

They made their way through the ruins. Viv already saw armor-clad sentries on top of intact walls, with some knights going through every building room by room to check for revenants. Viv saw that kids had been left near the entrance to play under the supervision of one of Gogen's brood. The cleaner had been one of the first to join the exile, along with her progeny and relatives who numbered in the fucking dozens. They found that the guard barracks by the side of the entrance had been repurposed as an administrative room with their one map available displayed on a damaged table. Someone had placed light stones in the rusty sconces and the place was less dusty. It looked like an underground resistance cell headquarters in any movie instead of just a dump.

The new, improvised council had a long session long into the afternoon, following which they gathered most people in the massive square by the entrance. The place had been cleared of wagons and repair supplies to allow a series of marked spaces separated by basic walls made by piling bricks on top of one another. There was the infirmary. They had a supply depot. They even had an armory. Kazar's free people were all lined up with light spells going off everywhere to provide enough radiance for everyone to see. Farren set up a pedestal and went first.

"Hello everyone, we have several pieces of news for you. First, I'm sorry to say that we will implement rules for the food distribution. I promise you that every family will get their fair share, and that nobody will be left behind, more details tomorrow. We will also make teams to do labor around to make that place viable. If you have any experience in mining for example, please see me at the end of the session. Thank you. Now, we will have a burial ceremony later tonight for Mayor Resh Ganimatalo. It's a shame that her life ended that way, but her departure does not erase forty years of effort and determination. We will honor her memory with a brief service."

Viv suddenly remembered that she had been forgetful of those who had died to carry her forward. Back when they had faced the necromancer, Jor, the strong silent man, had jumped to his death to give her a chance. Benetti the disgraced nobleman had charged crawlers to afford them a few seconds. They had sacrificed their life so that she might live, and it had been too easy for her to overlook them, so busy she had been with her own survival. Her own development.

Farren continued, unaware of her turmoil.

"One good piece of news, our witch pathed up!"

There were a lot of cheers. They were not exactly forced, but it was clear that the people were concerned.

"This will help our cause. Now I have spoken enough. We all know what you all want to hear. I will let Viviane go over the plan."

Some of the Enorians still called her Bob but it appeared that everyone was starting to make an effort. It felt nice.

The council had decided that, with Viv finally developing leadership skills, she would be brought forward to develop them. She half-expected that the rest of the council simply didn't enjoy speaking in public though, and that they were more than happy to let her get the spotlight and the stress that went with it. She replaced Farren on a pedestal and cast the sound spell that allowed her voice to carry.

"Right, good afternoon everyone. I'll start by stating the obvious. We can't stay here long."

There were nods all around.

"We just made a new ward stone so folks will soon be able to get out, and we do have some food, but it won't be enough in the long run. There is no rebuilding our lives in this place, not if we want more than half of us to survive. We have one option, and one option only."

She could feel their determination mounting. Anger was never far from the surface these days.

"We must take back Kazar."

"Aye!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Now," she continued, "I don't need to tell you the bad news. You can guess. The one piece of good news we have is that Prince Assh— I mean Prince Lancer is on a short time limit. He needs to get his filthy... he has to return to Enoria for the war season. He won't have a choice. That means that some of his army will leave and those who stay behind will be less numerous. He simply can't afford to keep everyone here."

"You can swear, you know?" someone screamed for the back. A few people chuckled. The mood changed. It felt more intimate now, like everyone was part of a conspiracy.

"Thanks, but let's stay on track for that one. We can hold out until the enemies split but that still leaves us with a siege force behind protected walls. Right now we are not ready to contest them, so we have to prepare. Fortunately, I have a plan. First, we need volunteers for accelerated militia training. Training will be provided by some of the best fighters this side of the Deadshield Woods. Join up if you're ready to fight for your land. Second," she continued, silencing a few clamoring people, "we'll get ourselves weapons. We're going to see the Yries and negotiate with them. They've already started to mine so they should have iron at the very least. Third, we're going to need siege weapons. I have an idea, but I'll tell you more on that later. And fourth, we're going to see if the mountain tribes won't join us. Once all of those things work out, we will attack. Any questions? Yes?"

