rest. Viv decided to pay her girlfriend a visit and they were let in by the mage's sneering housekeeper. Varska was waiting for her in the main training room. Something was wrong.

"Are you alright?" Viv asked as soon as she saw the formal dress and downcast expression.

"Yes. No. It does not matter. Listen, your departure allowed me to reflect on our relationship, and I have decided to end it."

What?

"Errr, did I do something?"

"You are not the cause. I am."

Oh god, she was going to pull a 'it's not you it's me'.

"You and I... It was not meant to happen. I am trapped here, at peace, but also at an end. My potential is spent. My chances have burnt out. You see the mark on my cheek and you do not care, but the others will. I am tainting your image by existing."

Viv wanted to tell Varska not to be so dramatic, but she did not want to interrupt the younger woman during what was clearly a very emotional moment. It felt wrong. It felt like denying her her feelings. So she listened, even though she thought that what Varska was doing amounted to emotional self-harm.

"We will continue our lessons. I will see you grow as you were meant to when you were dragged into our world, but nothing more. You will remain pure. I will stay in the shadows. This is for the best."

Viv did not think that anyone but Varska could see her as 'pure'.

"Do I not get a say in this?"

"I do not know how things work in your own world, but here it takes only one partner's decision to break up a couple."

Viv decided to be the more adult of the two, and not to roll her eyes at the willing misunderstanding.

"You assume that you know what I want."

“What you want has nothing to do with it. You have been in this world for all of two months, and I have been here for close to twenty. I have attended some of Param’s most exclusive parties, rubbed elbows with the archmages of Helock and the high priests of Mornyr. For all that you have life experience in your world, you are a baby in this one. You do not understand the ramifications of courting a pariah.”

Viv wanted to object but she saw in Varska’s posture something that went beyond a refusal. She had been dismissed. Her opinion would be looked down upon, simply because Varska had decided in her head that Viv was being irresponsible.

And yet, there was a raw pain there that made her think that she had a chance at convincing the headstrong mage.

But... it stung.

It stung being dismissed.

Viv was tired from the trip, and she had the others to take care of, and Varska was her own person, and...

“Fine. Ok. Fine. That’s your decision. I think that... nevermind. Just. I’m going to go. I’ll take tomorrow off and we can resume classes the day after, if you are still willing.”

Varska nodded resolutely. Viv climbed down the stairs and ignored the heart-wrenching sob she heard behind.

That was some bullshit.

Even Marruk felt the change.

“Did something happen?”

“Varska dumped my ass. Keep it to yourself, please.”

“Oh. Uh. Booze?”

“Yeah maybe later. Let’s grab some food then go home for now.”

They retreated to their den. Arthur helped with transferring her blankets to her designated corner, and rolled herself into a small ball, leaving only a pale snoot popping out of her lair.

Marruk begged off dinner and went to sleep after making sure nothing was amiss. Viv sat heavily into a corner and grabbed a bottle of sweet wine (three silver talents, a robbery) and poured herself a glass. She missed streaming cheesy dramas. She could do with a distraction right now. Getting drunk was out of the question anyway, she would not become her mom.

If only there was some way to distract herself.

Just then, heavy footsteps sounded outside. An armored fist banged on her door, three times, and a booming voice bellowed.

“This is Inquisitor Denerim. I would like to talk to Witch Bob. Open up, please.”

Fuck you, universe. Go eat a bag of dicks.

Inquisitor Denerim refrained from checking his armor for the umpteenth time. Simishe always said that it betrayed his nervousness. She would tell him to straighten and smile. Then she would probably slap his ass.

Denerim let the tiniest of smiles bloom on his lips and rectified his posture. He passed a hand in his beard and turned to Orkan, who had just kicked a stone.

“Patience.”

The sullen teenager gave him a vicious look. As usual, the glare lost its intensity after a second and morphed into a sigh. Orkan was a good kid. He was trying his best despite... everything, so Denerim placed a comforting hand on his apprentice’s shoulder and gave it a good, manly grip.

“We are intruding upon them when they are tired and probably just want to be alone. And we are figures of authority. It’s a normal reaction.”

“When a woman said that she was getting ready, it used to mean that she would return wearing very little,” Orkan said dejectedly.

“I would not count on it this time. Also there is a Kark woman...”

Both men smiled.

“Not that I’m judging,” the inquisitor said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Orkan chuckled and some of the pain left his angular traits. The younger man had enough scars for three veterans, and the tattoos marking his origin formed angry red lines across his muscular body from toes to forehead. Black eyes returned to stare at the closed door.

It opened.

Denerim ended up nose to nose with a powerfully built Kark woman with bloodshot eyes and a grumpy air. Her dark hair was mussy under a helmet, and for one moment, he thought his vision had gone awry. But no. There were two doors before him. The Kark had the other one strapped to her forearm.

“Come in,” she growled in passable Enorian.

They walked inside the house, finding a scene that he was definitely not expecting. The witch herself was armored, sitting in a throne-like chair before them, with a vicious-looking creature perched menacingly behind her. He briefly inspected her.

[Black Witch. Dangerous. Second stage of her path. One who has forfeited other hues in favor of a deep understanding of black mana, a rare choice. Highest stat: Focus ( early fourth tier) Highest skills: meditation, mana manipulation, pain tolerance.]

More information filtered through his mind as the magic helped him interpret what his senses perceived.

[Decent melee combatant. Superior caster. Smart. Killer. Undead Bane. Lucky. On the rise. OCCULTED]

That was... unusual. His inquisitor path gave him access to many tools, including ones used to pierce the veil used by assassins and dark worshippers. The ‘occulted’ feeling came with a feeling of hitting a wall, one that was vast and absolutely unyielding. It was worrisome, but it did not extend to his other skills. Occultation was not always a sinister thing. A simple discussion would clear things out.

The sinuous creature on her shoulder was a drake of some sort. An unusual color as well.

Except.

Denerim counted the number of limbs.

Oh shit.



[Juvenile draconic creature. Not very dangerous. Highest stat: Finesse (late second tier). Highest skills: draconic combat. Others: awoken intellect. Gourmet. Truce. OCCULTED]

Not tamed. Not tamed! Occulted. Alright, calm down. That was... weird, but truce felt like the dragon did not see humans as prey, he could feel it.

And it was a dragon.

He was so damn sure. No paladin of Neriad could see that winged figure and take it for anything else. By the high one's fetching buttocks, what the fuck?

And occulted?

Ok. Enough. He had already spent several seconds staring at the creature who was now eyeing him with malevolent crimson eyes. Denerim lowered his gaze to the witch who was now eyeing him with malevolent emerald eyes. He bowed politely.

"Greetings to you, Witch Bob. I apologize for calling on you at this late—"

"What the fuck are you looking at?"

Denerim's next words died out in his throat and he froze the tense smile on his face for the sake of his host. Simishe said that a public figure had to smile in tense situations. Apparently, it helped with settling things when done correctly. Easy for her to say.

Denerim straightened up one again and turned to his apprentice. The young man was baring his teeth at the Kark bodyguard, his tattoos glowing red like dying embers in the room's darkness. The Kark's expression had gone to the glacial neutrality of the consummate fighter planning her first strike. Things were going out of hand. He didn't want to start his investigation with violence.

"Orkan."

"They're fucking with us, we should—"

"Orkan."

"That big, disrespectful—"

Simishe always said that he was awe-inspiring and manly when he got serious. A rock in the storm. That's what he went for now. He was the center and he was as unyielding as a mountain.

"Orkan."

The boy calmed down. Despite his upbringing and the young rage in his heart, he found it in himself to rein his temper once more. Denerim smiled at him despite everything. Neriad welcomed all who fought the righteous fight, even if that fight was against themselves. Not all were born equal. Not all could tip the scales, but Neriad assisted each and everyone of those who fought for a better world.

Denerim would do his part.

“Sorry, mentor.”

“You are forgiven.”

“I’m the one who should be forgiving right now,” the Kark woman grumbled, still in the posture that would allow her to smash Orkan in the ribs in a moment. Denerim wasn’t too worried. Orkan and himself would win without...

His thoughts trailed off as he saw something glint at the edge of his vision, something yellow. He turned his head and saw what looked like a bone statue.

[golem]

He did not take the time to inspect more, because at that moment, the construct’s eyes flashed again, and in them he saw a depth of malice that sent a chill down his spine. There was a centennial hatred buried in those orbs that no living creature could ever hope to match, a cold intellect with a will defying logic itself. It would kill him with glee. Denerim did not exist as a person in what passed for the thing’s mind. It was merciless murder incarnate.

He felt a pulse coming from the caster, a sense of pressure that he knew meant a primed offensive spell. She was also pushing against his soul with a threatening aura, but Denerim had stood shoulder to shoulder with the greatest fighters of Param as an elder wyvern bore down on him. She was still a pup.

“Perhaps we started off on the wrong foot. Would it be fine for me to introduce myself again?” he said in an attempt to salvage the meeting.

“Could you introduce yourself to the closest latrines instead?” the witch asked.

“I assure you, I would not be bothering you if it were not important.”

There were too many things to consider, but it would have to come later. He had a mission that took priority.

The witch looked at him in the way that screamed ‘inspection’. She had short, messy light brown hair and beautiful traits. Very exotic. Her elegant poise could have allowed her to pass for a

noble were it not for her eyes. They had an edge that more experienced court animals would have smoothed over. And they were a unique green hue that he had never seen before. She was clearly from afar. Even her skin was very pale with a visible network of black veins, but with a healthy flush. It was all rather eye-catching. Dangerous, that.

She made a sign and the Kark stepped back.

“Alright, let’s hear it.”

The throne and the fact that they were not offered seats sent a clear message. Perhaps she was noble after all? Having them stand as if this were a palace and not a rental cottage in the ass end of Param was within the range of dick moves he would expect from a Baranese countess.

“We have come requesting your assistance in a delicate matter. We have been contacted by an officer of the law to assist with the track of a dangerous criminal.”

“Is that so?” the witch asked in a cold voice. He felt a spell priming again. The... baby dragon hissed.

“Yes, and that criminal has been living in Kazar for at least two years,” Denerim explained, having anticipated this sort of reaction, “that is why I think that you could help, since you are a recent arrival.”

She blinked.

She frowned slightly.

“You are not a prime suspect, if that is what you fear. I really came here to ask for your support,” he said, and called upon his Truth skill.

It was an interesting thing, his Truth skill, a double-edged sword that allowed him to detect falsehoods, but also made him much more reticent to lie. When he activated it, people would feel the candor in his words. Just like the witch did now.

She sat back in her modest throne and gestured for him to continue. By his side, Orkan settled down.

“What I will share with you is confidential information. I will ask you not to speak of it, or the cultist will flee and we will lose them.”

“Cultist?” she asked with a frown. His Truth skill whispered that her reaction was genuine. It was pretty much a gut feeling.

"I will get back to it. A few days ago, townspeople went to cut down a stretch of the woods to clear the way for more farms. They found a charnel pit. Five corpses in a mound."

"Wow."

"The bodies were... heavily damaged, but fortunately the citizens of Kazar called upon their prime investigator who recognized the precise cuts used on the remains. Missing thighs, cheeks, calves, biceps. She called us in turn. I do not need to tell you what this means."

She looked very confused.

"Errr. You do."

Again, a genuine reaction. She was innocent.

"You have never heard about Gomogog?"

She did not move in her seat. Her immobility betrayed an attempt to hide her reaction. To Denerim's experienced eyes, she might as well have been babbling.

"Very well. Gomogog is the dark god of flesh, renewal, and hunger. He offers immortality to his followers in exchange for the sacrifice and consumption of sapient flesh."

"Those cuts mean that someone harvested meat from the bodies..." she realized with widened eyes. The Kark made the sign of Enttikku, goddess of death. A shiver shook her mighty frame. Orkan just rolled his eyes.

"Precisely. Prime investigator Tars correctly guessed that the bodies were killed every two months or so, but also that the most recent one dated to a full year back. I suspect that the cultist changes the burial location from time to time to avoid gathering too much attention."

"How do you know that it's one cultist and not several?"

Oh? A relevant question. Usually, the first thing people did was to claim that their beloved town could not possibly have such a monster in its midst.

"The cuts are practically identical. Individual cultists always prepare the... meat... themselves, it is part of their ritual."

"I see. Why not dispose of the bodies farther into the woods, by the way? Monsters would help them disappear."

"Unreliable. Although people eaten in such a ritual never rise, body parts can still be found in monster lairs in case of a purge. We were really lucky to find those graves. Whoever that cultist

is, they have patiently fed on drifters and scavengers over the years. The proximity of the Deathshield Woods and the convoys going to forts means a myriad of ways to explain a disappearance. Our quarry is clever, yes. Hmmm. They could have been operating for a century and we would not know.”

“How dangerous is a Gomogog cultist exactly?”

Denerim refocused on the conversation.

“Depends on their food reserves. Alright, I need to delve into the depths of their depravity. Disciples of that foul god sacrifice others to stave off their own mortality, adding their victim’s flesh to their own. They are... larger on the inside, so to speak. They will grow to monstrous size in combat, thus revealing to the world the extent of their corruption. The disciple consumes flesh to heal flesh. So long as they have reserves, they can close even the most grievous of wounds, mutating in a mass of ever-changing musculature.”

“Also they stink,” Orkan added helpfully.

“They can regrow limbs?” the witch asked with a frown, one finger idly scratching the dragonling’s spine.

“Yes. Grow, regrow, multiply. Older disciples can reach prodigious size, but they are always revealed in the end. The insane hunger of their masters spreads through their unholy bodies until they can no longer control themselves. It is always a matter of time.”

“Alright. Do spells work against them then?”

Denerim and his apprentice exchanged a glance.

“Yes,” the inquisitor explained, “you see, they might resist them like all highly magical beings, but they use mostly life mana.”

“Really? That is... unexpected.”

“Life mana to sustain themselves, a little black mana to corrupt and change. As such, foreign black mana spells are extremely effective against them. As the antithesis of life and preservation, they burn and disrupt the ability to regenerate efficiently. I read Lieutenant Cernit's report on your inspiring contribution against the undead. Your specialty would serve us well in this struggle.”

“I see so that’s why you wanted me to join. Just to be on the safe end of things, there is another caster in Kazar we shou...”

The witch frowned and Denerim saw realization in her widening eyes.

“You are suspecting her,” she exclaimed.

Denerim felt the witch’s intense distress at the thought that Lady Varska, the resident witch, could be the culprit. She was not afraid, but worried. The two knew each other well.

“We suspect everyone,” the inquisitor continued, “but there are signs that can point us in the right direction. For example, disciples of Gomogog try to dwell in places with a high life mana attunement, and Kazar has one such place.”

The woman frowned.

“The tree?” the Kark asked.

“Precisely,” Denerim said with approval.

“Aw no, anything but that,” the witch continued, “what other signs?”

“Well. They tend to be very protective of their personal space, for obvious reasons. And they would tend to eat a lot, mostly meat.”

The witch relaxed.

“Yeah that’s not Varska at all. She is a herbivore. Mostly. Except for her sweet tooth, really. Though I suppose a disciple would gorge in private?”

“Most of the time, yes. Be careful with your suspicion, young one. The mind tends to focus on its own worst fears instead of searching for the truth.”

“A disciple would live alone, right? Away from their family, if they had one?”

“Yes.”

