

Viv took a deep breath next to Kazar's huge tree. Leaves were unfolding all across its foliage, a beautiful and delicate shade of lilac. The pure and fresh air filled her lungs with the promise of spring. It lessened the physical discomfort she was in right now. Even a magically-enhanced constitution did not suffice to offset all the shit she had been through in the past month. Perhaps a day of relaxation was warranted.

Also, she was wearing a comfortable loose linen dress that managed to look good while still feeling as comfortable as pajama. And she had just gotten paid.

Five gold talents, over a thousand bits total for the whole expedition, plus some change for all the revenants they had slain on the way. That part, Viv split in two with a flustered Marruk on top of her pay. She had also officially given her equipment to the bodyguard as a 'hiring bonus'. The tall Kark woman was clearly unused to such 'generosity' and was now following Viv sheepishly, not sure how to act. Viv's opinion was mixed. On the one hand, she had gone beyond their contract to the other woman's benefit. On the other hand, she had kept more than eight tenths of their total bounty for herself and her bodyguard was tearingly grateful. Cutthroat capitalism at its finest.

The gold was nice to have, although she did not really have anything to spend it on for now. There was a trade caravan scheduled to arrive soon, so perhaps there would be something then. In the meanwhile, she had VIPs to butter up, starting with the mayor.

Resh Ganimatalo. The police officer who had probed her, Tars, had mentioned that Mayor Ganimatalo had been at the head of the town for a few years already, and developing Kazar was her life's work.

She walked right to the town hall with Marruk in tow. The ancient edifice stood in the center of the plaza, facing both road exits. It had started as a single, stocky building with more expansions added as the years passed by and the lonely outpost had turned into a large village. The result showed an eclectic mix of architectures and building materials that gave the hall an organic feeling, the impression reinforced by the flower beds and trees surrounding the compound. A single guard bearing the Kazar coat of arms saluted her as she came in, but hesitated when Marruk followed.

"Ah, apologies Lady Bob. May I request that you leave your weapons at the entrance? It's the something something."

Farren had agreed to Enorian lessons and Viv was looking forward to it. With the magical bullshitery and how close the language was to Old Imperial, she was confident that she would be able to master it in no time.

"Yeah yeah, ok."

They moved into the compound and through a path along a small garden to the largest wing. Viv walked into a traditional waiting room that would not look out of place in a modern administrative center, were it not for the fashion and signs of magic. A man in colorful clothes was bending iron twigs into circles with his bare hands, while a teenager pressed both hands on his scraped knee. Viv saw the tell-tale halo of life magic at work.

"Mayor Ganimatalo is in a meeting. She will receive you shortly," a pale woman in a neat outfit told her. It was green and asymmetrical, and closed over her left shoulder.

Viv found a chair, and realized that she should have brought a book. She had left Arthur behind with alarm wards and food, the dragonling a bit more independent now. She started drawing runes out of boredom before realizing that the black symbols upset the other people here. It had become clear that the building hosted the city's few civil servants, and it saw a lot of traffic from magic-fearing locals.

Viv used this opportunity to study the people coming and going out of rooms that, she assumed, were offices. Their well-made clothes were rich in patterns and poor in adornments. Viv thought that she must have seen perhaps two rings and a necklace throughout the entire walk here. They spoke of people who had come here with nothing and made the best of it. They were also subdued, with none of the bluster she expected from entitled folks faced with the pit traps of bureaucracy. Everyone was guarded before they even noticed her in their midst.

It took a good twenty minutes for her to be called and she judged that it was on purpose. Her suspicion only deepened when the clerk led her deeper into the complex, up a flight of painted stairs and into a richly decorated office. Marruk was ordered to stay behind with Solfis hidden in a large bag on her back.

The mayoral office contrasted with the rest of the building as it was possibly the first room she had visited since her relocation that had a single decorative theme. The colors were amber and brown, both on the wall and in the furniture. A monumental desk of polished wood hosted documents and trinkets of unknown function, some of them magical. There were two people waiting for her. She was not offered a seat. She took it anyway.

A man leaned in a comfortable chair on the side, in a neutral position. He wore a clean tabard showing the Kazar tree on a white background over a genuine plate armor, which he wore as if it weighed nothing. The gauntlets showed marks of impacts, and a heavy sword hung by his side. The woman sitting behind the chair was a northerner with the same dark skin and amber eyes as the banker she had met earlier. She had her gray hair in thick strands held together by golden rings. Other signs of age were obvious in the wrinkles around her eyes and the hollowness of her cheeks, yet she bore her age with more grace than Viv had ever seen in anyone. There was a magnetic presence about the woman, one that made her think of intimidation but not quite. The pair's game was clear, and only made Viv feel more irritated as her discomfort took a familiar direction.

The mayor spoke first. Her voice was higher pitched than Viv expected, and melodious. Her Old Imperial was perfect.

“You finally deign to grace us with your presence, witch Bob. It took you only five days to come and greet the authorities of this town, and after I summoned you, I may add.”

