

The expedition set up behind the bridge. Viv crossed it to deploy the lure and then trotted back to defensive positions. The plan was to use the bridge as a chokehold. The revenants would rush to the lure, and, finding no target, turn their undying hunger to the only people around with a pulse. It also gave them an avenue of retreat provided that nothing managed to gnaw on their horses while they had their backs turned.

The plan worked well. Without a necromancer to guide them, the mass of creatures was just fuel for a devastating Viv. Most of the early stages were spent throwing mass yonks into the melee and killing the rare elite. The first change happened after fifteen minutes. Solfis had been inspecting their assailants with glowing eyes. He suddenly moved forward.

//Target acquired.

The massive golem crawled on the other side of the bridge by digging his talons into the very stone. Viv judged that it was more disturbing than being swarmed by reanimated bodies. At least those had joints. The golem returned shortly later with a writing revenant bearing a grey undershirt.

//Target retrieved: Sonali of the scout corps.

He looked just as mummified as the rest to Viv, but when Solfis drew closer she could see that the gambeson was newish, undyed and embroidered in the way the locals affectionated. The corpse was also relatively fresh.

“That’s Sonali alright. Poor bastard was about to return to Baran too,” one of the crossbowmen said. The revenant was disabled and purified by Torm, the highest ranking servant of Neriad present. He was the shield bearer who had pathed up during the ‘failed lich’ battle, easily recognizable by his drooping moustache, ponytail and receding hairline. He placed the purified body in one of the coffins, which was then closed.

//I have recorded the names and appearances of the missing.

//I shall retrieve them as they arrive.

//Please do not cast... mass yonks... on their backlines, Your Grace.

“I understand, and I have a favor to ask.”

//Speak.

“Do not let me see her.”

Solfis nodded slowly.

//I understand, Your Grace.

The morning went on and most of the guards sat down, with a few of the more adventurous crossbowmen taking potshots at elites and pointing them at Viv. Once or twice per hour, Solfis would move forth and through the fumbling masses to retrieve a single body, which

was then identified and put to rest. The carts filled with the dead. The inevitable happened around noon.

//Target acquired.

//Please avert your eyes, Your Grace.

Viv stopped casting for a full minute, which finally allowed Marruk and Torm to practice a bit. Viv looked at some of the revenant milling behind them, on their side of the chasm. A strike team of guards went from one to the other, disabling them and dragging the bodies to a pyre. They checked for loot, of course.

Arthur landed with a detached head in one claw and a purse in the other. Viv emptied its contents.

“No gold, sorry...”

“Squee.”

“You know, if you find seven silver talents, the banker will gladly exchange it for one gold talent.”

Arthur’s jaw fell open, revealing an impressive array of serrated teeth.

“Squ.... Squeeeeeeee—”

“And she’s off. Maybe I should have kept precious metal exchange rates to myself,” Viv muttered. The dragonling had climbed to the sky and was already diving back on a nearby target.

//It is done Your Grace.

//Torm put your companion at rest.

//You will be relieved to learn that her body did not suffer further abuse after her demise, beyond being discarded.

“That is plenty enough.”

//Indeed.

//The coffin has been shut, if you wish to return to casting.

//As for one of your previous comments, I have decided to share a self-reflection with you.

//If someone had defiled my creator Irlefen’s body, I would have pursued them to the end of Nyil.

//And made them suffer until their mind broke.

//Mostly, I find the concerns of organics futile and petty.

//In this case, I understand that the mage was dear to you and that the insult to her memory must be repaid in blood.

//You know that I will support you no matter what.

//I want you, Your Grace, to know that I support you because I want to.

“Thanks, Soflis. It means a lot coming from you. I appreciate it.”

//Excellent, Your Grace.

//Now please remember to make sure that I do not need to avenge you.

“I promise to do my very best. Alright. Enough of that, time to thin the herd.”

Viv returned to the fray and disintegrated revenants by the dozen. On the other side of the bridge, ash from the dead reached knee height. The slaughter continued into the afternoon until the last stragglers were disposed of by roaming groups of looters. Everyone piled the meagre findings on the ground by the cart containing the sealed coffins. The expedition had found all but one of the bodies, the last one perhaps too damaged to have been moved. There were still revenants down the chasm.

“Solfis, could you carry me down? I want to finish the job. Arthur, come back please.”

The golem easily descended the sheer cliff with Viv held under the armpits. They found a moaning pile of broken bodies under the mighty arches.

//They will regenerate given time.

//Do you wish to start casting now?

“No need. Come on, Arthur, give me a hand here.”

“Squee?”