“... I’ll try not to focus on my fear.”

“We can go tomorrow and assuage your concerns, and ours. It will be fine.”

“Yeah. Fine. Pass by after daybreak?”

“We will see you there. Be careful and make sure that your house is secure. Our arrival could have been noticed, though we have done our best to be discreet.”

There was a hint of defiance in the witch now, as she sat back into her throne.

“This place is safe now. I assure you.”

Truth. Or at least, she believed it was the case. Denerim had to remind himself to be careful, as being truthful and being correct were two entirely separate propositions.

“See you tomorrow. Take care.”

They left.

The door closed behind the inquisitor and Viv did her best to take deep breaths. It would be fine.

“It’s not her,” Marruk said.

Viv turned to the one who had started as precaution but was quickly turning into a friend. The Kark warrior’s big, honest face showed a level of confidence that Viv wished she could share. Varska was an exile with little to lose. She bore a stigma in her flesh that Gomogog could perhaps heal. She lived near the Kazaran tree. It did not look too good.

On the other hand... no it would be too weird. Too big of a coincidence. She had invited Viv to her home. But what if it was to eat her... No. No. Or yes?

**//I agree with Marruk’s assessment of the situation, Your Grace.**

**//Although mine is based on rigorous observation rather than fleshy wishful thinking.**

**//I have slain Gomogog disciples in the past.**

**//If your... ‘mentor’... were a follower of a dark god, she would have acted before.**

**//Gomogog followers are not known for their impulse control.**

**//It is not her.**

“Are you sure?”

**//Almost entirely, yes.**

**//Set your mind at ease.**

“Ok. Ok..”

Marruk locked the front door and placed a chair under the knob to block the access, for good measure. She yawned mightily, showing her large flat teeth in an uncharacteristic display.

“I’m going back to bed. Big hunt tomorrow.”

“Alright. Thanks for being there.”

“Always. Good night.”

That inquisitor called Denerim came back as Viv was having breakfast. Marruk was chewing on a warm bun with a vacant expression as the man let himself in with that weird dude that gave Viv punk vibes. The idealized type that screamed their rage with a guitar and threw rocks at riot cops. And he had shiny tattoos. Her inspection skill only said that he was an inquisitor apprentice though.

Denerim told her that he and Orkan had to fetch their gear first, and to wait for them at home. Viv thought that it was super inefficient but whatever, it would give Marruk a moment to rest her eyes. Even with the magic reinforcing people’s stamina, it was clear that the door-wielding bodyguard was suffering from fatigue. It was an exertion of the mind that made the usually stoic warrior despondent and even a bit grumpy.

Then there was a knock at the door.

Marruk went up and checked through the shuttered window. Her face froze.

“It’s Gogen. The housekeeper.”

Fuck.

What if...

Viv was getting paranoid. Was the old, portly woman hiding a terrible secret?

She turned to Solfis.

**//If she attacks you while I am here, she will die.**

“Ok. Marruk, let her in, but keep a distance. Let Solfis react.”



The Kark woman nodded slowly, then opened the door. Gogen unhesitantly entered the room.

“Hello,” she said.

Viv looked into the depth of those bovine brown eyes and saw nothing here. Her visitor displayed the malice and cunning of a snail laying waste to a piece of lettuce. She took her surroundings with a look, huffed, and started to dust the table Viv was sitting at.

Gogen was an amazingly ugly woman, as if someone had carefully arranged the proportion of someone to maximize her plain appearance without ever dipping into the unhealthy or the grotesque. Quite an achievement, really.

Viv watched, tense, for a tentacle to sprout out of the woman’s back.

It did not happen.

The old Kazaran frump grabbed her broom and swept the floor with practiced efficiency. All the while, she was breathing loudly through her half-open mouth, eyes glazed, with a bit of drool dripping down her lips.

Viv half expected an evil cackle, accompanied by a shriek of “no one ever suspects the cleaning lady nyaaaahahaha!” But no. Gogen finished her task in ten minutes and left, barely acknowledging Viv’s embarrassed ‘thanks’.

“Fuck, I really hope this gets over with soon or I’ll never go out again,” the witch said.

“We must face the challenge head-on,” Marruk agreed. She yawned again. “If we can find it,” she added.

Thankfully, the inquisitors returned before any more brilliant insight was bestowed upon Viv.

The pair had picked up nondescript suits of armor. They look like temple guards now, with a white capes over leather and chainmail.

Viv studied them again. The older one was tall and broad and very scruffy. He was also quite handsome in a dignified, solid kind of way. Even had the grey at the temples. He wore a well-used and quite obviously enchanted broadsword by his side. The younger one had a hooked nose, very dark hair and he was all edges. Especially with those red tattoos. He also wielded a broadsword, but on the other side he had nasty curved blade that looked like it was designed to bite around shields. The contrast between both blades was quite jarring. The curved one had seen much use.

Viv decided to leave Solfis behind as she thought that the two inquisitors might be enough to at least hold back the thing as Viv ran. They moved out.

"It's very unlikely that your cleaning servant is the cultist, but you were right to keep your guard up," Denerim said.

"So, except for, errrr, Gomogog, what other cults do you usually deal with?" Viv asked in an attempt to distract herself.

"The most commonly worshipped one is Efestar. Before I continue, do they not worship dark gods where you come from?"

"This kind of dark knowledge is hidden in my home country. Possibly censored," Viv answered noncommittally.

The inquisitor looked at her weirdly but he did not comment on the half-truth.

"I see? Well, Efestar is the god of resentment. His domain is that of the petty revenge, the secret scheme, the malevolent lies. His followers are always required to sacrifice something, or someone, of value to them to bring destruction on another. They are always the hardest to detect since the boon comes in a form that could be explained by fate or bad luck. A blight on one's crop, for example. Once the treachery is found, however, finding the culprit is usually straightforward. Just find whoever suffered as well."

"This seems like a recipe for disaster. People who just got their lives ruined always look for a cause. It's just too easy to blame it on someone else."

Denerim turned to her, showing a bitter smile.

"Dark gods corrupt and destroy as much as they can, and they are most pleased when men turn on themselves without their input. Such is their nature."

Just then, the younger man's tattoos flashed a deeper red before settling down yet again.

"Hmm, can I ask about the tattoos?" Viv asked with all the tact and diplomatic touch of a drunken rhino.

"I used to be a Hallurian warborn," the young man said defensively.

"Ooooooh," Marruk and Viv echoed. Everything had suddenly become clear.

Well, no.

But at least they knew where to start.

The mentee, Orkan, glared at them as if he expected a remark.

“So, tattoos are a warborn thing?” Viv asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Her paranoia had successfully been replaced by a deep sense of cringe.

“I’m just tired, makes me say stupid things.”

“Do you often wake up tired?” Marruk asked.

“Hey!”

“Huhu.”

The discussion was nicely distractive, but it died out as they approached Kazar’s central plaza, where the massive purple-leaved tree stood as the original bulwark against the deadlands. Viv had always thought of it as a relaxing, exotic feature. Now that she also knew that it was a cultist magnet, the imposing paragon of nature had lost some of its charm. The sight of the tower filled her with a deep sense of dread. Not only had Varska become her ex, there was a remote possibility that a tentacular horror hid under all that fragile elegance, the soft skin, the delicate floral touch, the blush, and the way the banished beauty averted her eyes and frowned when she felt attraction.

Fuck.

The Helock mage had burrowed her way to Viv’s soft and mushy heart.

Viv banged on the door, and was let in by a particularly grumpy old housekeeper wearing her nightcloth. It was still the ass crack of dawn, after all. They climbed up three sets of stairs and Viv, again, banged on another door.

Varska opened the door wearing something like a bathrobe, but thin. Viv’s eyes drifted south to two well-defined pert breasts before she managed to refocus on the grave matter at hand. Damn her brain.

“Sorry, this is serious and concerns Kazar’s security. Can you meet us in the lounge?”

Varska's hair was elegantly mussed and she was a little bleary-eyed, but the 'I will throw you off a cliff' expression turned to business as soon as Viv's words registered.

"Give me a minute."

She slammed the door in Viv's face.

Fair.

It still stung a bit.

They went back to sit in the lobby's comfortable chairs, all armed and armored like they had a noon appointment inside the walls of Jerusalem and the moors disagreed. Never had Viv seen such an awkward, socially inept gathering of idiots since her boyfriend's birthday party back when she was eleven. Fucking awful. She almost prayed that the tentacular horror would burst out the door to bring an end to her torture.

Varska walked in exactly two minutes later, wearing a light green dress and hair held up in a no-nonsense tail. She crucified every attendant with her glare as she took her seat. Viv reddened. Marruk lowered her eyes. The paladin gave the fakest of smiles and his apprentice glared back.

"I hope you have excellent reasons to disturb my rest."

Viv had plenty of good reasons to disturb her oh for fuck sake not that again the pressure was making her horny. And now the moment of truth was upon her and her stomach was drilling down her chest in an icy avalanche to settle slightly above her bladder.

Viv did not want Varska to be the worshipper.

Please no. Anything but that.

"There is an acolyte of Gomogog in the city. One who has been here for a while," Denerim started as Viv was paralyzed by anxiety.

Varska leaned forward, expression blank.

"Are you quite sure?"

"We have found a charnel pit with ritual victims. There is no mistake."

Varska slowly sat back down into her couch, eyes lost in deep thought in a way that Viv recognized. Varska was in full focus mode. She would not even answer questions. Then, a torrent of words erupted from her lips.

“Here for a long time so no recent immigrant, possibly low-profile, lives alone or with enough personal space to carry out their activity, close to the tree for added potency, unchanged over a period of... oh. OH! THAT MOTHER. FUCKING. BI—”

Viv’s danger sense shook her.

Danger sense: Beginner 5

The door to the lower level exploded inward and a thin clawed limb punched through it.

Everything happened very quickly.

Varska managed to raise a thin shield of brown and green. The attacking bone pierced through it and burrowed deeply into her left arm.

The Hallurian swung and cleanly severed the offending tentacle with Denerim charging right behind.

Marruk dove for Varska’s falling form, interposing her shield. She glanced back to check that Viv was ok.

Viv was last to act despite having used her heightened perception as soon as the noise of cracking wood had reached her ear. She waited for the fighters to engage and angled a purge left, under a couple more tentacles and into the body behind it.

It screeched and threw itself forward.

A solid mass of pinkish, muscular flesh without skin slammed into Marruk’s door which, against all odds, held. The Kark woman’s mace was now playing against her as the single strike she managed hardly had any effect. The two inquisitors were having much more success. Their blades bit deep into the creature and golden flames licked their edges, preventing them from closing at all. Great spurts of blood covered the expensive carpets.

Viv cast successive purge spells. They were barely penetrating the creature’s highly resilient flesh, but the wounds were not healing either.

The acolyte shrieked and burst through the nearest window, leaving a man-sized, circular hole behind like a looney toons character. The afterimage of a humanoid shape with tendrils coming out of its back remained seared in Viv’s retina. It had been simply too quick to see clearly.

The two inquisitors jumped after it at the same moment. No hesitation.

Viv returned her gaze to Varska, kneeling on the floor and applying a healing spell to her punctured shoulder. Marruk stood protectively above the mage. Viv saw that she was quite pale. Beads of sweat pearly on her paling brow.

“Are you alr—”

“What are you waiting for? GO AFTER IT!”

Viv took a few steps forward and looked down.

They were on the fifth floor.

Below, the two men had engaged the monster, which had grown to hippopotamic proportions but not quite elephantine proportions yet. A peasant woman laid in a pool of her blood, the entire right side of her torso missing. A child was screaming.

“It’s a bit...”

Marruk grabbed Viv in a firefighter carry and jumped down.

“Ah, FU—”

“Keep it off the tree!” Varska’s voice came. It was frantic.

They landed on the plaza’s pavement with a grunt. Marruk dropped Viv and charged forward. The acolyte and the two inquisitors were caught in a deadly dance around the tree’s base. The acolyte was aiming for the tree, probably to do something drastic now that its cover was blown. The men fought it off, coordination and technique against random savagery. They were not winning, or at least, not fast enough.

Viv sprinted towards the creature while, in her mind, a strange split occurred.

One part was casting overcharged purge after purge on the monster’s pink’s skin. Grey scales started to form on its flank to mitigate her attacks and a tendril slashed her way, only to be deflected by Marruk’s fearless form.

Another part was shocked. The speed at which the combatants moved was like watching a kung-fu movie in fast forward. It was insane. Insane!

The last part was relief.

At least, it was not Varska.

She managed to get close enough.

“Werfer!”

The small, localized, and fast blight spell would not have hit if Orkan had not dug its hooked blade in one of the creature’s limbs to throw it off balance. The shadowy flames hit its shoulder with a terrible hiss. The creature recoiled in pain for the first time since the beginning of the fight. It also opened three eyes from under its armpit — tentacle pit? — and they zeroed on Viv.

The acolyte bounded away towards her, ignoring two devastating slashes on its flank. Viv noted in passing a limb going up and raking a low branch. Violet flowers faded and fell where it hit.

That was bad.

The creature dodged under another werfer and simply tanked an overcharged purge, swallowing back eyes under thick scales before they could be burnt. Marruk expertly blocked three strikes.

Then the creature’s chest split open like an exploding carcass, showing purple, veiny flesh and half-formed, football-sized human molars.

It screamed.

Viv yelled in pain and brought her hands to her ears, and so did the two inquisitors. Only Marruk stood steadfast. A few tentacles merged into a larger limb with impossible, horrific speed and slammed the brave defender aside. The creature jumped on Viv.

Mages often depended on gestures and rituals.

Instinctive casters like Viv did not.

“Werfer”

Hands still clutched on her ears, Viv allowed the wave of pure, destructive black mana to emerge from her core instead of her arms. The familiar, eager power overloaded her conduits in its enthusiasm to get out and do what it was designed to do. The spell caught the acolyte full on as it was already in the air and incapable of dodging. Viv felt a moment of triumph as she rolled to the side and let the smoldering horror show screech its way above her head.

She sprinted away and towards Marruk while looking back. The thing flayed with small tendrils which she blocked with a large, all directional nope shield. She felt exhilaration when a large chunk of corrupted flesh simply shed from the whole, reducing the creature to a more manageable size.

Marruk rushed back in and thwacked a tentacle away, the pair of inquisitors fanning around her. They renewed their attacks. Viv's mind was getting tired though and her perception slowed down. It became difficult to follow the insanely quick combat. The combatants were barely more than blurry form to her at this stage, striding across the plaza in a flurry of flesh and golden-tinged steel. A show as terrifying as it was awesome.

Viv shook her head and resolved to help however she could by throwing overcharged purge when she thought she could land one. The inquisitors somehow gave her openings despite their lack of familiarity with her fighting style. Every time they left her a clear path, she flayed the creature's flesh with thick threads of annihilation. Marruk repulsed any attempt at killing her from afar.

But the fighters were tiring. As they finished a full circle of the plaza and were back where they had started, the acolyte tore off and threw one of its arms in the path of one of Viv's spells. It rushed between the pair and ignored the attacks on its back.

It was aiming straight for the tree.

Viv was no expert, but she guessed that a creature of corruption touching a defenseless symbol of purity was a bad thing. She raced after it with Marruk by her side.

"Help me stop it."

"WHAT?"