So that’s how it was. The two to her one, the presence of weapon, the rich appearance, not offering her a seat. They were not trying intimidation.

The most effective technique against intimidation and bullying was self-esteem, in Viv’s experience, and she had quite a bit of that now. Viv had undergone a major crisis when she had turned sixteen, one that put her at odds with her father whom she had previously held in very high esteem. It took her quite some time to rebuild confidence, but she had done it just in time to escape his plans. When compared with the smooth, corrupt politician, those people here were amateurs.

What surprised her is that Tars must have told the man who could only be captain Corel, the leader of the guard, about her. He should know that she was no wild talent raised by wolves. Or whatever the Nyil equivalent was. It could be that Ganimatalo used some sort of advanced manipulative strategy to achieve some os cure goal, but she doubted it. People were not perfect. Busy people sometimes overlooked things. Her dad had been a fervent supporter of the Hanlon paradigm: never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity.

The two idiots had done goofed.

Now, she could engage in a subtle game of threats, insults, and the proper use of body language for intimidation purposes, but she had a good way to kill two birds with one stone.

“Sorry, where are the lavatories?” she asked.

The woman facing her blinked and opened her mouth, then closed it again with a click.

“The bathrooms? Cabinet? Water closet?” Viv insisted.

“Are you mocking me?”

No, Viv was not, in fact, taking the piss. It was another kind of emergency. The English were invading. She was being visited by her aunt Flo. Moses was parting the red sea. Shark week was upon her.

The last time it should have happened would have been when she was in the Cassian springs. Apparently, being reassembled at a molecular level had thrown her hormones out of whack, and things were only now returning to their natural course.

“The fucking bathroom, woman. It’s an emergency.”

The mayor sensed the seriousness of the situation and sent her to an appropriate place, where Viv had to sacrifice a sock. She was sent on Fantasy land and still had to contend with all the old bullshit. Ridiculous. Did the women in Lord of the Ring struggle with those things? Nooooo absolutely the fuck not. Their ordeals were to deal with Viggo Mortensen’s raw sexyness and that armored dude on the flying lamprey. At least, that explained today’s discomfort and yesterday’s timid resurrection of her libido, not that it had led to anything.

Once secure, she returned to see her two hosts where she had left them.

“So, was there anything specific you wanted or did you just want to get to know me? Because I’m feeling poorly and I really need to go.”

“Sit down,” the mayor ordered.

“I’ll take that as a no. Bye then.”

The door banged open behind her and the guard captain stomped in the corridor.

“Miss Bob, you are making a serious mistake.”

“The mistake I made was coming here.”

“I would not want to have to use force.”

A deep, terrible silence spread across the room. The annoyance in Viv’s heart turned fiery and vicious, and when she stopped and turned, her voice was loaded with the promise of death.

“No, you really wouldn’t.”

“If you use magic—”

“Lay your hand on me, lose the hand, asshole.”

“The law...”

“Look at me. Look at me. There. Do you see me caring, at all? Do you want to test me? Is there any magic around that regrows hands? Because that’s what this is about right here, right now. You, me, and your silly games. I don’t care about what you and the hag want. I’m already gone. There is nothing you can do to change that even if you put your life on the line. Got it? Good. Until you have something worthwhile to say, piss off and leave me be. Alright? Bye.”

Viv stormed out of the building with a confused Marruk in tow. She looked around the plaza, seeking help. There was none to be found.

“Fuck.”

“Tower now?”

“No. We... are going to the brothel.”

The Spotted Feather had a selection of lightly enchanted rags that kept clean and soft and warm, and a soothing herbal mix that was already doing wonders. Viv was in her previous room with a positively purple Marruk carted off to her own place.

“It’s just for a bath,” Viv had insisted, “I’ll pay the fee for you.”

Marruk had stuttered something about not being interested in humans, which had instantly turned the two nearby ‘filles-de-joie’ teasing and provocative. One of them had made an innocuous comment about ‘what big hands you have’ and the Kark had emitted an amusing distress sound.

Now Viv gave herself a break. Courtesan Yan had left her to her own device.

Her meeting with the mayor had gone catastrophically, but now things were looking up. Everyone had had lunch together and Viv felt ready to face the rest of the day. Only Solfis found cause to complain.

**//I can do it in three minutes from door to door.**

**//No one will say a thing.**

“No, you may not murder the mayor. And to slaughter her just after our meeting, you think that no one will suspect me?”

**//I never said anything about suspicion.**

**//I said, no one will say a thing.**

“Farren knows I have you. If someone I dislike ends up mysteriously trounced to bits, he will most certainly react.”

**//And when you are asked about it, you can say that you never ordered or even suggested the murder of the mayor.**

**//Farren will only be too glad to drop the matter.**

“I think you underestimate how stubborn the religious types can be.”

**//And I think you underestimate how persuasive I can be.**

**//Especially after I stuff what remains of his pet assassin in a washbasin.**

“I believe that there are steps we can take before escalating to a campaign of murder-fueled terror.”