“Well you’re not going to match the desolation of Aristan without practicing a bit, you know?”

“Squee!”

The small dragonling extended her neck from Viv’s own arms and hacked and spit a bit, culminating in a rather unimpressive performance. It looked like she was projectile-vomiting termite. Nevertheless, the results spoke for themselves and the pile quickly ignited. Viv then remembered why she usually preferred her own, cleaner method.

It was the smell.

Just inhaling the smoke was basically getting airborne burnt human flesh into your lungs. Viv shuddered and they made for the rest of the group. The loot was quickly divided between the participants, Viv getting the lion’s share, and they were set out to leave when one of the guards hailed her. He looked extremely pleased with himself.

“Goodmother! Sorry, Your Grace. Your Grace, I have pathed up!”

“Congratulations!” Viv said with genuine pride for the young lad. The others heard him and everyone gathered to offer their heartfelt pleasure, but the guard was not done.

“Inspect me, Your Grace!”

Viv did so.

[Witch-pact crossbowman]

“It’s because of the Yries weapon. The path allows me to use it to the maximum of its abilities. It is a good path, Your Grace!”

“Wow, I don’t know what to say. Is this fine, though? What if the weapon breaks?”

The man waved his hand dismissively.

“Weapons break and get repaired. Or remade. What matters is that I got it from another race. Oh, wait until I tell the others!”

The man seemed happy and the atmosphere improved on the way back. She slept fitfully in the tower and moved out the very next morning to handle the next pressing matter: the fate of the prisoners.

It didn’t take long to find a handful of men to get rocks. In fact, there was an abundance of crossbowmen eager to get a few headshots, probably because of the new path. Unfortunately for them, the place was almost empty. Fortunately for Viv, she didn’t have to carry the local equivalent of menhirs.

They proceeded the same way as they had back at the mines. Solfis helped her engrave the glyphs and she cast the spell when she was ready. It quickly turned out that once per day was her maximum, which only surprised her, and the golem managed to recharge his core while she recovered.

On the evening of the second day, the council accepted her proposal and she announced to the grimy-faced prisoners what their fate would be. Looking at all those desperate eyes shining in the twilight sun, they probably expected her to skewer them with pitchforks and then oven-bake their babies. The promise of new land and freedom after only three years gave them the sort of suspicious hope that waits as much for deliverance as for the other shoe to drop. The first to get land would be picked at random and stay in the camp until they built their dwellings. It would also prevent the Enorian from growing idle and the camp from acquiring the deep stench of overcrowded villages. The guards reported that tensions and incidents decreased. Of course, Viv did not stop there. She had the perfect, modern solution for handling mistreated minorities.

Propaganda and mental reconditioning.

Every evening, she would tell how they had been lied to, how they were victims of Prince Lancer who stole their money and left them to die. The Prince had seduced them away from the path of righteousness with his pretty words, then had abandoned them to the Kazarans’ righteous fury. But not all was lost! In their immense mercy, the Kazarans understood only

too well what it meant to be downtrodden and after a more than reasonable punishment, the offenders would be redeemed.

Viv used light makeup and a sober dress to present herself as virginal and distant, yet another victim of the prince's lying tongue. She told them of her efforts and how she would create good soil for them out of the deadlands and, more importantly, she told them what they wanted to hear. That it was not really their fault, and that, deep inside, they were better than this.

Strangely, it was easier than talking about the constitution and she immediately understood why. She cared about those Kazarans who had fought by her side even if they were not perfect. The Enorians could go fuck themselves. She wouldn't go out of her way to ruin their lives but if they got eaten by a passing wyvern she wouldn't shed a tear.

It was two weeks after the conquest when Viv did what she felt was important. She organized general elections for every position in the city, including her own, as a way to mark the occasion. They had won, had what was shaping up to be a bountiful harvest, and Irao had reported that the prince had left the Deadshield woods. Viv ran on a platform based on her successes and her aura as the one who had introduced democracy to start with. She didn't even have to resort to Solfis-backed negotiations with the handful of misguided rivals who opposed her. If anything, she had to rein in her supporters who were rather invested in her success and had the weapons to back it up. It was the Athenian democracy all over again.

Eventually, they ended up with almost the same names and a new representative for the laborers. Voting booths had been a huge success, as had been the application of purchased dye on the thumb of the voter to show participation. The people of Kazar were... proud. Invested. Things were moving, most of them of their own accords. Most people were busy with the harvest.

It was now time to experiment with magic and make use of Denerim's continued presence to work on regrowing limbs.

//This is a good place, Your Grace.