Viv looked to the side. The Kark warrior's eyes were bloodshot and she was bleeding from both ears.

"You're deafened."

"YES! I DEFEND!"

"Fuck."

They were not going to make it in time.

Denerim screamed something and the symbol of Neriad appeared on the creature's back. It slowed down the more it tried to flee. Orkan's tattoos flashed red and he planted his hooked blade into the ground, through the thing's temporary back leg. Once more, the creature shed flesh to escape.

Corded muscle stretched to the undefended trunk.



There was a thud, like a baseball bat hitting a face if both were the size of a bus.

Where the acolyte used to be, there was now a denuded root jutting up. Viv backpedaled and looked around, not quite understanding, until something smashed into a far wall.

The other three were already sprinting back. The acolyte's diminished form was rebuilding bones at the base of Varska's tower but the mage of Kazar had apparently had enough. Thorny brambles burst through the pavement to form manacles around it. For every one it tore off, three more encircled it. Viv did not dare cast to avoid destroying the binds, and she did not have to. A heavy arrow punched through the heavy plates forming on the monster's surface. The projectile came from Koro, the Amazon member of the Temple Guard. Their leader Lorn joined the fray.

Their coming heralded the beginning of the end. The front of the tower soon turned into a veritable butcher shop of wrecked stone and slabs of bloody, pulsating flesh of various sizes. The acolyte had to discard gobbets of meat as soon as they were burned and purified. In the end, only a heavily deformed head filled with serrated teeth was left in the midst of an expanding pool of gore.

Silence descended upon the battlefield as the combatants caught their breath. The Inquisitors were spent and covered in sweat. The temple guard had fared a little better. Viv picked up a tiny vial of high quality mending potion and gave it to Marruk who gulped it down gratefully. The Kark woman then busied herself shoving her large fingers up her itchy ears.

"Whoa. That went pretty well," Orkan said, wiping blood from his blades.

The comment was extremely poorly received.

Denerim looked up from the kneeling position he had taken and pointed his chin at the corpse of the half-devoured woman. As the crisis had passed, her child ran back to shake her lifeless body with heart-wrenching sobs of pure grief.

"What? You know I'm right," the Hallurian insisted.

"Some tact, please."

"Fine, fine. Anyway. Good stuff."

"Not good stuff," Lorn interrupted. The Temple Guard captain stood with all his height as the rest of his company formed up around him, all steely mail and white cloth. He fixed them with a furious scowl. It now occurred to Viv that the inquisitors had 'borrowed' his troop's uniform and probably without asking.

Varska half-stumbled through her door, the wound in her shoulder bound with a reddening cloth.

“Is she dead?” she asked.

“Yes,” Denerim assured.

“Explanations. Now!” Lorn demanded.

A group was gathering around them. Viv also noticed Corel running in with a contingent of guards in tow.

“I’m going to check on Varska,” Viv told Marruk who nodded while inspecting a bloody finger. She approached the pale-faced mage. Varska had a vacant look.

“Are you... alright?”

Varska’s response was immediate. She lifted a delicate finger, then bent forward and emptied the full content of her stomach. Mostly tea.

“Please excuse me while I regurgitate every meal I took in the last two years.”

Viv did the only thing she could and held the woman’s hair back as she dry-heaved.

“I’m definitely sure that she didn’t feed you anything off though.”

A murderous glance.

“And, pray tell, do you think that the acolyte of Gomogog used a different set of knives to part my dishes.”

“Pretty fucking sure, yeah,” Viv replied immediately. The acolyte was depraved, not stupid. Why take the risk of using a cursed tool to cook for someone who might have mana perception in the third tier?

Varska frowned, but she did not object and was already looking less, well, nauseous.

“Huh. Anyway, now my reputation is thoroughly ruined. People will see me and realize I shared my quarters with a monster for years. Years! I am such a fool.”

“Good thing that you were actively involved in its demise then. How long did she live here anyway?”

“That’s the cause of my anguish! She served my predecessor, a retired warmage, until his death. I never thought to check how long she had been here before or I would have perhaps suspected something.”

“The warmage, he...”

“Choked on a fishbone. Tars double-checked.”

“Wow, that’s...”

“A shitty death for a retired fighter. Yes. Thank you. Any other valuable feedback you would like to share?”

Viv knew when someone had reached bitch mood and it was better to leave them alone. She raised her hands in surrender and stepped back.

“Wait! Wait,” Varska said. She took a deep breath and winced.

“Your wound...”

“She managed to suck some of my mana but otherwise it’s fine, don’t worry. I just... I am taking it out on you. You came to...”

Varska assessed her.

“You thought I was the creature.”

“No, but I was afraid you might me. Terrified, even.”

Viv did not know how her honesty was received. Varska appeared lost in thought and she heard fragments of conversation behind. Lorn had focused his ire on Denerim, but the inquisitor had taken out a badge and now it was the temple guard captain’s turn to answer some pointed questions under Orkan’s smug look. On the other side, Corel was conducting an increasingly frustrating interview with Marruk.

“Did you know that there was an acolyte?”

A long pause.

“Not until yesterday at night.”

“When did you meet the inquisitors?”

A long pause.

“Yesterday at night.”

“Were they the one who informed you of that fact?”

A long pause.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to make me wait even for the most basic questions?”

A long pause.

“Yes.”

“Maranor’s sword, the two of you will be the death of me.”

Viv could only see the Kark’s broad, armored shoulder from there but she knew the stout woman was grinning.

“I’m sorry,” Varska said from behind. The mage stood up and brushed her blood-stained dress with one hand. She had a strange, chastised look that didn’t befit her.

“I messed up again, didn’t I?”

“I’m just saying that figuring out your roommate is a cannibalistic monster gives you space for some allowance. No worries.”

“No, don’t you see? I... I did not find out! It’s all... again...”

“Wow wow wow, she was not a hermit and lived in front of a temple of Neriad, right? Lots of people had lots of opportunities to find out and didn’t. Maybe the acolyte was just good at being what she was. Your predecessor did not succeed either.”

“Yes,” Orkan said as he approached the pair, “this was the fastest hunt we’ve ever done. You ladies impress me. We could not have succeeded without you.”

He grinned, the expression slightly threatening with the glowing tattoos disappearing in his raven-black hair. Varska sniffed. Orkan persisted.

“Normally, it takes weeks and then the acolyte always manages to eat a few people on the way. That’s what Denerim said, at least. This is only my second time hunting one with him.”

Varska was not very receptive. She stood up and disappeared back into her tower, sparing one last glance to Viv.

“Come see me tomorrow.”

Then she slammed the door closed.

Orkan sighed heavily.

“Don’t take it too personally. She’s had some difficult moments recently,” Viv tried. It felt like being the only mature adult in a trio.

“You know, back in Halluria, women would queue to spend the night with me. I could not enter a new fortress without finding someone in my bed. But here everyone looks at me with disgust.”

He looked dejected. Viv wondered what she had done in a past life to deserve the details on the love life of a servant of the church.

“Don’t inquisitors swear vows of chastity or something?” Viv asked.

Orkan was shocked. Nay, scandalized.

“Absolutely not!”

“Well you could always visit the Spotted Feather before you leave. I’m sure that they would accomodate you.”

“Me? Paying for sex?”

“Well duh.”

The warborn’s eyes turned contemplative.

“I’m sure I can convince Denerim to splurge for a night. Maybe some action will distract him from that Simishe woman he bones every time we go back to base. And we did save a lot of money by finding the acolyte so fast. Stroke of luck, that was, hmmm.”

Lucky indeed.

Corel interrogated Viv in turn not long after that. His questions were similar to what he asked Marruk and Viv gave the same answer, but without the delay. She could not be arsed. Denerim flew to the rescue as they were two minutes in.

“Black Witch Bob acted as my deputy during this hunt. Surely you have better things to do than to pester the heroine of the hour?”

“One last question, if you will,” the dour man insisted, “why is that every time something happens here, you two are involved?” he asked, eyeing Viv and her yawning Kark sidekick.

“Because we get shit done?” Viv replied innocently.

That was it for the interview. Lorn made for Viv, but a sharp glare from Denerim dissuaded him. The head inquisitor had given enough of his time to smoothen things out with the local populace.

“Thanks for the help. I will walk you two back to your house and then the good captain and I will handle and sanctify the acolyte’s lair. Orkan will keep an eye on your friend, make sure she is fine.”

“Could she have been poisoned or something?”

“No, Gomogog is not about poison. That would be Octas the Spider Queen.”

“Another one of those dark gods?”

Denerim raised an amused brow.

“It’s not like we are trying to start a collection.”

They made their way to the outskirts with Marruk trailing them, beyond exhausted. It had been an interesting morning. Viv waited until the trio had gone through the assembled loiterers before asking the question that had been burning on her lips since the beginning of the fight.

“I cannot help but notice that the acolyte could heal and regrow stuff.”

“Caught that, did you?”

“But healing spells do not regrow arms. Instead, they form healthy stumps. What gives?”

Denerim looked alarmed, and a bit wary as well.

“No no, the acolytes corrupt and denature life mana for their own twisted ways. You cannot use the same method on a person. The results would be horrific!”

Viv was crestfallen.

“Oh.”

“Wait, you accept my words? So easily?”

“I figure that you would know about that sort of stuff since you are, you know, an inquisitor. And you don’t look like the type to lie.”

“Thank you. Most people dislike inquisitors in general, despite our efforts. It does not help that our appearance always heralds disaster. In any case, the healing magic only closes a wound that could have potentially healed by itself. That is why light damage to five organs can be healed but if someone has their liver destroyed, they cannot be saved, for example.”

“But that’s the thing,” Viv replied, annoyed, “every cell in the body carries the information required to build the entire body. Why not use either that or other limbs for a blueprint. Everyone has a liver, no? Why not copy one from someone compatible or something? Why is it not possible?”

Denerim looked at her like she had sprouted an extra head.

“What’s a cell?”

“Gods dammit.”

In the end, Viv explained that her home nation had tried to better understand the body instead of better understanding magic (technically true, at least to her), and that they had discovered quite a bit. She explained cells, then used a metaphor to explain DNA and how stem cells could potentially be created then ‘molded’ into the desired limb. She knew that researchers in Japan had even successfully converted adult body cells back into stem cells. The potential was there, and with the use of magic, surely, something could be done?

“Just imagine, you must have a lot of people maimed in the line of battle, right? All those people could be healed if we figure out how to use magic to help the body remember what it should look like!”

“But we would have to regrow the conduits.”

“Then we would need to figure it out, but at least we gotta start somewhere, yeah?”

The inquisitor’s eyes grew distant.

“It would take well-controlled black mana for its change potential, and life mana. In theory... but no, there would be too much risk. People would die.”

“We would not use it on humans first, of course. It starts with animal trials, then moves to volunteers only after the tests are conclusive. Have some standards, please.”

They had almost reached their house and Denerim was still mulling over the new information.

“This all sounds so crazy. But you believe it. Tell you what, master the change aspect of black mana and contact me via Farren. I will arrange something.”

It was Viv's turn to be shocked.

"Wait, you just told me that body modification was a horrible thing I should never try. I never expected you to agree with me. I was just venting."

"You forget two things. First, I can pray to Neriad to confirm that this is a good idea. If I receive his blessing, it will mean that we can go ahead. Second, it's clear that you are an outlander, so you have knowledge that we lack. Or forgot."

Viv was worried. It was clear to her that, caster or not, the inquisitor could kill her if he wanted. Of course, Solfis would tear him in two afterward but a fanatic might decide that it was worth it.

"Oh, don't be like that," the older man said. "We do not hunt outlanders like some nations do. Why do people always believe that we are out to slaughter everyone? Besides, you already helped us immensely in the short time that you were here, between this and the necromancers. We, the inquisition, have your back."

That was too weird to be fully comforting.

"Is it really that easy to tell that I'm an outlander?"

"Most people would not think of it, but we inquisitors are trained to delve into questions and theories. Honestly, your strange skin tone, your weird eyes, the accent, the teleportation accident story? It's a shame that it took me so long to figure it out. I must be getting old."

"Alright. Well, we are here. I'll see you around?" Viv asked at the gate to her mansion.

"We will probably depart shortly. We would not want to further exhaust our welcome, hmm? Remember what I said. When you have a decent knowledge of the change aspect of black mana, we can get to work. The church cannot help you with that. We do not attract black mana practitioners. Take care now."

Viv practically dragged Marruk in. The poor woman was dead on her feet.

"Wait. Was that part of the garden so turned? Did you do some gardening? I swear it was not like that this morning."

Marruk muttered something unintelligible and Viv decided to let it go. They went through the door. Arthur trotted across the room to greet her.

"Squee."

"I'm glad to see you too. Did something happen while I was away?"



**//Nothing of import occurred during your absence.**

**//I believe that Arthur missed you.**

**//She has displayed signs of impatience.**

“She probably wanted to fly out, but it was too dangerous. Here you go now, little one. Solfis, believe it or not but we found the culprit in exactly two minutes of investigation. It has to be some sort of record...”

Viv put Marruk to bed and came back to gossip with the golem. She did not notice the bloody cloth stashed under Arthur’s lair.

Outside Viv’s house, an hour earlier.

“You go in, grab what you can, trash the place and leave, remember? In and out, no dallying, no fire, and no killing the drake if you can avoid it.”

The mercenary leader was named Kelto, and he was out of patience.

The three men in front of him nodded nervously. There were two thugs who were on their third break-in attempt, and a thief hired for the occasion. Kelto had splurged on the last one. No choice. He had a reputation to salvage.

Everyone knew by now that his attempt to intimidate the witch had ended in failure. Normally, his chainmail and scarred cheeks created fear in the hearts of others, but now, sneers and jeers often followed him. Something had to be done.

He had tried to steal her belongings and leave a knife to show that she was not as invulnerable as she thought. The first time, his men had been surprised by the drake. The second time, they had to contend with a network of traps and pits that only a vicious mind backed by skills could have created. He had even interrogated the housekeeper, Gogen, but the daft cow had only sobbed and repeated that she was there to clean. Worse, it turned out that Gogen was well-liked and had thirteen children, half of whom were in the guard.

Things became unpleasant for him after that.

He had to strike hard. He gave the signal.

The three men raced across the deserted street. The thief did something with his hands, and the ward on the door did not ring when he picked the lock. They disappeared inside.

In the house, the two thugs approached the pile of cover they suspected harbored the beast of Kazan. The horrid, white reptilian creature emerged from its nest with crimson eyes shining

ominously in the dim light. While the thief inspected a bedroom door, they took out a net and brandished their clubs.

The door slammed close. All three men jumped.

There was a nightmarish creation before them. A tall, skeletal frame of glyph-covered bones and two orbs shining a baleful yellow dug deep into a grinning skull, twin horns jutting up and back. It towered over them, one monstrous hand flat against their exit.

**//ARMED INTRUDERS DETECTED.**

**//IMPERIAL CHAMBERS AEGIS PROTOCOL ACTIVATED.**

**//MAXIMUM STRENGTH AUTHORIZED.**

“No... Please...” one of the thugs mewled.

**//ERROR.**

**//MERCY MODULE NOT FOUND.**

**//FAREWELL, MEATBAGS.**

They screamed.

Back outside, Kelto heard a commotion. The door opened and a titanic undead abomination stepped out, claws bloody.

Kelto ran.