A sturdy man with a long white beard roared from among a group of wiry men with dark expressions. He was from one of the most remote regions from Kazar, so Viv had never seen him before.

"What if Prince Twatface comes to us to finish the job?"

“We have already sent scouts away and the mountain tribes will also warn us, but right now the plan is that I will walk six hours into the deadlands and activate a beacon that will attract a horde, lure them back to their army camp and finally escape.”

The proposal was received with an awkward silence.

“Any reason why we can’t do that with Kazar?”

“Because the church and every garrison around would object to wholesale civilian slaughter, even if they are partly responsible, and because we want a city to go back to.”

“Would the mountain tribes really help us? They’re usually really reclusive.”

“I think they will,” Viv said, “because the first thing the prince will do after taking the countryside will be to try to steal from them as well.”

There were a few more questions, then the crowd soon started muttering.

“Alright everyone, one more thing,” Viv said in an attempt to channel all the energy she saw, “remember that we need people to help with various vital tasks. Cleaning, excavation, baking, and fighting... Decide what you want the most and find your groups. Come place your name on the list in front of the command room.”

Leadership: Beginner 2

The assembly dissolved into the milling mess that was a finished reunion. Viv went to talk to everyone she wanted to bring on the Yries expedition, then it was time for the burial. For some reason, people showed a lot of affection for Arthur. She was particularly popular with children, and many of them started to bring her shining rocks to line her nest. She would welcome their tribute with spread wings and approving squees.

People still gave Solfis a wide berth, which showed that they were smart.

The service happened outside at nightfall. The mana saturation had already decreased enough that most people could stay outside for an hour without ill effect. The air was dry but fresh, and there were hints of rain higher on the mountain.

They buried Ganimatalo in a deep grave. Some of the common folks had managed to engrave a slab of stone with her name in the northern script, that of her home. There was even a basic tree to symbolize the city, her life’s work. The city guard lowered her rickety coffin into the ground in silence. Farren spoke when it was done.

“We have gathered tonight to say goodbye to Resh Ganimatalo, our mayor for decades. She spent her entire life turning our fair city from an outpost to a real community. Thanks to her hard work, we made this place our home, not just a way station for traveling soldiers. She dedicated her entire life to this project and I would like to thank her.”

He stood straighter and his gaze swept the assembled people.

“I will not avoid the topic of her death. You know how she died. You all know that she killed herself. I heard whispers that she abandoned her in our hour of need and I will have none of it tonight. We are not all equal before adversity. Some of us are strong, some of us are smart. Some of us can get kicked down and climb back to their feet every time. Resh could not take it and she lost hope. We all suffer from her decision, but we must all remember that most of us try our best day to day and, sometimes, we fail. As Neriad reminds us, every day is a battle against our own demons. Resh lost that battle, despite her efforts. We must respect that fact. In the end, how we live and die is our own choice and our own responsibility. She chose to stop fighting. We don't have to like it, but we have to accept it. Likewise, if any of you feel that your own demons are closing in, remember that you are not alone. What may look like indifference might just be people prioritizing the current crisis. We care about each other, we just don't always show it, especially at a time like that. I have spoken. We will proceed with the burial. Anyone who wants to say goodbye, please form a line.”

Viv joined it. She had not really cared for the departed mayor, yet she understood that she was sort of a public figure and appearance mattered.

Fuck, she was really becoming more and more like her dad. A shovelful of dirt. A muttered prayer — in French so that nobody could get it — and she was off to the side.

The procession lasted for a long time. Almost everyone had shown up, even those who lived outside of the city walls and who could not have seen the mayor more than a handful of times. The sun dipped behind the horizon and lights rose in the air one by one in every shade of the rainbow. Finally, Farren stood again before the assembled people. He led a quick prayer as the tombstone was set, and finished with a little surprise.

“We say farewell to Resh Ganimatalo and pray that Enttiku, god of death, leads her soul to the beyond. And since we should not remain leaderless, I propose that we choose someone to unite us in this hour of need. We don't want a mayor now, we want someone who knows how to fight and to lead. We need someone who knows the deadlands and the forest both and walked them without fear or hesitation. Finally, we need someone who comes up with a plan. I nominate Viviane, Nyil's first Lost Heiress.”