Viv looked around and agreed. With new stones set at regular intervals, they had freed acres of arable land. It would take a while for the farthest expanses to desaturate, however, which gave her a window of opportunity to experiment. The place Solfis had selected was a small basin between two low rises. A few stones emerged from the packed ochre dust haphazardly, while scraggly black growths clung to the rocky slopes. The ubiquitous dark

clouds of the deadlands still clung stubbornly overhead, pushed back slowly but surely by southern winds.

Viv sighed. It was desolate. Just what they needed. Now that they had stopped, however, she was struck by an unexpected bout of nostalgia.

“You know, we had a thing called *the internet* in my old world. It was like a magical network of knowledge that covered cities and houses and that almost everyone could access. It let us check the sum total of our civilization’s knowledge.

//Your nation must have been great indeed.

“Not really. Most people used it for jokes, erotica, cat photos and the spread of stupid rumours.”

Solfis remained silent for a while.

//I am at once disappointed and unsurprised.

//A contradiction.

“Yeah but I digress. I used to have a good friend I met through the internet and whom I actually never met in real life. He was a person who took great delight in exploiting systems, finding loopholes, those sorts of things. He was at his happiest when he used a tool for an unintended purpose with great effect. I wish I could talk to him now.”

//Does this relate to experimentation?

“Yeah. I realize that I’m pretty good at learning magic, if my fast progress is any indication, but I’m just... unimaginative. I have this awesome power at the tip of my fingers and I’m just using it to melt things.

//Arguably, you do this very well.

“Yes but I can do better. I need more tools if they exist. I need to consider stealth, mobility, and utility. Anyway, I will start by experimenting with the ‘change’ meaning. Try it out a bit.”

Now that there were no immediate crises, she would take the time to explore new things, starting with one she had not touched yet.

It was partly out of fear. The concept reminded her of the roiling, pus-filled ball of putrid flesh they had faced in the mines. The failed lich. The memory of that stench still haunted her nostrils on occasion, giving her goosebumps. It had been that bad.

Enough of that now.

“Bzzt.”

Viv tried to charge her most basic spell with the meaning and... failed. She was familiar with annihilation but this was radically different. Black was the color of entropy, in a way. Annihilation was merely the most drastic and final expression of it. Change as a concept implied that something came after.

Viv tried again. She willed the spell to alter its target, and it did. She felt the bolt leave charged with meaning, and when it hit, the dust reacted. Plumes of earth grew from the ground like a time-lapse, then the spell stopped and half of it fell back in various sizes of granulated sand. What was left behind resembled a sculpture in a zen garden, if the zen garden was curated by outer-space squids.

“Hmm.”

She tried again with various degrees of power. The dust she hit would change shape and become more compact, or more porous. Sculptures hit a second time expanded quickly then collapsed. On a hunch, she refined the concept.

‘Change into a wall.’

The next spell was, well, more wall-like. It still looked like a prop from a cheap sci-fi movie but it did reach waist-height.

//I detect residues of black mana in the structure.

//It will make it resistant to spells.

//However...

Solfis picked a small stone and casually tossed it at the sculpture. It shattered.

//Any decent soldier may simply run through it.

“I see. It might also block line of sight, which is valuable in itself. Let’s experiment a bit more.”

Casting on an actual stone as opposed to dirt led to similar results, though slower. The stone walls still looked eldritch and menacing. They had the same organic appearance as what the Yries built but none of the elegance. Solfis tested them and found that they were slightly more sturdy.

//Do you believe that you can form better walls?

“Probably. I need to get used to the concept first. Annihilation requires a lot of power and conviction, but change is very flexible. They are really different. In fact...”

She tried to annihilate a wall with a purge net and found that the meaning came to her sluggishly. It probably would not affect her later, but she didn’t think the two meanings could work together at all.

Viv slowly worked through more experiments. Through practice, she realized that she could make the walls go higher by affecting a larger area and forming a hole next to it, which led to an obvious discovery.

“Alright, so I cannot really create matter. The dust walls are simply unpacked dust, that’s why they are so flimsy. Same for the stone, I draw it from below. Whatever I touch will probably retain its original mass, only change form. Similarly, the tighter the construction, the more effort it takes to deform it.”

//It implies that you can create fast but fragile obstructions while on friable terrain.

//Rocks will allow you to make sturdier structures but they will also take more time and energy.

//Is this assessment correct?

“Let’s find out.”

A few more spells cast on the rocky slopes confirmed the golem’s hypothesis. Perhaps it would change when she got the hang of using the concept a bit more. Whatever. She would practice, but she was not done with experimenting yet. The next target was obvious. She had to cast it on something alive.