Solfis dragged the first corpse behind himself, and grabbed a shovel off the wall. He delicately removed one of Marruk’s spiked traps from a flower bed and started digging, his skull emitting a sibilant, high-pitched warble of pleasure.

It felt good to be alive again.

Viv blew on her cup of hot klod and took a bite of roll. Solfis was quiet for now, and Marruk was yet to emerge from her lair. Only Arthur bounced excitedly from foot to foot, crimson eyes aimed north towards the town center.

“What’s with you?” she asked.

There was a yelp, a bang, and a pallid Kark woman politely opened the door, hair messy and eyes bloodshot to hell. Viv thought that she looked like a med student after a three-days bender.

“You got a few days of break stored up. Would you like to use them now? I think we’re safe.”

Marruk blinked. Her face scrunched in concentration as tired synapses half-assedly pushed electrons around. Eventually, the incredibly complex proposal was successfully deciphered.

“Sleep more?”

“Yes, go rest you big lug. I’ll be fine.”

“Sleep.”

The woman about-faced with the precision of an officer at parade and promptly left. The door closed. A body impacted a hard mattress. Viv heard soft snores.

“I think she was tired.”

**//A good ruler keeps her servants healthy.**

**//A good balance must be struck between contribution to the empire and attention to the self.**

**//Or so it was written.**

“I think I’ll just nap for a while.”

Someone knocked lightly on the door.

“Or not.”

Viv checked through the window to see a peasant boy in simple clothes. He held an envelope in his grubby hands.

“Yes?” she demanded, opening the door.

The boy jumped back and held the envelope before him like a talisman.

“It’s just.. I’m just... Beg your pardon... I’m, huh...”

“You have a message for me?”

“Yes.”

“From whom?”

“Lady Varska. Shetoldmetogetiittoyouinpersonposthaste.”

“You did. Well done.”

Viv still used her perception to observe the package because she was careful, not paranoid. She had real enemies, big difference.

[envelope]

Thanks.

Viv grabbed two iron talents and tipped the boy, who looked on with wonder in his grimy face.

“Thanks a bunch, your ladyship.”

“That is fine. Off you go now, shoo shoo.”

Feeling positively princessly, Viv went back in and opened the missive, sipping her cup in her comfortable robe while Arthur added her warmth to her lap.

“I am one world domination plan short of the Bond villain. Look at that. Hmm.”

Arthur peered curiously at the words. Viv could swear that her beautiful red eyes followed the symbols, trying to discern the meaning in the words. Maybe the dragonling had started to understand human writing? Viv had started reading slowly as a way to stimulate the adorable little terror, but... Oh well.

“And what does Varska say?” Viv wondered aloud, “Let’s read.

Dear Lady Bob.

It would be my pleasure if you could be so inclined as to join me for the Spring Celebration preparations. As your friend and mentor, I wish to guide you through the step of this ancient and respected tradition, and I—”

At this stage the forcibly elegant calligraphy of Varska degenerated into a smudged mess.

“Ah screw all this. Please come, I am growing mad over here. I am sorry for everything. I will explain the spring festival though. I will understand if you do not come, but please come.

-Varska”

Viv placed the expensive paper on the table.

“It appears that we are being summoned. What do you think, Solfis?”

**//Although this will slow down your training, I approve.**

**//It is important for sovereigns to appear at public functions.**

**//Mage Varska will also explain the proper protocol to you.**

**//Additionally, I estimate that she will be 97% useless in the next three days from a training perspective.**

**//Spending time together is a smart use of your resources.**

“Alright... then I’m going. Are you coming too?”

“Squee.”

Viv cleaned herself and dressed in a comfortable outfit. She had no doubt that Varska would find a myriad of things to say if she even attempted to pick up proper attire without knowing about the tradition. Might as well go in something that she could easily change out of, and allow the little fusspot to play dress up.

Viv walked out, taking care to leave a message to Marruk, the pay for the past weeks, and locking behind her properly. Her bodyguard was insistent that Viv did not step out of the path in the small garden, and Viv thought she was worried about something. An intrusion, perhaps? In any case, better be careful.

The streets of Kazar were filled with smiling groups of men and women preparing for the celebration, which Viv realized was going to start that very night.

“Farran did tell me. It must have passed my mind, what with the flesh eating cannibalistic monster.”

Many of the villagers greeted her politely, and she nodded so many times she thought her head might detach. People were cooking, cleaning, attaching little pennants and bouquets of wildflowers to doorways and sills. Little girls attached flowers to their hair while boys were heading to a field outside where competitions were already going at it. It was as if the monster attack had never occurred. It came to show the resilience of the people of Nyil, Viv thought. Come hell or high water, they would still live and endure, because the monster attacks would never stop. They might as well enjoy it while they could.

Only when Viv reached the piazza did the atmosphere change a bit. There were more guards than usual and people avoided the place, and still they were smiling and talking about, from what Viv could hear, girls.

“I’m going to ask Litara to dance with me.”

“Good luck to you, friend. As for me, the old woman and I have planned to spend the night with another couple.”

Scandalous.

Viv finally arrived in front of the tower with absolutely no one stopping her. The damage to the pavement was only partially repaired, but it had been done overnight which made Kazaran civil engineers on par with modern earth ones, probably. The massive hole in the tower’s wall was completely closed by slightly darker bricks though. Viv knocked on the door.

And waited.

“Think she forgot that no one was here to open the door?” Viv asked.

“Squeeeeeee...”

But no, the door rotated inward to reveal a very flustered mage.

“Sorry, I stood up too fast and spilled jam on my shirt. Come in, come in.”

Viv was very much amused. Arthur jumped off her arms (the creature was getting heavier by the day) and scurried off the stairs with her tail high, off to sniff the greenhouse plants. For some reason, the riot of colors was a great source of entertainment.

Viv followed Varska up the stairs. The door to her housekeeper’s quarters was locked and sealed with the symbol of Neriad.

“The inquisitors found the ritual site in a cave in the forest yesterday. Most of the stuff here was mundane, except for a few dark texts and preserved meat that they purified on the spot. I’ll have everything cleared and burnt after the celebration,” Varska explained.

“Did they give you much pain?”

“Everyone was cold. Colder than usual, in any case. We are all feeling stupid that she lived under our nose for so long.”

“Shared bad moments have a tendency to do that. Don’t worry, in a few weeks, this will be replaced by another crisis and people will remember you for your contribution. We are the only two locals involved in killing the acolyte, anyway.”

Varska did not reply. She did tilt her head in consideration.

In reality, Viv knew that people would blame her for a long time simply because it was expedient to do so. Admitting that they were all powerless in keeping those hidden predators from their midst was an unpleasant prospect. Better to find a scapegoat than admit that the housekeeper had been a local, and they had seen nothing. Such was the nature of mankind, and one of the reasons why her dad was so jaded. He had shared this wisdom with her. She would not share it with Varska at a time when the mage’s sanctum had been defiled. The timing was off, and the crafty politician probably already knew it anyway.

“Enough of this topic, if you would. There will be a banquet tonight, and we are naturally invited to attend as the two local casters. We just have to show up and look official. I assume that you do not have a dress for the occasion?”

“I have plenty of dresses. At least three.”

“This one should be green to honor Sardanal, the god of growth and prosperity. And thieves.”

“No green dress for me.”

“Fortunately I anticipated this, and had one of my old dresses adjusted to... better fit your form.”

Varska’s eyes went to Viv’s chest. The outlander arched her back to make it a bit perkier.

Varska blushed.

“Ahem. In any case, please follow me.”

They went to Varska’s quarters, which Viv had never visited without some snogging taking place. Especially over there, by the couch. The bedroom was cut in two halves by a series of vertical panels that split the bed and wardrobe from the reading and makeup space. They sat in front of a tiny mirror, then the mage picked up a pot from the vanity table which contained a transparent liquid with a light shimmer.

“Cream for your skin. I, ah, noticed that the air in the mountain could be dry. Hale is fine, but you cannot have ruddy skin! You are not a peasant!”

Viv stopped, her face very close to Varska’s.

When she had been deployed in Afghanistan, her platoon had worked with an armored detachment to secure a city district. Tank crews were a weird bunch. On one hand, they displayed the most insane courage she had ever seen, as if anti-tank weapons did not exist. On the other hand they were massive weeps. One of the crews had taught her the term 'tsundere', someone with a polarized hot and cold temperament to their loved one, whom they saw as needing help.

So, Varska was a textbook tsundere.

Viv was going to have some fun with it. Her irritating little morsel had dared break her heart. She would have her vengeance.

"Would you mind applying it? I'm not sure how much I should use."

It was an exercise in self-control not to smirk triumphantly as Varska turned a delicate shade of tulip and applied the cream, lips flushed, modest chest thrumming with impassioned breaths.

'I'm going to make you stew in your own desire,' Viv thought unkindly.

Varska fled a little later to fetch the dress. When she returned, Viv started to strip sensually in front of her until she was chased behind the partition by a few outraged shrieks.

"Have some decency!" her victim bellowed.

Viv made sure to hang her clothes over the panel so Varska could see them, then sat down on the mage's bed and bounced a few times. Comfy.

"Hmmm."

"S-stop doing that! Get dressed!"

Viv obeyed and Varska changed as well. They both wore assorted green dresses with a small cleavage opening under a mandarin collar and long, airy sleeves. The fabric was snug and thick around the shoulders and waist before flowing into a skirt. It had an Asian feel that Viv found exotic, and it was also warm enough to ward off the slight chill that the Kazaran weather could have at night.

After that, they did each other's hair. Varska's touch was fast and professional, as if she had done this before. When Viv's turn came to do the same, she slowed down and smiled.

Varska squirmed on her chair.

Oh, yes, Viv had done that before. Letting Viv massage her scalp and comb her hair? The poor mage was a young fool, betraying her inexperience when it came to matters of seduction. For



someone who had spent so much time learning manipulation, she was woefully unprepared in the romance department. Perhaps Helock, her city of origin, took a dim view to it?

In any case, Varska was done for.

Viv took it slow and roguish, sneaking a caress here, a deep scalp massage there. Varska smelled of flowers, as usual. Viv had a good view of the poor mage rubbing her legs together when she could no longer resist. Viv most thoroughly combed, then braided the hair in a half-wild, half-traditional asymmetrical composition that her host considered with widened eyes.

“How very unique!”

“I know many such foreign techniques...”

“Enough! I—I told you that... Enough of this, we should, err, go to the banquet now!”

“So soon?”

“It’s already early afternoon. We can most definitely go now. And should. I’m hungry.”

And thirsty, Viv judged. She still accompanied the mage down and they left, following the main road to the edge of the forest, then to the same open ground where they had celebrated the arrival of the convoy. Arthur flew after them, but preferred to stick to the rooftops.

There, the same white tents and pavilions had been erected to welcome the revelers. Large platters of hearty food were spread on the long tables with breads and rolls garnished with nuts and fruits. Thin slices of cheese and cured meat provided fillings with egg-based sauces and small cakes overflowing from baskets. There were older villagers sitting around drinking a local watered beer while, in the distance, young men and women competed on the grass in games of strength and skill. The ambiance was already festive and the pair was led to the dais by an excited young guard. They plopped down at their assigned seats, on the edge, and looked on as young couples danced in circles. The music was provided by a few players using flutes and drums. Viv had to admit that they were pretty amazing.

The music reached them, an enticing jig that made Viv smile. She realized that her companion did not share her enthusiasm and realized that a few of the older folks were casting hostile glances at them. Or more specifically, at Varska.

“Hey,” she said.

“What?”

“Didn’t you say you were hungry? Here, have some meat,”

Viv placed food on Varska's platter. Most of the stuff was cold with roasts and cakes coming later, but it was still pretty good. Viv sneakily served a sweet fruit wine to her prey in tiny goblets that she often refilled.

"How about telling me about your trip?" Varska asked, eager for a distraction.

Viv started her grand tale. Varska gasped in shock at Koro's directness, laughed at Arthur's attempt to eat a creature fifty times her weight and wondered at the tribe's welcome of one who spoke the ancient tongue. Viv mentioned the obelisks, the enchantments on them, and how she thought they were perhaps suboptimal.

Varska then went on a lecture on basic mana shaping and that yes, the working was inefficient, but it was also extremely resilient which was the main concern here. She went on to explain different configurations including some that could be used to power up Solfis with ambient mana, but would take a lot of time and effort to set up. Time and effort that Solfis had so far preferred to spend on her.

All the while, Viv nodded and made sure the fetching maiden had enough liquid fire to whet her whistle. A non sequitur led to Varska explaining that the spring was celebrated in one form or another across the entire continent to mark the beginning of the year, and the return of warm days. Helock was closer to the sea and Varska spoke of fantastic views from the tower tops. It made her a bit melancholic.

During that time, dignitaries came and went including Farren and Tom Manitaradin the banker. They were warm and welcoming, and they all congratulated the pair on killing the acolyte with minimum loss of life. Marruk came to skulk around the bun piles. As the sun was setting, Varska leaned and rested her pretty head on Viv's shoulder. The curly strands fell on Viv's dress and the smell of flowers tickled her nose.

Varska suddenly moved back and glared with slightly unfocused eyes.

"You... you are tricking me. Using alcohol!"

"And how, pray tell, am I tricking you?" answered Viv who had also grown tipsy.

"You are trying to, err, seduce me! I already told you it's not good for you!"

"Is it working?"

Some measure of anguish filled the beautiful woman's brown eyes. She looked young and lost without the mantle of authority she always wore in public.

"Damn you. Yes. You have no right, I've told you that I needed to keep you away."

“Or people will assume that we’re together and I will be branded as a pariah as well?”

“Yesh.”

“Well, look around, that ship has sailed.”

Varska blinked and stared at the guards studiously avoiding her gaze, the closest villagers, now more numerous, suddenly very focused on their plate, and Farren two seats aside who coughed discreetly into his sleeve.

Viv leaned and whispered in the mage’s ear, eliciting the tiniest moan.

“You wanted to protect me and I find this very commendable, that whole sacrifice thing. But you forgot something very important.”

“What?” the other breathed.

“I decide if I value my social standing or us more. Not you. Me. I make that decision for myself. And I happen to fancy you quite a lot, and if anyone has complaints, I shall stand in trousers before Neriad’s temple so that they may line up and collectively kiss my ass. Now, little mage, do you want to feel alive with me?”

Varska turned and her eyes were a bit liquid. She opened and closed her mouth a few times before finally managing to gasp out words.

“Not the tower. I hate it there.”

“My place then, come.”

Viv dragged the mage through a knowing crowd and through deserted streets at a trot, only stopping once or twice for a deep kiss. They closed the distance to Viv’s door at a sprint.

Far behind, a mercenary watched the door close from a distance. He licked his lips in consideration, then froze when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

The man turned around. The last thing he saw was a massive fist before a titanic right hook sent him flying into a garbage pile.

Marruk massaged her knuckles, picked up her bun and munched it thoughtfully.

“Good eye,” she said.

“Squee.”

“Let’s find some more food.”

“Squee!”

Viv and Varska made love. Passionately at first, then with more patience and time spent exploring each other. Viv guided her partner with affection on the path to bliss. They teased and kissed and licked and caressed late into the night, far from the hum of the crowd but close enough for flutes and drums to provide an amusing background. They fell asleep in each other’s arms at dawn, happy and sated.