Viv was stunned speechless. It was a bit of a low blow as that sort of thing should definitely be discussed well in advance!

“She saved me kid!” someone said from the back.

“Can kill a hundred revenants with her little finger.”

“She said hi to me once.”

“Hold on!” someone said, and silence spread. It was the same old man who had asked her about the mountain tribe’s help.

“I don’t know this woman,” he stated, and others around him nodded. Viv could see the backlash building as her newest supporters frowned and moved, but they were all stopped when Denerim the inquisitor stepped forward.

“I will speak for her.”

Viv just stood there like a mall dummy, not knowing where to put herself. It was all going very fast.

“Let me tell you of that time we were hunting an acolyte of Gomogog, the evil master of flesh and change...”

The old knight told a tale that sure as hell painted Viv into a good light. What she remembered the most about that fight was how close they had come to losing the tree, how scared shitless she had been, and how Varska had vomited afterwards. Hearing him though, she had kept a cool head and done some amazing stuff. Marruk and Varska got compliments as well. Then it was Lorn’s turn to talk about how she had held the line twice during the first mine expedition and how they would have had to fall back without her, losing people for sure. Farren talked about her helping clear deadland locations for paltry sums. He did not mention that she was hoping for a cure for her soul wound.

It went on for a while.

Brenna talked about how she had helped with the wounded after the beastling battle. Gogen the house-cleaner said that Viv was a good kid and that did it for half of the crowd. The child she had saved from the weird plant monster said that she had not hesitated to use a healing potion as he was bleeding out, even though it cost at least five silver talents and no mistake. Arthur bounced forward, stood on her hind leg, spread her wings and squeaked and suddenly she had all the children’s votes. The old guy was already nodding and so were his friends so that was pretty much it. Then somebody broke a cask of beer — one of their last ones — and people politely lined up to get a few thimbles. A few rathclaw skewers later, they had a party.

“Dick move to do that without clearing it with me first,” she told Farren in the ensuing din.

“Seeing you flustered and surprised made it more spontaneous and Kazarans like spontaneity. I’ll just have to apologize and make it up to you. Now that you’re technically the head, I won’t hide things from you again, I promise. Let’s just say that it was my last necessary evil.”

“You’d better remember that because my patience for bullshit done behind my back is exhausted. Next time, I’ll tell you to fuck off, fate of the city or not.”

“Crystal clear. I’m sorry Viv, I did it for the people and I promise I won’t surprise you again.”

The next to visit her was Lorn and he hurriedly said a few words before leaving, which was wise because she could not bear to be anything more than polite with the fucker.

A plethora of folks came to congratulate her until her smile froze and her face hurt. She didn’t have a clue who most of these people were, and found it a bit hard to give a shit, but she remembered that it was important to them and that was enough to keep going.

They were still strangers to her.

It was very late when people started going back in. At some point, Solfis had come to stand by Viv’s side and things had gone significantly calmer. She felt drained. Exhausted in a way that she had not since leaving the deadlands. There was a void in her chest where her heart was supposed to be. Everything had gone dull. Arthur came and climbed on her shoulders and Viv patted her on the chest.

“Why do I feel like shit?” she asked aloud.

//We are burying someone, Your Grace.

//We are not burying the one we should.

Viv did not want to deal with the grief. it could not be handled. There was no closure to be had while Prince Assclown still sat near Varska’s tower, counting his fucking stolen money like some be-crowned mob.

“I don’t even have her body.”

Viv tried to ignore Solfis but he had the kind of persistence that came from missing a lot of organic bits. She could not win a game of patience with him.

“What.”

//Irfen once told me that burials are for the living.

//You do not need remains.

//You need memories.

“I don’t want to do it. It’s not right.”

//Taking revenge may satisfy you.

//But you will have to say goodbye.

//It might as well be now.

//That we have peace.

Pissed her off. Pissed her off. He pissed her off being all reasonable and result-driven and everything.