“Bzzt.”

The dark, scrawny plant got instantly mangled.

Viv had used only the smallest hints of power. She approached the shredded matter for some impromptu dissection. The leaves were either shredded or fused like acid scars. The core had been half shorn while the rest had become ossified.

//This is the concept you wish to use to regrow limbs, is it not?

“Yeah I see what you mean. That concept is to regeneration what a chainsaw is to surgery. With that said, I can probably fine-tune it to work with a life mana construct. It will just take some practice. We need more live targets so I propose that we walk to the forest.”

//As you wish.

The stroll let Viv clear her head. The new concept was playing tricks on her mind. It resonated within her, vast and unexplored, a thought that was not just her own. Annihilation was visceral. Angry. A thing as straightforward as a blade. Change was ethereal and complex. Abstract. Mental. Flexible. Both concepts existed within her and outside of her. They were part of magic and, as such, they belonged to the world. She merely touched upon them. It felt incredibly strange to ‘acquire’ ideas in such an organic fashion. There was no earthly experience that could quite compare.

Viv considered what Varska had told her. Mages took a more analytical approach to casting and she wondered if it was not a bit of a mistake. You could read, or be taught that concepts gave spells a meaning corresponding to a color’s facet but you could not truly understand it until you experienced it. Love and rage could not be explained with words. They could be

alluded to or evoked but not truly, truly rendered. It was the same with casting. Although, perhaps it was still the most efficient way for a lot of people.

Viv arrived at the edge of the forest almost an hour later at a brisk pace. The ward stones she had placed were really expanding the living lands. Now it was a matter of seeing if the encroachment lasted.

“Bzzt.”

Viv attempted the spell on a few trees, turning them into modern art exhibits, or so she thought. The inspection skill disagreed.

[Mangled trunk: remnant of a deep wood fir submitted to destructive black mana.]

“To change its form in real time, the acolyte of Gomogog we fought back near the tree must have had some incredible control.”

//I estimate that divine assistance should be credited with this feat, Your Grace.

“Do you think that I could target a tree and turn it into some sort of regenerating monster?”

//Statistically, if you destroy every tree in the Deadshield Woods, you might be successful once or twice.

//Although my algorithms return that it would be an inefficient use of the next centuries.

“Right. There is one last thing I want to test.”

Vic coated herself with the armor, but infused the parts with the meaning of change. Immediately, the infantry armor shape she was used to melded and weaved. It looked like she was wearing liquid dark fog. There was no apparent effect until she took a step forward and the surface shifted a bit.

//Can you make the armor stop changing so much, Your Grace?

She willed it and the multiple tendrils and vaporous patterns covering her floated instead of writhed. It lasted until she moved and the thing shifted again. Viv was about to ask what Solfis meant when the golem’s skull snapped to the side. Viv about-faced with some alarm, but it was only Irao standing straight by a damaged tree’s remains. He was still wearing his dark armor. His slitted yellow eyes considered Viv without much emotion.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I felt an unknown camouflage and came to investigate. I check every major anomaly on our territory.”

“Camouflage?”

//The Hadal is correct, Your Grace.

//The armor changed with its environment in a way that gives you stealth capabilities.

//Additionally, the stealth effect is reinforced by a distractor.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Your coat actively deflects the attention. Some of my abilities work in a similar way,” Irao explained as he circled her with interest. “It is sloppy but you have only been at it for seven minutes.”

“Do you use black mana as well?”

The man nodded.

“Yes. Not the same meaning as you though. I use obfuscation. Different process for a similar result. I can show you.”

And he did, but try as she might, Viv did not get it.

“You must deny the world and have the world deny you.”

Irao used his abilities, even intentionally lowering their efficiency after Solfis suggested it. She still failed to understand.

//It might be good to let the idea decant in your mind, Your Grace.

//Imperial records show extended periods of time between concept understandings.

//Your spongy brain matter can only adapt so fast to the raw fabric of reality.

“I guess.”

//You may also have a low affinity for a concept that centers around hiding.

//You tend to make yourself highly visible.

“What do you mean? I hid all the way from Harrak to Kazar!”

//And now you are heading a revolution.

“Well... Ok I guess.”

Ah, the hypocrisy. Looking down on her father only to follow the exact same path. The apple didn't fall far from the tree and all that.

Viv felt the worst kind of annoyed, she was pissed at herself.

“Alright, I shall name the camouflage armor... Sneaky Ghillie Lemon Squeezy.”

//May I object?

“No. Next, we are going to pay Denerim a visit. We need to create a roadmap on that arm regrowth thing.”