Golden light woke Viv up. The noon sun had warmed her bedroom to comfortable levels, and she could hear through the closed shutter the tweets of birds.

Varska lay asleep by her side. Her face was peaceful in a way that Viv had never seen before. Without the haughty mask of a court mage, she had an innocent look that radiated serenity. Even the brand on her cheek seemed less pronounced. It was more a scar and less a status of shame.

Varska had lifted up the heavy blanket to cover her nudity before she had fallen asleep. She had shifted during her slumber and now, only the modest intent remained. A dark nipple peeked from above embroidered cotton and the vale of her breasts could be seen, as well as the elegant curve of her back. Viv drank in the sight and passed a delicate finger along the smooth pale skin. It elicited a tiny moan.

Varska frowned and blinked herself awake.

Viv smiled.

“Oh,” the captured mage said.

“Oh!” she repeated. Viv waited, no longer masking her smugness. She almost expected complaints, or some affronted comment about how the canny, roguish witch had stolen her virtue. Instead, Varska searched the room with disbelief, finally returning her attention to Viv.

“Well, this is not how I expected my year to start.”

“Hmm hmm? Not too disappointed, I hope?”

Viv stretched in bed, sneakily letting the covers shift. Viv was comfortable with her body. She knew that she had won the genetic lottery. She had also worked hard at improving what nature had bestowed. She knew that it would make things interesting. And it did. Varska blushed and averted her eyes.

“S—stop that!”

“Why?”

Varska’s answer was covered by the abominable growl of a starving beast, a warcry as primitive as it was intimidating. It came from the mage’s stomach.

“No one to cook for you, uh?” Viv asked smugly.

“Quiet! I simply have not found the time to find a new housekeeper.”

“Don’t worry honey, you can eat my food and even wear my clothes.”

“I will certainly not wear those barbaric garments.”

“You could take ten minutes to dress up in your elaborate robe... or we could go out and eat now.”

“...”

“Rolls, nuts, fruits, meat jerky.”

“You have won. Do not be so insufferable about it.”

Viv lent her one of her super comfy inside dresses and underwear. They walked out of the bedroom into a council.

Both women froze. Marruk sat at the table with a grumpy face and pockets under her eyes. Irao was there as well, studiously using a nasty-looking dagger to carve a piece of wood. Solfis’ yellow orbs glinted from a corner.

“Squee.”

Arthur waddled to Viv and jumped on her with a flap of her wings.

“Hellooooo and a good morning to you too, sweetie!”

“Squee!”

“Sorry, greetings, oh mighty beast of Kazar.”

“Squee.”

“Who... What are you all doing here?” Varska demanded, mortified.

“We live here,” Marruk grumbles. Irao nods wisely.

“Are you... a Hadal strain?”

Iroa nodded again, then refocused his attention on the sculpture.

“Errr. By Neriad’s buttocks, how thick are the walls here?”

“Not enough!” Marruk bellowed in an expression of pure frustration, “this is my half week off. You two go back to your tower. I need to sleep! SLEEP!”

The Kark stood up, bottomed up her cup of klod and returned to her room in sulky silence.

“It does not matter that the walls are thin because I can hear through walls anyway, so that’s fine,” Iroa helpfully added. He then also left.

“Very tactful, you lot,” Viv reproached with a glare.

“Apparently the only person with a hint of politeness here is the golem,” Varska spat as she approached the table. Platters of cold rolls and what look like leftovers raided from the spring party covered its surface. There was a steaming pot of klod and Varska picked up two cups to fill them. Someone had fried eggs recently. They were still warm.

**//I turned off my hearing abilities to afford you some privacy.**

“Very kind of you, Solfis,” Viv said.

**//Besides, I can monitor your physical condition through your aura.**

“... excuse me?”

**//Orgasm causes a strong reaction, akin to a trauma.**

**//I had to calibrate to understand the difference.**

**//Every time you masturb—**

“Yayayaya I don’t want to know I don’t want to knoooooow.”

“We are going back to the tower,” Vraska declared firmly. She grabbed a few pieces of stuffed bread and walked imperiously back to the bedroom.

Viv took the time to feed and care for Arthur, and the three left soon after. The streets of the city were mostly empty, and the few people out had the constipated air of those in the throes of a massive hangover. There were even a couple disheveled folks doing the walk of shame without much care, which led Viv to believe that the Enorian conservatism had not pervaded Kazar despite the city being nominally part of the kingdom. They arrived in the tower and Arthur once more climbed to the greenhouse. Varska drew a bath, then swatted Viv with a towel when she tried to join her. They eventually reconvened in the eating room, with Arthur pleased to have two people pet her scales.

“It appears that you have outplayed me. Well done,” the mage finally admitted. “I was under the impression that you were... inexperienced in the ways of the court.”

“First, you assumed wrong, and second, seduction transcends cultural barriers, at least to an extent. I was raised to be savvy. I just... the transfer here, it did something to me. I feel more raw. It’s more difficult to control or hide my emotions or to put on a mask.”

“The soul wound?”

“Yeah. Probably. Sometimes, I wonder if people in my world get those as well but never find out.”

Viv’s mood turned sour. Sometimes, life had a way of grinding people until they broke. She had noticed that long before joining the army and learning about PTSD.

Varska patted her hand.

“There, have some tea.”

“Thanks. I’ll ask Gogen about a replacement housekeeper. She’s some sort of professional cleaner or something. She might know someone.”

“Thank you. Now, finish your tea and join me downstairs. There is something I would like to show you.”

Varska left first. Viv finished her cup and found the mage’s dress and knickers properly folded by the door to her room. Viv smiled and knocked.

One month later.

Spring was in full swing. Birds sang, flowers had bloomed to turn the grass into colorful carpets. Local insects that looked suspiciously like bumblebees buzzed around. The air was filled with cries of things trying to eat and fuck each other. It was all very distracting.

Viv closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The clearing she had used to test her blight spell was now a nice meadow dotted with plant arrangements that Varska had curated to make the place more zen. Or the Hellock equivalent, whatever. It was nice.

Viv breathed carefully and extended a hand. Gestures were important until you got a good feel for it. She felt her own mana push out and willed the color to remain trapped inside.

It was an extremely complex feeling of separation, akin to feeling in two places at the same time. It was also unnatural, in the sense that she had to go against those instincts that made her so good at manipulating black mana. It had taken her weeks of effort to get it right.

Colorless mana gathered in a ball in her hand. Contrary to its black equivalent, this one was tame. No, more than tame. It was not 'alive'.

Viv compared her experience to using software. Colors were the normal, basic functions. They were what the creator of the software had made available to the users. Thus, using colored mana felt natural to most casters, because they were manipulating the consciousness of Nyil in ways that it allowed.

Moving colorless mana was like delving into the programming of the software and changing its functions. Playing with the code, so to speak. With her experience of intellectual property rights Viv almost expected a sort of resistance from Nyil itself but it was not the case. Colorless mana just felt... neutral. Indifferent. It was not so much reluctance as inertia that made it difficult to yield.

Viv infused the energy in a pair of linked 'seek' and 'north' glyphs, and watched as the sphere flattened and gained an arrow pointing in front of her, to the deadlands.

"Yay it worked."

It was completely useless as things went for now, but, well. Progress. She checked her stats.



Current status:

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

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 19.1%

Her attunement had increased again, which was a consequence of her constant training. The more attuned she was, and the more complex and powerful spells she could cast. Varska had talked about strategic spells that could change the weather for weeks, alter the course of a river or raze a small city. Those were still far away though.

Her mana channels had also improved. Besides helping her cast faster, it also made overcasting less likely. She could exert herself for longer periods of time without falling. The better her channels were, and the easier she could exhaust and recharge her mana without burning out. It helped with her training since she could keep going for longer periods of time.

Sometimes, Draconic Surrogate Mother appeared as Draconic Surrogate Mommy when she summoned the interface, but it changed back to normal when she took a second look.

Both Finesse and Power had improved as a result of her favorite way of recharging mana: meditative trance. She would go through a series of complex and relaxing motions under Solfis' direction. He had taught her a sort of soft martial art designed for casters, as far as she could tell, and it had the advantage of providing a full body workout. Kind of like dancing.

Solfis and Varska agreed that most adults plateaued at the low twenties in stats that had a limited impact on their career. After fifty years, dedicated people could get to thirty or above across the board. That meant that someone like Gogen must really have started low to still be so simple. Possibly, she was a little bit daft.

Her Focus and Acuity had risen by two and willpower by one. That was the result of a strict daily training regimen that would have driven her crazy, were it not for how well-tailored it was to her abilities and mood. Even then, very few people could match that incredible speed. She could thank her two bossy trainers and her traveler's blessing for such stellar progress.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Apprentice 8

Hand to hand combat	Apprentice 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 8
Small blades	Beginner 7	Intimidation	Intermediate 2

None of her general skills had progressed. That was expected. For Nyil to offer a reward, one had to show dedication, and Viv simply had no time to work on anything but magic. All her efforts had gone towards her class skills.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 1	Mana manipulation	Intermediate 2
Mana sense	Intermediate 1	Danger sense	Apprentice 3
Mana absorption	Intermediate 2		

All her skills had reached the third tier, except for Danger Sense which lagged behind. She had only reached apprentice by attending an expedition in the deadlands to rid a specific area of burrowing undead centipedes. There was no way to train easily in Kazar.

Not because of a lack of techniques. Solfis was sure that he could have her improve.

It was because of Arthur.

First, the tiny dragon's intuition and senses were simply off the chart. She could feel a trap coming from miles away and warned Viv every time. Second, she attacked whoever tried anything. Spars were ok, somehow. Surprise attacks were not. The only thing they could do was to burrow traps in training areas for Viv to fall into. It was inefficient, but Viv refused to confine Arthur while she trained.

The last interesting thing was path progression.

Black Witch 1/5

She had reached that milestone after learning her fiftieth glyph or so. It did not feel that significant, and perhaps it was not, but she imagined that a proper witch would have some flexibility in her casting.

According to Varska and Solfis, the third step on the path was where a lot of people were stuck for a long time. It required an advanced mastery of one's chosen field to move on, and that was

also why most folks branched out once afterward. Varska was considered a promising genius for reaching the fourth step at such a young age.

Viv closed her eyes and refocused on the world outside. The compass she had created still hung in the air by her side. She felt a dim connection to it, one she could keep alive with minimal effort.

Viv willed the orb to disappear and stood up. It was time to go to a more practical part of the training.

Then Arthur landed by her side and rubbed her own forehead.

Arthur kept growing up and the amount of meat required to feed her meant regular hunts at the edge of the forest. She could now reach Viv's navel when sitting on her hind legs. Surprisingly, she was still light enough for Viv to carry easily. Her wings were huge too.

One notable difference was that her horns were growing. Dragons had one set of horns curving back from above their head to protect their neck, but they also had horns above their eyes that only came out later. As to why, Viv wasn't sure. For now, only two black spines poked out

They were apparently very itchy.

"There, there."

Viv massaged the scaly skin around the nubs, gently at first, then deeper as Arthur relaxed.

"Squee," Arthur signaled, bringing Viv's ministrations to an end.

"Alright then."

Varska had some knowledge on dragons from her youth in Helock. There was, in fact, extensive documentation on the massive creatures. Unfortunately, most of them were historical recountings of conflicts and strategy books. There was not a single book about dragon-rearing in the entire Param continent. Of this, the smooth mage was sure.

"Guess it's up to me, then," Viv muttered to herself. But writing would come later. Now, it was time to empty her channels by casting powerful spells. Solfis addressed her from the edge of the clearing.

**//The target is set up, Your Grace.**

Viv looked down towards Kazar to see a standing target made of a stone held up by several logs. Marruk stood nearby, hands on her waist and wheezing quite loudly. Viv whistled, and the stout Kark gave a sign and moved away.

Viv was almost entirely confident in her aim, but it still irked her to shoot a spell with friendly people downrange. That was just wrong.

Viv poured power into a sphere, then drew the runes for projection, distance, and power on it, then she infused it with the meaning of destruction.

The sphere was perfectly silent as it formed, like most of Viv's spells. Sweat grew on her brow as her mind stretched to the limit. The task was as complicated as juggling several equations at the same time. It would have been impossible for her only three months ago but now it was just a strenuous exercise.

Black mana was as eager and willing as ever. Getting better at manipulating did not change it, or make it grow. It changed her. It made her understand and coax the flow better. Nyil, the world, offered the power, Nous, god of magic, offered the path to use it through the interface. It was up to Viv to make use of the opportunity.

"Arty."

The sphere veered like a comet, arching beautifully throughout the air on a tail of pure darkness.

And Viv finally saw a kid running up the path behind it.

Viv's focus wavered. The spell lost cohesion in that very moment. Viv gritted her teeth and, through a supreme effort of will, breathed back life in frayed connections. The baleful projectile went through the target without stopping and crashed heavily in the grass beyond, taking a chunk of wood on the way. The running boy stopped dead in his tracks although the spell never even came close to him. Marruk had moved towards him just in case, but in truth there had been no real danger.

Not that Viv was going to admit it.

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" she bellowed. Everyone knew that she used this place to train. She had no official right to do so but she was on public land, and no one in their right mind could watch someone shear off a rock with the power of their mind and bitch about it to their face. Even the guards gave her a wide berth. So what was the little twerp doing here?

To her surprise, not only did the boy not run away, he actually tried to reach her. Marruk gently stopped him with a hand. He started babbling. Viv closed the distance.

As she looked on more, she could tell that the boy was young, probably around ten or something. She was not very good with kids' age. He wore the typical undyed loose pants and shirt combo of the Kazaran children. His sleeve was torn off and he was bleeding a little bit. He was also completely out of breath.

“Yes? What’s going on?” Viv asked.

The boy stepped back, dark eyes bloodshot and red from crying. He frantically recovered a dusty pouch from his one pocket and shook the thing in front of Viv’s nose.

“You are for hire, right? The temple hired you and so did the Baranese, right? That’s what my ma said.”

“Hm. Yes?”

“I want to hire you! I’m serious! I got…”

He opened the grubby pouch and spilled the contents in the palm of his hand. It was a meager prize.

“... six iron bits, a real nice pink stone and half of a real core, I swear!”

It was a piece of quartz. Viv was sure.

“And what task did you have in mind?”

“My friend and his sis. They were with me. We got ambushed by beastlings!”

He spat on the side of the road.

“We got split up. I think they could still be alive. Please, help me find them. Please!”

“The guards won’t help?” Viv asked, surprised.

The boy tried to spit again but he had run out of saliva and just sort of did a ‘pblblb’ sound.

“Those good-for-nothings won’t help unless it’s a real threat to Kazar. Please... it’s already been ten minutes.”

Viv could not find a reason not to try.

She could not let a kid die.

She knew that helping now meant that she would be helping again but, come on. A kid.

“Alright. Lead the way, quickly.”

Viv expected Marruk to complain but the tall Kark woman was already running to get Solfis. It was, apparently, time to hunt.

But Viv knew why the guards would not have helped.

Beastlings did not take prisoners.

The trio rushed along the edge of the forest at a good trot. It was obvious that the kid was running on fumes, but he did not slow down and Viv would not stop him either. They turned into the forest seemingly at random, until Viv noticed that someone had bound a small cloth around a carved trunk. A path that was a little more than a beast strail snaked deep into the forest and they followed it with all haste.