//Your Grace, please.

//I have an idea.

Solfis' words pierced through the veil of self-destructive anger.

"You do?"

//Yes.

//Come with me, please.

The three left, soon joined by Marruk who still looked a bit awkward about the whole affair, yet the stout woman just grunted that she had known Varska too and that she was going to pay her respects and no one could say anything.

They passed by a patrol and Solfis picked an apparent random piece of slag from the ground. It had been half-buried near one of the larger mounds. Without a word, he moved with the usual uncanny speed, and six slices later, they had a rectangle.

The improvised tombstone was smooth and mostly red-brown, but there were veins of verdigris snaking through it. It looked like...

//The closest I could find to her favorite mana color.

"How did you know?"

//There were a few veins of copper in the surrounding slag.

//I knew that they would turn the right color.

//Should I write something?

"Just her name and... nothing else. I can't think of anything that would do her justice and that I want others to see."

//Sobriety has its own class.

"Yeah yeah."

"I will carry the stone. There is a secluded place behind the foundry with a lot of sun. I think I know what Solfis plans," Marruk said.

Viv followed and they soon found a nice, isolated spot. Marruk brandished the stella and stabbed it into the earth. She left and returned a little bit later with...

"The Suncult Marea..." Viv said.

Varska's pride and joy, the large fiery flower had been under her care for over a decade. Its large yellow petals were looking a bit dimmer but it was still going strong. One of Gogen's people had looked after it during the trip. Viv delicately removed the plant from its pot and placed it in a hole she dug out with a shovel. It was not a proper tomb, but it was a memorial.

//My data banks show that grief is better managed if you can say a few words about the departed.

//And then say goodbye.

Viv realized the trap when tears dripped down her cheeks. She had tried to bottle it because they were under constant pressure but there was no holding her emotions in at this stage.

“Varska, you bitch.”

She was off to a good start,

“You had no right to do that. I’m not a child to be protected, I’m a caster dammit. I eat monsters for breakfast. Literally. They’re tasty too.”

More tears.

“Fuck... Right. Okay. Varska, you were one of the best things to happen to me in this world. You were a pearl in an otherwise drab tapestry. I wish we could have stayed together longer. I wish you could have forgiven yourself for your past sins so that you would not feel the need to die for them. Nevertheless, thanks for everything. Thanks for the lessons and the kisses and thanks for the way you served us tea with a full ceremony every time. I’ll never forget you, like I’ll never forget Jor for tossing me up that wall before I could get swarmed, and Benetti for charing to his death to give us a few precious seconds. I won’t throw that chance away. Also I’m killing that bastard Prince Lancer with my own hands.”

“Uh oh,” Marruk said.

//Your Grace...

“I don’t want to hear it! It will take a year or a decade, I’ll do it here or in his palace but I’ll fucking do it. I will watch the light go out from his greedy eyes.”

“Squeel!”

“Thanks darling, I knew that you would understand. Careful you’re going to scratch the stone.”

Sensing her distress, Arthur jumped on Viv. Given the fact that she was the size of a labrador now, wings excluded, Viv almost fell down but she did feel better afterward. Marruk mumbled a few guttural words in Kark and they all stood there in a quiet moment that didn’t need more words.

It was Solfis who first spoke.

//Your Grace, you know that I may not recharge my own core.

“Yeah?”

**//The accumulated black mana in the obelisk should have recharged your black core.
//If you allow it, I can transfer the core's content to my own with only moderate power loss.**

"Can I set a recurring order?"

Solfis' eyes flashed yellow. Several times.

**//Bypass attempt failed.
//I appreciate the effort, Your Grace.
//Hard-coded directives may not be circumvented so easily.
//You will have to authorize the transfer every time.**

"Is there a way to remove the directive?"

**//Only Irlefen could have done it safely.
//It is impossible now.
//You may still add manual directives, if you wish, to skirt the rules.
//They cannot alter my core.**

"Ah damn. Well, go for it then."

**//Excellent.
//In the meanwhile, you have visitors.
//Remember what I told you, mutant.**

"I remember," Irao said, emerging from the dark. Everyone else jumped in surprise.