Solfis' next words were 'if you say so, Your Grace' but the tone said 'spoilsport'.

Viv and Marruk left the Spotted Feather early in the afternoon, just in time for Viv's appointment with Lady Varska. They walked to the tower unimpeded. The pair came across a few guards, but none reacted to her presence beyond polite greetings, which she returned. The tower itself was as tall and unwelcoming as she remembered. There were vines climbing up its surface, and many windows, but their surfaces were strangely reflective. The building was hermetic. It was designed as much to impress as to provide distance, a promontory above the city from which its dweller saw without being seen.

Viv knocked on the door. It opened ominously. She expected it to be enchantment or something, but a wizened face filled with grey hair popped out of the shadows.

“You're the witch?”

“Yes. And you are...”

“I'm Grema, the housekeeper. Come on in. The bodyguard stays behind, and the golem too. If the good Lady wanted to kill ya they would make no difference.”

Viv was quite sure that she was mistaken. Having Solfis stay secret really helped, and his presence would be an additional guarantee of safety, but her host had said no and she found no reason to object.

“I stay outside,” Marruk told her, and Viv slipped through the massive wooden door.

The main floor felt cozy. The ceiling was really tall, with a circle of windows set high on the walls to provide illumination. A round stairway snaked up to an upper floor and the rest of the space was quite open. There were crates and stuff and a couches as well as a hearth. It was well-aired, and a bit impersonal except for a large banner hanging from the wall, with a circular glyph on it that looked more like a coat-of-arms than a magical symbol.

The housekeeper climbed up and Viv followed. They reached a first landing, with her guide going through another door without a word. Viv caught a glimpse of a kitchen, so perhaps those

were her personal quarters. Many of the doors and windows emitted complex mana signatures that she could not identify. It was like trying to spot a specific dot on a buggy screen. Her senses were overwhelmed by a wall of impressions that she did not know how to interpret.

Without specific direction, Viv kept climbing until she reached the next level. This was clearly the tower's receiving room, and her host was here.

An elegant blue carpet showing a complex sigil covered most of the room, with the lines walled by shelves. Carefully arranged couches and blue magical lights created a calm ambiance that invited contemplation. A small fire danced merrily in the room's hearth, and the sound of crackling logs provided a nice background to the watery sounds of tea being served. Viv approached the eating table on which Kazar's resident caster had placed two cups and an assortment of finger foods.

"You must be Viviane. Please, take a seat. The tea is just right."

Delighted that someone would make an effort to pronounce her name properly, the witch lightly sat and was handed a piping hot cup for her trouble. Lady Varska was, well, she was interesting.

The mage was slightly shorter than Viv with a svelte build and a graceful prestance. She wore a light green dress with gossamer sleeves that led the eye to her delicate fingers. The color went well with her skin tone, weirdly, as she had a greenish tint like every else here. Viv's gaze travelled up to dark wavy hair that fell to the woman's neck, and large, expressive chestnut eyes that studied her in return. Varska had a pretty face, slightly pointed, and only marred by an angry red scar.

Viv averted her eye immediately, but it was too late. Varska had noticed and her thin smile had turned bitter. It was quite a scar as well, in the shape of a symbol she did not recognize. The skin around was puffy and raw, and it looked like it might be quite painful.

Varska sat as well as Viv took a sip of her tea. She breathed in with delight at the sophisticated taste. It was definitely tea-like. Flowery accents and a delicious almond aftertaste graced her poor palate.

"Excellent blend," she commented lightly.

Varska, however, did not reply. She was obviously quite focused on some personal reflection. Her intelligent face was scrunched in concentration while she tapped a finger against her nose. Viv watched with interest as a gamut of emotions bloomed on the woman's face. Surprise, then confusion, then suspicion, then revelation, then smug superiority.

"You are an outlander," she finally declared.

Despite her best efforts, Viv could feel her eyes widen. She started to drink on the tea to mask her worries.

“Only three nations on Nyil could have produced someone with your skin tone, would have access to teleportation magic, and would have knowledge of the Old Empire. Even then, such a mix is unlikely,” the woman explained, quite proud of herself. “A woman from Korrin would have reacted to the sigil of Kor the baleful, their country’s arch-traitor, which I placed at the entrance. A woman from Vizim would have never accepted to sit on a carpet showing an offensive spell array. Finally, a woman from the shaded lands would have recognized the taste of the poisonous Nightblossom.”

‘Pfffffftt!’

Viv spat her entire mouthful of infusion in the mage’s startled face, then jumped back in alarm. She stopped when she realized that Varska had her eyes closed and both hands open, palms empty.

Viv stood at the edge of the carpet while Varska calmly cleaned her face with a towel, looking much less triumphant now that her enthusiasm had been doused with saliva. She finished by drying off her modest bosom, and took a deep sigh.

“Of course, I did not use Nightblossom but its harmless cousin, Mirage blossom, which shares a similar taste, and is used for training purposes.”

“Oh.”

“I apologize for surprising you.”

“Accepted. And, err, sorry about the tea.”