Even during the day, there was something peculiar about the Deadshield Woods. Sounds were dampened and, quickly, Viv thought that she was no longer quite sure where she had come from. The kid did not share her hesitation as he sprinted down and down, his breath raspy and desperate. He only slowed down near a large boulder topped by a tall dead tree.

“Right. Right. Almost there,” he half-choked.

They moved more slowly then, with Marruk taking point. It only took a few minutes for the tall Kark to stop and hold a fist.

“Yes?” Viv whispered.

“A girl. She’s dead.”

The boy took a deep, shuddering breath and let out a single sob. He was trying very hard to keep the tears in.

“Miri is dead but maybe Sar isn’t?”

“Let’s keep going,” Viv said, “we’ll recover the body on our way back.”

A form crashed through the canopy of the nearest tree. Arthur shook her head to clear the brambles and pointed forward and to the side.

“Squee.”

“Let’s go then,” Viv replied.

They ran and Viv tried her best not to look at the tiny form sprawled on the ground, with red blood staining her grey dress. The kid had been brained with a stone.

The forest grew thicker by the moment. Where at the edge, it could have passed for a normal earth forest to anyone without a degree in biology, the trees grew taller and stranger as they ran on. Some of them bore purple or grey leaves. Some bloomed with mesmerizing flowers that shone flamboyantly in the dim light. Viv had to run around ferns and thickets, between moss-covered trunks. They heard screams in the distance.

Viv picked up the boy as he was about to fall and they sprinted. She could only see Arthur’s tail swishing high. The rest of the dragonling was buried in greenery.

Soon, the light grew again and they burst into a clearing.

Viv took in her surroundings. The fall of a giant tree had made a hole in the canopy by taking its smaller siblings with it, and the resulting space was a mess of young sprouts, rotting trunks and low ferns. There was one thing that stood out, so to speak.

It was a monster.

In the instant needed to slow down, Viv noticed four heavy legs, not unlike those of an elephant, supporting a cylindrical body topped with a conic maw filled with serrated, inward teeth. A multitude of limbs emerged from the main body like so many tentacles.

The supporting limbs were brown-grey, but the color of the flesh turned to green the higher one went until the creature looked like an overgrown venus flytrap and pitcher plant slapped together by Frankenstein’s demented cousin. It used one of its tendrils to grab a squealing beastling and Viv noticed that the limb ended in a thick sucker with the same inward-facing talons.

The limb retracted and deposited the smaller monster in the larger’s maw. It closed down with a crunch.

“There! Sar’s there!” the boy wheezed from over Viv’s shoulder. He was pointing at a depression formed by a dip in the land and protected by remnants of the collapsed trunk to form a sort of cavern.

And indeed, Viv saw a tiny pink arm wield a branch to slam a wounded beastling.

“Ok, new plan. We get the boy and fuck off. Marruk, block the thing while I cover you.”

Viv dropped the child she was still holding and followed Marruk. The Kark advanced, leaving her mace in its sheath and taking out a shortsword with a broad blade instead. The monster turned

a few tentacles towards them, but the bulk of them were searching the cave. Many of the limbs poked and prodded around. One of them found a small beastling's leg and grabbed it. The horned creature shrieked and a flurry of other limbs attached themselves to it, tearing off great bands of flesh.

"I think it's blind," Viv whispered in Marruk's ear. The Kark nodded and advanced. Viv moved to the side and tried to get to the kid, but her attempt was short-lived. The monster somehow felt her move and patted around with its many limbs.

Meanwhile, it was ponderously crossing the clearing towards the small cave.

Ok, Viv thought, Ok, change of plan.

A fleshy liana finally touched and latched on Marruk's shield. The Kark calmly pulled it back and swiped the thing off with her blade. Red blood spurted from the wound and the creature let out a strange, whistling sound.

"Kid, you'd better come to us quick!" she yelled instead.

That did it, for the monster at least. Several tendrils whipped out her way as she ducked behind Marruk's form. The limbs were fast.

"Net."

A mass of criss-crossing 'purge' spells whipped out around Viv and met the charging limbs. The shadowy wires won, but the spell failed after too many were spent.

"Hurry up!"

Viv cast one, large purge at the creature's torso but it barely penetrated. There was too much mana in the thing. She would need a lot of power to reach the innards, and the time to set it up. Time that they didn't have.

Then her 'client' started to run across the clearing to fetch his friend. Marruk took a step forward and swung and swiped, meeting the questing tendrils with a fury that Viv had never seen in the stoic woman. The shield crashed down into another limb, cracking it. Viv helped by whipping overcharged purge spells around the Kark to cover her flanks. Several times, a tendril found Marruk's leather armor and started to pull, but the Kark planted her feet on the ground and stood upright long enough for Viv to sever the attacking appendage. They started to fall back under the onslaught.

Viv reached a state of focus that she had already experienced on earth, but only during firefights. It was not that the world slowed down, but more like any distraction or parasitic thought disappeared. The ground was soon littered with discarded limbs. The monster still tried



to slap them around with half-mutilated ones, even without the teeth at the end, but Marruk was like a rock against the tide. The thing beat uselessly against her shield. It was always where it was needed, angled here and there with an economy of motion born from expertise. At the same time, Marruk's other arm lashed out like a viper with quick and devastating sweeps.

But they were in trouble.

The creature was turning and moving towards them at the same time. A fresh contingent of tentacles joined the fray while the reduced distance meant that farther up ones were now in range. Viv diverted her attention for one instant to see the two boys stumbling towards them. The rescued one was bleeding profusely from his flank. He was pale and sweaty, and her employer was shorter and younger. It was going to be a close call.

Or not.

"Give me three seconds," Viv bellowed. Marruk redoubled her effort but her leg got caught as Viv was pooling colorless mana in her hand.

A white flash blurred and Arthur bit the thing off. The limber dragonette jumped back instantly.

Viv was done.

She gathered air, shield, and still runes and pushed them together. A transparent half-circle formed over their heads. It was quite large.

"Sound shield."

One of Varska's staple spells. It blocked all sounds by preventing the air from moving it across.

The tendrils went through without problem, and yet there was something different about the monster. It stopped its slow trudge through the undergrowth and showed some signs of agitation.

"Back, back," Viv ordered and Marruk ran to her. They plodded through the ferns to the pair of struggling kids and Viv pushed them down. She removed a blood-soaked hand from the older kid's wound and winced at the sight. The shirt was gone, as was a lot of skin and tissue. He had been flayed by the tendril.

He was dying quickly.

Viv grabbed for one of her side pockets and took out a thick glass vial with a greenish liquid inside. She removed the stopper with her teeth and shoved the bottleneck between the wounded boy's blue lips. The kid swallowed, more by surprise than anything else, then took a deep, shaky breath.

The wound sealed before their very eyes. Concentrated life mana regrew skin and muscle at visible speed. Both little twerps looked on in wonder.

“Mending potion...” the smaller kid said.

Viv returned her attention to the monster. It was slowly trampling its way to them.

“Can probably smell us.”

They were now farther into the clearing, with the monster blocking the way out. They had their backs against the rotting trunk.

“We can probably scale our way over the trunk or that rock on the side,” Marruk said. She was breathing deeply but appeared unharmed.

Viv checked and thought that it might be doable.

But also maybe risky.

“I got a better idea. Give me a sec.”

The monster was still plodding hesitantly around. Viv noted in passing that it grabbed the cut tentacles whenever it could find them, and shoved them down its maw. It was self-recycling or something.

Marruk could most likely climb the difficult terrain. It was pretty much a safe bet.

But Viv was absolutely certain that she could kill the thing. It was clearly an ambush predator, and its ambush had failed.

A mage was its most powerful when given time to act, and she had bought them twenty seconds or so before the lumbering form would even get close to her. It was five more than she needed. A sphere of pure black rotated above her right shoulder, glyphs forming around it. Viv altered the spell a little bit by making the range shorter and the projectile larger. That was difficult but she managed. Adrenaline gave her wings.

The spell took a third of her reserves. The mana sang through her mind and conduit in its eagerness to be used, leaving her giddy. As soon as she was ready, Viv kneeled and moved to the side to search for the perfect angle.

“Arty.”

Casting powerful spells was something that she would never get fed up with. It was so... intuitive. Elegant. Her creation drove through two trunk-like legs in an instant, right at the joint. In silence.

It left behind a gaping wound vomiting lymph and blood.

Viv winced at the trilling whistle the creature emitted as it slowly toppled to the side like a falling tree. Its main body crashed against the cavern with a loud thump. Shards of wood and earth went up in the air and a musty smell soon filled Viv's nose. The monster whistled piteously. It was bleeding out.

Marruk and the kids stared wide-eyed at the fallen beast. Viv searched for Arthur and found her sitting on her butt, tailed curved around her, both hands grabbing a tendril. She was eating it like an otter eats a fish.

"We should go before the smell attracts other stuff," Viv said. The others didn't have to be asked twice. They moved around the fallen giant towards the legs. Viv considered finishing it off with a blight spell but decided against it. She was almost dry, and there could be other things around. They left the clearing in a hurry.

Viv only stopped on the way back to recover the body of the little girl. Both kids were subdued, with the older one crying in silence. Viv didn't think that she would ever grow used to dead children. There was something inherently wrong about it.

They wrapped her head with her brother's shirt to mask the wound. The return trip was bitter.

As soon as they were out, Viv turned to her 'employer'.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Arlom, mam."

"I would like my payment now."

Viv emptied the purse in her hand and pocketed the iron bits and the two stones.

"Deal done."

"I know how much a mending potion costs, miss witch. I know that you helped us for nuthin."

"Well, yeah maybe. But keep it to yourself. I don't want everyone to know that I have a soft heart."

"I won't tell."

They split up.

Viv said nothing as they walked back to the house.

**//A wise ruler sometimes shows acts of kindness, Your Grace.**

**//It has been shown to improve the people's morale.**

**//Well done.**

"Well, we saved one out of two."

"It was a good thing," Marruk said. "Humans here give up too easily. In the steppes, we lose kids as well, but we always look for two days before stopping. It gives us all hope. It makes us believe that someone will try to come. They might be too late to save us, but they will come. They will care."

"Or children could stay out of the forest so we don't have to pick up bodies," Viv spat.

**//Children will travel and play.**

**//Especially where they are forbidden to go.**

**//The forest hides many treasures, and the survivors will carry the lesson they learn to the next generation.**

**//I was also informed that starvation is a powerful motivator.**

"They're not starving."

"But they are hungry," Marruk said.

There was nothing to add. Viv had done what she could and that was it. She would not shed crocodile tears for a person she did not know, but she still felt some measure of empathy for her and the family she had left behind. They arrived soon after. Viv unlocked her door and frowned.

"Hey, is there something buried here? I could have sworn that this flower bed was lower," she said.

"It's probably nothing. I was digging around there recently," Marruk said hurriedly.

"Were you?"

"Yes. Haha. This very morning."

"Well, alright then."

Viv's house, half an hour before.

Kelto the mercenary grabbed the cork between two yellow teeth and tore it away. Ethanol vapor made his eyes burn.

He was done.

He was fucking done.

Two months was all it had taken. The witch had accepted the contracts he had delayed in order to push the prices up. His failed attempt to bring her to heel had failed spectacularly, and his men had deserted one by one. The death of the last loyalists had been the nail in the coffin. Now, only he remained, with his cloak turned ratty and his purse hollow. He scratched his cheek and the stubble here creaked under the friction.

That bitch was going to pay.

He would be gone by dawn to try his luck through the forest. Sometimes, lone travelers successfully passed through by dodging the most dangerous creatures. He was not staying a minute longer in this shithole.

But before that, he was going to burn down her turf, because fuck her.

Kelto plunged a grimy piece of hanky down the bottle and waited for the cloth to absorb the alcohol. He snapped his fingers together and a small flame appeared. He made to light the improvised incendiary device.

And failed.

Someone had grabbed his hand. Kelto's bloodshot eyes traveled along a black armor, up to a pallid face with slitted eyes. A bald head.

"I... I... I..."

"Hellow," the half-man calmly stated, "this is my house."

"Mo — monster!"

The inhuman being nodded wisely, in a 'I see how it is' fashion. There was a flash of something, and Kelto was now staring at his headless body from a strange angle.

Things followed their normal course. The two boys, Sar and Arlom, made their way back to the lower district where poorer people lived. There were a lot of tears in the tightly-knit community, but finally the kids were asked what had happened, especially Sar who had a great expanse of pale skin on his belly. Arlom said that he was supposed to stay quiet but Sar had made no such promise and explained everything in great detail, including how the witch had charged in to save him, then slain the beast with a single, mighty spell.

The villagers were incredulous at first, but a group of armed men and women led by Arlom found the cadaver of the monster already being nibbled on by a few birds. They alerted the city's scouts who, in turn, secured and covered the site while the village worked tirelessly to turn the remains into usable goods. Monster meat was both delicious and nourishing, and there were even rumors that it helped expecting women to give birth to mages. Certainly, the city would not let go of such a boon.

Columns of people transferred stacks of meat, skin, and bone for soup stock to the city's warehouse long into the night. Everyone who pitched in was given something to bring home, with several months of supply granted to the bereaved family. It was late when a pair of burly scouts knocked on Viv's door and dropped several baskets of meaty goodies before saluting her and leaving in silence.

"You know," Viv said later as everyone chewed on skewers around their communal table, "we haven't heard about that group of annoying mercenaries who came to provoke us. They sort of disappeared."

The rest of the group kept masticating pensively.

"I was expecting them to try something," she insisted.

"Maybe your reaction caught them on the wrong foot?" Marruk suggested.

"Yeah, perhaps you are right. Still..."

"Squee."

**//You may underestimate our ability to scare off your foes, Your Grace.**

**//Not only are you a powerful witch, but you also have many friends.**

**//To provoke you is to provoke your network of allies.**

**//They must have figured it out.**

“Maybe. I think Farren mentioned that the entire group had stopped taking jobs. They just don’t hang around as they used to.”

“Mercenary work is dangerous work,” Irao said.

Everyone turned to him, since he had pretty much just used his entire word quota for the month.

The Hadal human shrugged.

“They could have run afoul of a monster during one of their tasks. It is a common end for those who follow that path.”

“Hmm. You may be right. Nevermind. I’ll just forget about them then.”

“Yes, let’s just forget about those. Haha. They probably won’t turn up again,” Marruk assured.

Viv thought that maybe there was something fishy going on, but her plate was full with training and the coming expedition and she could not be arsed to look for disappearing rivals.

“Alright, fine. Please excuse me,” she said, and stood up to attend to a natural need.

Marruk leaned towards Irao.

“Kelto?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Did you burn the body?”

“No need, what I kill stays dead.”

“Alright.”

“Squee.”

The three who could still eat split the remaining green, slightly crunchy skewers and focused very hard on looking inconspicuous.

One week later.

“I cannot come with you.”

Varska poured tea from her favorite teacup, expression grave. While Viv would have preferred it if she had joined but her refusal was expected. In fact, Viv had not even asked.

“I know,” she told the mage, “I expect that you have duties.”

“Indeed. I promised our dear mayor that I would remain on the ready three seasons out of four, winter being usually a period of low activity for monsters here. I have to respect my promises, and I cannot justify this... fool’s errand you will be pursuing.”

The two women picked up their cups and sipped in silence. Varska’s new housekeeper, one of Gogen the Cleaner’s cousins, passed her head through the door.