"Squee!"

"Please don't scare us, I mean, don't scare my poor Arthur!" Viv said.

"One day you'll get a reflex mace strike to the face," Marruk complained.

Irao lifted his hands in appeasement but he showed no signs of guilt.

"Hellow. Sorry. It takes effort for me to reveal myself. I do not mean any harm to you. I do not hide my presence consciously."

"Oh," Viv said, "I did not know that. But anyway, what's the occasion?"

"A very important one. First, do you wish to force me to kill?"

It took a moment for Viv to understand. She understood that a lot of people in her shoes would demand that the assassin perform some task for them, or else, but she would not. She had a feeling that the Hadal human before her would just disappear. It was just a waste of time. Worse, pushing him away might deprive Farren of a free bodyguard. There was

nothing to gain by alienating the weird man. He was like some sort of faerie tale being that could never be compelled, woe to the ones who tried.

“You are referring to Prince Lancer?’ she asked, just to be sure.

“Him. Or his bodyguard. Or the Envoy. Or his officers. Or...”

“Yeah I got it. No. You have not pledged yourself to our cause. I won’t ask this of you.”

“... I see.”

“And I intend to kill the man myself.”

The bald assassin’s slit eyes rose up in contemplation. He returned his attention to Viv a few seconds later.

“I will still... pull my weight. If you fulfill your promise to me.”

Viv stopped and drew a blank.

“A promise? What promise?”

“On the third month of the year, after the garrison shifted, you went to clear a cave with Farren. Your golem detected me. We talked. I knocked on your door later that night. I greeted you.”

“Yeaaaaa?”

“You asked me... ‘What do you want, Irao?’”

“Shit!”

Viv jumped back. The voice that had come from the man’s throat was hers, exactly hers, to the last intonation. It was an exact copy of what she sounded like when she was tired but trying to be polite. A recording could not have done better. Her own mother would have been fooled.

“And I answered, a safe haven for my people,” Irao continued.

And then Viv’s magically-improved memory supplied the remaining part of the conversation. it had indeed been months... but...

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

Ah.

“Not exactly a queen,” Viv said.

“Your kingdom is very small,” Irao allowed, “and you may not be queen for long, but those are what Farren calls technicalities. What you meant was, if you have a territory and you get to make the rules, which is the case now, you will give us safe haven. Will you stand by your statement?”

It was a moment of truth. Viv knew that Irao had been testing her, but she had assumed that it was more about trust and, perhaps, sharing the odd piece of intel like he had done earlier.

There was no need for any hesitation though.

“So long as you respect the rules of Kazar there are no issues. I won’t discriminate based on race simply because it might anger someone I don’t even give a shit about. However, I have a few questions. First, how did you know that... things would turn out this way?”

“I did not. Farren came here, and I followed. I realized that this was a good place. Kazar is remote enough that hit squads will not follow, and if they do, I will see them come. There are plenty of places to hide in the forests and at the edge of the deadlands. It would do. But... we would have remained hidden. Now, perhaps we can live together with some normal humans. I want to know if it is at all possible.”

“And you believe that I can make it happen?”

“You are the only one who said yes.”

Viv raised a brow at that.

“Indeed,” Irao continued, “I asked some other rulers. They talked a lot, made a lot of wind with their mouth but it was only that, wind. They wanted assassins they could keep at no cost. We wanted a life.”

“Alright... alright, fuck. This complicates matters a bit but it should be fine. The Church will definitely agree and we can tell the guards that you are refugees and scouts. Is scouting fine?”

“Yes. I understand the concept of community and contributing to it.”

“And, uh, you said we. When are your people coming?”

Irao made a sign of his head and shapes started to emerge from the shadows of the surrounding buildings. There were bald men with stooped postures, some more inhuman than others. The women all had the same prominent skull and black straight hair. They were all pale. The light of distant spells reflected on dozens of slit eyes like from a pack of wolves. The silence was complete.

On Viv’s side, a hairless kid peeked at her from behind a tired Hadal woman’s ratty skirt.

Irao turned to her.

“Now.”