“You will be needing anything else, ladies?”

“Not until dinner, thank you,” Varska replied with just a little bit of haughtiness. It always amused Viv how the mage bristled at the mere mention that she would need any sort of assistance with tea.

“You do not think that we will succeed?” Viv asked after savoring the infusion’s delicate flavor.

“You may. You may not. But you would not find a self-respecting mage of Helock taking part in such a risky expedition. Only one caster? And not even an earth specialist? Please. Farren is most daring. Most daring!”

“It’s not like there is an overabundance of us around,” Viv remarked.

“Irrelevant. While I approve of initiative and ambition, I cannot help but note that he is overstepping his role. Farren was tasked with making sure that Kazar was a well-functioning temple base to facilitate traffic to and from the deadland outposts, not to revive the entire region. Bah, it matters not. You already agreed.”

Viv shrugged sheepishly.

“I kind of need a functional soul, you know?”



“Ah, yes, my apologies. You are so... normal. According to outlander standards — ”

“Hey!”

“ — That I often forget about the wound. Do you feel any different?”

Viv had considered the question extensively. She watched Varska refill her cup while she replied.

“My emotions are more raw. I find it more difficult to stay in control and some social games try my patience while, before, I would have been navigating them without issue. I don't know how much of it is the wound and how much is me simply changing. The main symptom is that I simply cannot pray to any of the local gods.”

“A very localized but very deep wound then. In any case, that specific one will not kill you while the expedition could. So...”

Varska blushed a bit and averted her eyes. Viv found the bashfulness rather adorable.

“I prepared something for you. Better than your current protection.”

Viv still used the leather armor she had found in Harrak whenever going into battle. It was nice and functional. More importantly, it did not get in the way.

“Here,” Varska said.

She stood up from the tower's reception table and opened a nearby chest. Viv watched as she was handed an off-white cloth of good size. Even folded, it was rather cumbersome.

Varska let go.

Heavy too.

“Go on, try it,” the mage urged.

It was a robe. A mage robe with a thick fabric in the slightly eastern style of Varska's other garments. The shoulders were padded and horizontal, with sleeves allowing for freedom of movement. It also had a mandarin collar and an opening on the side rather than the front. The robe went down into a skirt and trousers combo. It was off white and undyed like most clothes here, but the make was exquisite and, more importantly, there were protective runes inscribed on regular intervals.

Viv did not need to focus to realize how magical the thing was. Power practically radiated from it. Interestingly, she recognized black and colorless strands.

“It repairs itself and resists damage. Since you have that strange skinsuit of yours, temperature control is barely a concern. Your defense against magical attacks is also decent for someone so early on her path, so I thought it best to provide physical protection. And you will finally look like a proper caster instead of some cursed bloodline’s last scion.”

“Wow. Darling. I don’t know what to say.”

Varska opened a fan and raised exactly one imperious brow.

“Thank you would be a good start, and I will also accept outrageous praises.”

“Oh, great Helockian one. This garment is both incredibly stylish and remarkably powerful. I can tell that it was custom-made locally, which speaks of foresight, affection, and attention to detail. I can tell that someone weaved it according to your specifications and you made the runes yourself using dye that, I surmise, you extracted from your own flowers. It is both thoughtful, practical and elegant which are qualities I associate with you. I would also add that it is my finest possession and that no one had done something that thoughtful for me that I can remember, in this world or the previous one.”

Varska closed the fan with a snap.

“Not bad.”

“I try. Seriously though, I will cherish it. Thank you very much.”

“You can thank me by coming back alive. Is your black core charged? Is Solfis?”

“The black core is charged and Solfis is close to fifty percent capacity. I can go over my preparations with you later, since you are such a worrywart.”

“Have you already been on expeditions that would last several weeks?” the mage challenged.

“Yes. Yes, I have.”

Varska just huffed.

The time had come for Farren's attempt to find the lost iron mines of Min Goles. Success would bring Viv one step closer to healing her soul, and possibly implore a deity for a way home.

As she packed her things, the outlander realized that returning home was becoming a more abstract and distant goal. Nyil had become her new reality. It was pretty good despite the lack of internet and ice cream. She had met a lot of people who mattered to her, and Arthur was dependent on her presence for, well, something. The memory of her loved ones back home on earth was growing more distant. She remembered them more clearly now that her mind was helped by a healthy serving of magic, but the emotions associated with them had lost their edge. She had been gone for three months already. If they had found her body, they were probably getting over the grief by now.

It was a bit upsetting.

Nevertheless, she did not have to choose now whether to return or to stay. The priority was surviving high attunement and getting her soul fixed.

Viv fastened her back pack and brought it outside. She and Marruk made a first trip to the main square of Kazar and its temple where the convoy awaited.

The expedition was planned to take up to a month, which here lasted for twenty-eight days on average. The Param calendar was a mess anyway. They would try for a while and come back later if necessary. Or plain give up. She was not clear on that. It did not help that Lorn, the head of the Temple Guard, took a dim look on the expedition.

"A waste of fighting forces is all it is. We're here to slay undead, not do business," he had told his branch master when he thought Viv was not paying attention. Though, even a security expert could see the appeal of a new supply of iron, especially one discovered by its church.

As a project that was supposed to last a while, the expedition was pretty large. They had twenty guards including some of the most elite ones like Koro the ballsack-loving southerner, half again that many people as camp followers, and about ten horses. Viv had no idea if the guards could use them in combat. Horses were really expensive.

This also meant three carriages packed to the brim. Two would contain their baggage while the third one was the same armored chariot they had ridden to assault the beastling horde.

It took only twenty minutes for everyone to be ready, a credit to their organization. Then, they were on the way. Marruk and Viv sat inside the armored carriage as the caster was always supposed to be the most protected person. Viv prepared for another gruelling training session, but she was surprised when Marruk addressed her instead. There were only the two of them at the back of the cart. Farren had gone to walk with the helpers.

"I have questions. About your world without magic."

Viv looked into the dark eyes of her bodyguard's large, honest face. It was perhaps the first time that the stout woman had asked her something that was not directly related to their survival.

"Do tell."

"There are no monsters."

"No."

"But there are humans."

"Yes."

"Are there Kark?"

"Hmm, no, as far as I know we never had anything other than flavors of humans."

Better not tell her that one of the most probable causes of the extinction of Neanderthals was that the Sapiens happened to them.

"So, do you have steppes? Steppe people?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact we do!"

"Are they good at war? Can they defend themselves?"

"Oooh boy. Let me tell you about a man called Temujin."

Viv went on a recounting of what she remembered of Genghis Khan. It was not much since she had never been a history nerd, but it was enough to take an hour. The army had encouraged the study of tactics and her memory was crystal clear. She focused on the Great Khan's military prowesses on one hand, and his ruthlessness on the other. Marruk let her speak with no interruption for a long time. In the end, she was most intrigued by his ability to adopt new techniques.

"Can you explain siege warfare to me?"

"Well, you are outside and the foe is inside and behind walls..."

Viv explained earthworks, siege machines, rams and so on. Marruk noted that the absence of powerful magicians gave war a more regulated, technical dimension. She was the most curious about doctrines rather than the physics behind a trebuchet. After a few minutes spent on

intelligence gathering, Viv used the lull in conversation to finally ask a question that had been on her mind since the morose Kark had finally started to unclam.

“So, can I ask why you are so interested?”

Marruk did not meet her eyes. She was staring over the reinforced wood of the carriage to the north east, the deadlands, and the steppes far beyond the mountainous passages.

“My people are dying. Slowly, but they are dying. Every year the Pure League destroys more land with their crops. Every year, more of their fields turn to dust and so they keep pushing. There are so few left of my tribe that we might as well be a clan now.”

“Is that why you left?”

Marruk’s tone turned surprisingly bitter. There was a lot of resentment buried deep beneath her stoic exterior, and it was not directed just at humans.

“I left because I was expected to do more of the same. The same shit we have been doing for centuries. I was expected to marry a chief and maybe have children who could become shamans like my mother, so a new generation of my family could fall to the Pure League’s assassins in the dead of night. I tried to talk to them. Push them. I even thought I was getting through to a chief’s son.”

“What happened?”

“He wanted me as a bride to affirm his claim. He only entertained my ‘delusions’ because he believed that it was a youthful excess. That I would become wiser after my first child was born. He said so himself.”

Ah. Oops.

“But the thing is, I did not know.”

She glanced up at Viv, this time, her gaze measuring.

“I did not know what we could do better. We have no iron, no magic academy to turn shamans into war mages. We are already fighting at our best with the tools we have and we are still losing. So I thought, maybe our mind must be changed? Maybe it’s not the arm that has failed us, but the head. I think I was right.”

“I see. You are looking for a strategy. Something like guerilla warfare?” Viv asked.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a technique through which an inferior force can inflict disproportionate damage through the use of ambushes, mobility, hit and run tactics, raids and so on.”

Marruk’s large face was suddenly quite close.

“I’m interested.”

It took an uneventful three days to reach the mountain tribe stronghold, then another two for them to ride farther and reach the limits of civilized lands. There were many mountain tribes dotting the escarpment of the Harrakan mountain ranges, but they concentrated around fertile patches of land where a population could be sustained. A traveler could spend a week walking without encountering anyone. Anyone alive in any case. The expedition was never attacked. Most monsters knew better than to engage so many foes, though that was merely a general rule.

As they approached their destination, the terraced fields grew few and far between, until they disappeared completely after the last settlement. Grey and brown replaced man-grown vegetation until the last vestiges of nature were shrubs and hardy growths that only goats could feed on, or whatever the local equivalent was. The guides they were offered were a pair of ‘walkers’ who knew their stuff, and it was not long until they stopped at the edge of a small cavern entrance. They made sure that the coast was clear and moved in.

They found a man-made warren of small rooms with some dry food and water in storage. There were some basic protection runes in place. The knights and followers unpacked their belongings as this was to be a base camp, with the civilians settling down more permanently. Farren and Lorn gathered the people who would go on into the wild around a small map.

“This is where the walkers think we could find something,” the captain said with a gruff voice, “three days travel from here. We will descend to the edge of the deadlands so that we can keep the carriage with us, otherwise the terrain will not allow it. Keep your black mana protection gear on you at all times and watch out for buried stuff. If we fail, there is another candidate a bit farther. We will go there and fall back to the main camp no matter what to resupply. Alright?”

Everyone gave a few nods. Viv retired early that night with Arthur coiled nearby. So far, everything had gone smoothly.

There was no way in hell that her luck would hold.

On the right side, a cliff, on the other, an empty desert filled with hostiles. The men before her were mostly silent and she wanted to pee.

“Can’t fucking believe that I’m pretty much back to Afghanistan.”

“Squee?”

“Except for you of course my darling.”

They were on foot this time, with the carts left behind. The terrain was simply too rough. She had at least thirty kilograms of gear in her large backpack and she was still the lightest person around. Marruk was the worst off. She had to carry Solfis on top of everything else.

“Why are you carrying that heavy stuff anyway?” one of the guards asked her.

“I’m practicing so I can lift your mom.”

It appeared that spending too much time in the barracks was having a deleterious influence on the straightforward Kark, Viv thought.

The trek was a bit monotonous, with the only thing of note being how hard it was. Viv was at the top of her form physically. Her body was reinforced by magic. She just huffed and sweated behind the column of soldiers who moved as if they were doing a nice afternoon hike. The only interruption came later as afternoon was advancing.

**//Buried undead detected.**

Viv froze in her tracks as the entire guard turned around, some with their hands on their weapons.

“It... speaks?”

Viv looked at the yellow eyes and realized the ploy. Solfis had chosen to reveal that it could indeed communicate, which most golems could do on a basic level anyway, but it kept the exact extent of his capacity hidden.

“Location?” she demanded as if used to the weird robotic exchange.

**//Direction: fifty paces ahead.**

**//Nature: worm or necrarch.**

**//Estimated danger: very high.**

“So that’s why you kept that thing around!” the previous guard said, “Very useful that, you could just have told us.”

“It’s a very valuable thing to have,” Lorn retorted, “you cannot blame her for being careful. Although, to be fair, I think that we have determined beyond the shadow of a doubt that we were on the same side. I believe that you could trust us with that much, Lady Bob.”

Viv shrugged.

“Sorry, keeping it secret is more of a habit at this stage.”

Lorn glared at her in a way that said that he didn’t believe it, but would let it go for the sake of group harmony.

“Can you guide us around the hidden danger, golem?” Lorn asked with importance.

Silence fell as they waited for an answer and Viv realized quickly, but not quite quickly enough, that Solfis was snubbing him.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, the golem is bound to me. We will require directions, Solfis”

**//Of course, Your Grace.**

There was just a hint of smugness here that the guards should not have picked up. Farren had clearly been ill at ease during the whole exchange. He knew what Solfis truly was.

It did not take long for the golem to guide them in a wide circle around whatever hid beneath the sands. Viv kept stealing glances at Lorn as the two were at the head of the formation.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, just, I always expect religious orders to try and kill every monster they come across. I know it’s not based on anything real. I was influenced by the stories I heard in my youth.”

The leader of the temple guard snorted once and passed a hand over his greying beard.

“And if we were close to a village, I would have led the charge myself to prevent that horror from snatching kids. We are not, though. We stand on the edge of Param’s ulcerous bunghole. I could kill one of the big fuckers every day and die of old age before the place was cleared.”

“Yeah. You showed your valor several times already, I’m just glad that there is a brain behind all that brawn. I must say, my place of birth has a poor history with groups claiming to be righteous and behaving like total twats. You guys are a relief.”



Lorn smiled ruefully. Viv expected it to be the end of it, but the large warrior actually laughed.

“Ah, if only the rest of Param shared your opinion! It comforts me to know that we humble servants of the temple managed to convince an outsider.”

“A righteous fight is easy to pick when the enemies are monsters, less so when rebellions and wars are involved. Is it righteous to back a rebellion when people suffer? Even if thousands will die? What happens if the rebellion goes too far, should the temple then switch sides?” Farren commented bitterly from behind.

“I am familiar with grey morality, thank you. What I find curious is: what does Neriad think about it?”

“He gives us the freedom to choose,” Farren says.

“What do you mean?”

“So long as you believe that you fight for justice, he will support you within reason. You will often find his followers on either side of a conflict, for is it not righteous to fight for your people?” Lorn answers.

“And those who act in anger...”

“If the follower commits atrocities or loses faith in his cause, the power of the golden god will be denied to him until he finds absolution,” Lorn continues coldly.

“Implying that Neriad does not have a clear idea himself of what is right and wrong?”

“Sacrilege!” Lorn bellowed. Viv jumped in alarm but the powerful man merely grinned. The guards behind them snickered.

“Just kidding. His will is clear. Neriad wants us to unite against monsters and the dark gods’ servants. And stop being cunts. He won’t force us, though. Too much trouble. It’s up to us to decide what we stand for.”

Discussions started among the ranks after that, though Viv soon grew too tired to participate. She almost sighed in relief when they found a cave higher up the path in the late afternoon. The issue was that it was quite obviously not a natural formation. The group gathered a little further down on a slope that gave a good view of the entrance. Shields and weapons were drawn as a precaution.

“So, think it might be one of those horrible digging insects?” one of the guards asked.

“Could be a gut spiller,” Viv suggested. The others turned to her.

“How do you reckon?” Koro asked.

The witch pointed at the entrance, which was round, large, and lacked the sharp claw marks she would expect from something insectile or worse, a nascent necrarch. The stone had a porous, pitted quality that she had seen in the aftermath of monster vomit. Not even post-bender puke could match its vile acidity.

“This was dug with bile, not claws. I think.”

“Yeah, you are right,” Lorn admitted.

“Witch Bob is good hunter and fighter,” Koro the Amazon said, “Find husband soon!”

The large woman leaned forward to whisper in Viv’s ears.

“But not Courtesan Yan, please.”

“He’s all yours. Now, I can usually make short work of gut spillers but I need a clean line of sight. You think you can lure it out, somehow?”

“We can certainly try. Alright folks, drop your backpacks. Half circle at good range. Those with no shield stand a bit back and mind the puke.”

“Yeah yeah it’s not our first kill,” a bald older guard grumbled.

The group split up and positioned themselves with the efficiency of a well-practiced quad. Viv stared with fascination, eager to see what skill the experienced warrior would use to drag the beast out. Lorn carefully walked up with his shield raised and leaned forward at the entrance. He soon banged it with his sword.

“Wakey-wakey you cocksucker! Come on out now, don’t make me drag your sorry ass outside!”

Something roared in answer and Lorn trotted back as the ground rumbled with the footsteps of a giant. Viv was... a little bit disappointed.

A gut’s spiller giant head, with the twin horns that gave Solfis his eerie appearance, emerged first. It crawled out, first showing arms like tree trunks, then a large belly.

“Bob?” Lorn asked with calm.

The creature finished rawling out and revealed legs as large as an elephant’s.

“Bob?” Lorn asked more urgently.

The creature stood up to its full size, which was close to four meters high.

“Bob!”

“YOINK!”

Her overcharged spell would have struggled to flood the creature’s conduits only two months ago. Now though, it was like filling a gutter with typhoon water. The creature turned to ash and collapsed on itself.

“I had to wait until it was out or we would have been shovelling ash out of the entrance until night fall,” the witch calmly explained.

The guards were clearly a bit upset but it didn’t last. One of them pulled the more or less intact skull from the pile of ash and bone it was embedded into.

“Wow. Nice size that. Should we keep it as a trophy?”

“Sure thing, Erlas, as long as you carry it.”

The skull was left where it was, a mute witness to the violence that had occurred.

The group explored the cave and found it empty. It offered a decent shelter for the night. After a stew, Viv crawled under her covers, played a bit with Arthur and promptly fell asleep.

The next morning, Viv took some time to massage Arthur’s horns to help them out. They were black as the night, a sharp contrast to the dragonette’s pale scales. After she was done, she stepped outside to attend to a natural need.

Left alone, Arthur searched the cave for a victim and found him near the cave entrance. He was one of those humans that came clad in their own pressure cookers. She moved sinuously to him and stopped. He froze as he saw her, a large piece of jerky held in his paw. She stood on her two back feet. Like that, her head was level with his, and quite close too. She delicately picked the piece of jerky between two claws while his mouth opened and closed stupidly, a proof that those other humans were really not quite as bright as her own. She gobbled her prize.

“Squee.”

Idiot.

Satisfied, she trotted back to her cover.

“Did that thing just insult me?”

The expedition made good progress until they arrived at the first site. As they walked past a curb in their path, they came across a hidden valley nestled between two slopes.

“This is what you seek,” one of the walkers informed Lorn.

Viv looked and saw the remnant of a base of sorts, not a town but something more functional. The long, unified buildings looked like warehouses, and there were a few half-collapsed chimneys popping up from derelict workshops. Everything was grey and dusty, but she could still spot the remains of a large paved road leading from a caved-in entrance into the mountain to the deadlands proper.

The group climbed down. The first thing they came across was a strange mound at the edge of the complex.

“This looks promising,” Viv commented. Farren nodded.

“Yes, it looks like a slag heap. The iron ore was probably smelted here. We may have found our destination on the first try.”

“Of course you have,” one of the walkers said.

“Indeed. It looks solid now, but if we dig a bit below the dust, I bet we would find layers of scoriae. Did you know that glass can be made from the discarded material?” Farren said, suddenly very interested. He stepped forward while the guards stood around inspecting their surroundings.

“That pile is quite small. It would either indicate that —”

The rest of the sentence, they would never know, because at this moment a clawed hand grabbed the side of a door in the closest warehouse, and a horrible, ghoulish head emerged from the darkness. It howled.

“Ah, fuck,” Farren expressed as his scientific moment was ruined. The creature bounced forward in a weird, uneven gait while a horde of revenants poured from every opening in a frenetic urge to attack them.

[Ancient revenant: dangerous, a revenant infused with black mana over a long period of time. Hardier and faster than its fresher variant.]

Lorn didn't wait. He jumped to grab Farren with everyone else covering them.

"Yoink!"

Viv took out the crawler that had alerted the rest. It was too late and a trickle of undead was already stumbling towards them. In a minute, they would be an ocean. Viv kept killing them but she knew that it would not be enough.

"Back!" Lorn ordered.

"I need a chokehold if we are to kill them," Viv said.

"I know, woman, dammit. We go back to where Loric took a dump. Line formation. Koro you take the left, I take the right. Go, go!"

The guards moved as ordered with Marruk voluntarily taking the center while the rest of the expedition stayed behind. Arthur took flight.

Something clicked for the line of infantry. Their movements suddenly started to coordinate to an uncanny level, and their steps were assured even through the difficult terrain. It was definitely Lorn using a skill.

"Yoink!"

Viv stopped caring too much about the revenants as they were still few enough for the guards to cut them down with weapons infused in golden light.

"Don't tire yourself out, we can take out the rest later! This is just the edge of the deadlands!"

Viv understood what he was referring to. The revenants were ancient and wizened beyond recognition, but they were also fighting in a place where black mana saturation remained very low. It would take hours for them to rebuild themselves after being cut down.

The group quickly reached a natural chokehold between two stone elevations that would make flanking them difficult. There, they made their stand. The moaning mass of undead stuck to their line like a slow wave. Their voices made a deafening drone that covered even the clash of weapons.

"Steady on! Save your strength, and don't overextend!" Lorn bellowed.

Viv took the advice for herself as well and kept focusing on the occasional crawlers and gut spillers emerging from the mass. Mutated animals were fair game as well.

“On top of us!” Farren suddenly yelled. Viv’s danger sense warned her and she took a few steps back, only for an undead bird to crash at her feet. It was missing a wing and its head. Above, Arthur screeched in triumph.

Damn, it was good to have dragon-backed air supremacy.

Viv yanked a few of the larger specimens of revenants to ease the pressure on their right flank, but soon the press of bodies was so thick that the men started to be pushed back. Worse, some of the more enterprising revenants were making their way around the stone elevations, Farren and the two walkers enough to fend them off for now.

Viv focused and a large sphere assembled above her. She called the runes and the spell vibrated. It was ready.

“True mass yoink.”

The sphere took off and tendrils emerged from it, spearing revenants and only leaving ash behind. The tendrils spread like a plague across the horde of enemies, killing dozens in quick succession.

Black mana flooded Viv’s conduits.

It felt amazing.

As surely as black mana was slowly killing her, it also made her feel alive on a fundamental level. It was pure will given power over matter, something that her people had always dreamed off but never obtained. It flooded her being and begged to be used, unleashed, according to her need. And she had a need right now.

“Marruk?”

The Kark woman bashed one last skull, then grabbed her shield horizontally with both hands. She roared and smashed it into the now thinned first ranks with supernatural power. The sound of the defensive weapon impacting dry flesh was like a gong, and there was suddenly a calm in the center of the conflict, an eye of the cyclone that Viv made use of. All the overload she had just acquired flew into the mightiest blight she had ever conjured. There was nothing to spare here, none of the trees and shrubs that she was usually loath to annihilate. Just a mass of undead threatening her life. She could go all the way. She could let go. And she did.

“Blight!”

There was a certain beauty to an art perfectly done, even if that art was designed to destroy. The sphere left her side. It perfectly flew over Marruk’s shield before spreading, expanding into

a cloud of hungry, hissing void. The blight spread over the slope in a cone, smothering the land and silencing the horde. Only its furious hiss was left.

It reminded Viv of the 'Nuees Ardentes', a phenomenon formed from incandescent clouds of ash and particles tumbling down the side of a volcano to catch the unwary. They were faster than cars and left no survivors.

When the construct was finally spent, there was nothing left behind but blackened rock and twisted remnants of armor.

"Well, shit," one of the guards said.

"Focus, it's not over!" Lorn said, "can you do that again?" he then asked Viv.

"Yes. Twice more."

Lorn looked genuinely amazed.

"I'm perfect against the undead."

"So it would seem."

The battle resumed. Farren and the walkers handled stragglers, Arthur kept the skies clear above their heads, while Koro and Lorn covered the flanks. Viv figured out why when they started being pushed back due to the large amount of bodies piling up. Both combatants were able to handle several revenants at once, though it became clear that they were tiring. Viv redoubled her efforts and sent another blight to relieve the pressure, aiming more to the side this time. After that, they only had about sixty revenants left to kill and Viv simply yonked them at great speed.

The guards collapsed where they were as soon as the last undead fell. The rest of the group walked around, keeping an eye out. Only the walkers were still fresh.

Arthur landed and paraded before Viv, who lavished her with praises and rewarded her with some meat. The proud dragonette preened and spread her wings wide so that all could bask in her victorious illustriousness.

"You did such a good job!" Viv congratulated, "they didn't stand a chance against you!"

"Squee!"

It was at that time that one of the walkers whooped in delight. He picked something from the ground and waved it where all could see. It was the glint of gold, tarnished by time and sorcery, but unmistakable. It came from a rectangular coin at the limit of being an ingot.

Arthur's gaze turned and she spotted the coin.

It suddenly occurred to Viv that she had never used one of her very few gold talents in Arthur's presence. The denomination was simply too large to be exchanged on an everyday basis. The most expensive things she had bought in Arthur's presence had been paid in silver.

In the dragonette's eyes, the light of cupidity shone like a star.

"Oh dear."

The party rested for twenty minutes during which Viv pulled black mana from the few wounds the warriors had suffered. Then, the looting began. Viv had almost forgotten that for typical undead hunters, half of their profit came from checking revenants for valuables while the rest was the bounty. It soon became apparent that this location had not been cleared for centuries, and everyone started piling valuables. A lot of the stuff was steel or faded, enchanted pieces of gear with just enough magic left not to fall into pieces. They did not find another pouch of money like the walker had found. There was still quite a bit of silver left. Lorn was giddy.

"This is my favorite part. We get money, and nobody died."

"How very avaricious. Are you sure you're not a follower of Sardanal?" Viv teased. Sardanal was the god of wealth so the joke should work.

"Nothing said that good deeds cannot pay!" the guard captain exclaimed.

"Yes," Koro said, "we punish evil, get rich and get laid. That is the good life."

Viv could get behind that.

They ended up with a pile of scrap that could nevertheless be used by talented smiths as is, but that they could not transport for the moment. It could wait since it never rained in the deadlands. The rest was the more valuable stuff. They had usable weapons, mostly steel short swords, which they decided to leave as well since they were damaged. They also had a collection of ancient coins and some jewelry. Arthur trotted forth and grabbed one coin.

"Squee."

"By tradition, casters get ten parts, officers three and footmen one. That coin covers your share, I believe," Farren said in a rather subdued voice.



“Works for me.”

While the rest split up the loot, Viv asked for one of the walkers to help her with something. A knife, a needle, some thread and a few straps of leather, Viv had made a pouch which she presented to Arthur. The dragonette was still clutching the precious, tarnished coin within two claws with consideration, inspecting it from different angles.

“Here.”

Viv placed the coin in the pouch with only a small resistance, though there was clear distress in Arthur’s face. She fastened the pouch around her neck where it was unobtrusive, and then showed her precocious student how to open and close it. Arthur squeaked impatiently to show she understood and resumed her study.

Meanwhile, the group was ready to go and they moved down the slope, finishing off the revenants that had started to regenerate. They used the opportunity to explore the empty base building by building, finding broken foundry equipment like crucibles, furnaces and the likes, all covered in dust and the rusty remains of scaffoldings.

“It would make sense for the Min Goles mines to have a foundry nearby so that they could transfer ingots directly inland,” Farren noted.

They continued their exploration and found the decrepit remains of barracks and what looked like administrative quarters. They found a lot of coins in the various collapsed remains of chests, but the real treasure was in the topmost office of the tallest building. A safe, damaged by falling stone, easily disgorged its contents with the help of Lorn’s sword.

“Neriad’s fetching buttocks,” Koro exclaimed, “we’re rich!”

They had found the Min Goles treasury. There was enough gold and assorted silver to buy half of Kazar.

“Holy shit.”

“We’re loaded!”

“Squee!”

“Wow,” one of the guards said, “why haven’t we come here sooner?”

“Hmm, the undead infestation?”

“Oh right.”

The group decided to spend the night there and check the mine entrances in the morning. They used the rest of the evening grinning like idiots and splitting the loot, including the walkers who looked slightly less enthused. It was an unexpected boon. Everyone took refuge in one of the barracks which two of the guards meticulously swept and cleaned until it was livable.

"I'm sort of jealous," Viv admitted as the pair carried on their tasks. One of them, the only female guard besides Koro, turned to her with an amused frown.

"I'm jealous of someone who can depopulate an entire undead town in fifteen minutes. Guess that makes us even?"

Everyone was in a good mood, and jokes and banter fused as Koro cooked the meal. Viv went out and sat next to Marruk who had gotten busy polishing her mace as she kept a vigil on the darkening landscape around them.

"So, you're rich now," Viv started.

"So it seems."

"That means you can leave my employment, if you wish."

"Yes. I know. But I don't think I will. I think I want to know everything about guerilla warfare first."

The Kark placed her weapon down on the ground and massaged her hands. They were quite scarred.

"I told you many times that I left my tribe."

"You did."

"I think I was just running away then. Running away from a fate where things would keep up as they were, I would bear witness to my people's slow death. I told myself that I was looking for... something. A magical weapon. Anything that would stop our extinction. It took me years of wandering before I figured out that I needed a new art of war. It took meeting you. Now that I have finally found it, I want to keep you alive long enough to learn it."

"You make it sound like it's hard," Viv joked, but Marruk was less amused.

"It is. You have an uncanny tendency to end up in the most dangerous situations. One day, that insolent luck of yours will run out."

Viv thought of her divine spark.

"Or maybe it won't."

“Well, I hope we never find out. In the meanwhile, this boon changes nothing. Money will not save us. The best use I can make of it is to buy the best armor I can for myself and try to drag that knowledge back to the steppes. And then probably bang a few heads together until those stubborn idiots are willing to listen to me. And if I get even richer, well...”

“Well what?” Viv asked, curious.

“I’ll hire you.”

Viv smiled and nodded. After she was cured, perhaps.

The group slept soundly and studied the caved-in mine entrance in the morning. It did not take long for the strongmen of the group to open a passage into the complex large enough for people to pass. The last boulder was lifted to reveal an interior completely submerged in darkness. Viv heard something large shuffle in the distance. Farren’s voice echoed in the passage.

“The Min Goles iron mines, ladies and gentlemen. Shall we?”