

Viv's badass moment was instantly ruined when Solfis reminded her of the necessity of looting. The refugees had to function on minimum resources and so many horses, both alive and dead, could simply not be wasted. Marruk managed to catch a few of the wandering beasts, but others had galloped away or back to the edge of the deadlands and would have to be caught. With the sun setting, it was a lost cause without some help.

Viv managed to feel a trickle of mana coming from the cavalry leader and 'liberated' a magical item from his uncooperating form. It was a small brooch holding a shield enchantment that would protect its wearer from spell effects.

To an extent.

The fortunate finding was immediately given to Marruk, the most vulnerable member of the band. Money was also found in small amounts, except the officer who yielded a whole gold talent.

"Squee!"

With great ceremony, Viv offered the prize to Arthur for 'extraordinary services and draconic excellence'. The small one observed the shiny, shiny gold for a full minute before placing it in her collar purse with motherly care. After that they departed the battlefield. It only took them a few minutes to cover the league separating them from the camp on stolen rides, trussed prisoner in tow, except for Solfis who merely ran. They found Koro waiting patiently at the edge of the cordon of guards with a number of torches providing lighting to the sentries. Many of those let out a dark, pungent smoke and Viv suspected that the wood was too green.

"Hey Koro, we need a retrieval team."

"You killed many revenants then?"

"Not just. We also got forty about forty Enorian riders. Some of their horses are still alive." Koro whistled softly, then her gaze grew vage and a thin line of drool dropped from the corner of her mouth.

"Horse steak."

"Hey, focus," Viv chastised.

"Sorry! I, hmm, I have good news and bad news."

"I could really use some good news right now."

"We had the first baby delivered succesfully! It's a girl and she was named Bob in your honor!"

Viv slowly slapped herself and groaned in her saddle.

“And the bad news is that, ah, mayor Ganimatalo was found dead in her tent.”

Viv’s first reaction was quite uncharitable as she forced herself not to glare at Solfis, who had once proposed this very option. He had been with Marruk then herself for the past two days. There was no way that it was him.

“What the fuck happened?”

“Investigator Tars says she took her own life.”

Koro’s face was a mask of intense confusion.

“Grandfather world is trying to kill us all the time, how can you just let him win? I don’t understand...”

Viv searched vaguely for something to say and found that she couldn’t be arsed. She didn’t understand Ganimatalo either. It didn’t matter right now. They were in crisis mode. Viv made her way to the command tent, everyone giving her a wide berth. Or most likely giving Solfis a wide berth. Two guards saw her and opened the flap to let her in without a word. Inside, she found Brenna writing in a ledger, as well as Corel and Tars. Viv had rarely seen the severe investigator since she had welcomed her in Kazar, a few months and an eternity ago, which made sense. She had not been involved in anything suspicious like mysterious disappearance after all. Tars wore a leather armor and her skin was pale, though still tinged slightly green like everyone else here. A deep gash ran from her right cheek to the back of her head, and her ear was missing some flesh. The wound had scabbed over but it looked like it hurt a lot.

The tent’s occupants looked up at her as she arrived. Then Corel unexpectedly rushed her, only stopping at a few paces when Solfis followed her in. Marruk had stayed outside.

“It’s all your damn fault,” he spat, foaming at the mouth, “even since you came we’ve only had one catastrophe after another. Twenty years of growth and development ruined in two days.”

“The fuck? You are blaming me? Me?”

“Boss, please, calm down...” Tars said with a plaintive voice.

“Don’t you see?” Corel raged, “Don’t you see? She brings bad luck. She goes to a fort? Necromancers. She goes to a town? Monster hordes. Military invasions!”

Brenna frowned. She closed her book with a snap.

“You are out of your mind, Corel. Grief is making you spew bullshit.”

“Fuck off, woman. You are blind.”

“So Neriad help me, watch your tongue. Your pain can only excuse so much. I won’t even argue with you. You know the utter stupidity of what you just said.”

“You are both looking at chains of logic but you don’t see the patterns. We have had more crisis since she arrived than in the past five years combined.”

“And so it’s her fault? The civil war? The fucking civil war?”

“I know what I know. She is a calamity. The Calamitous Bob.”

Corel pushed his way out of the tent. Viv let him pass. Solfis didn’t.

One moment, the angry man was barreling out. The other, he was static with a claw on his shoulder and the golem’s alien gaze only a few fingers away.

//Do not let your emotions rule you, human.

//Or else.

“Are you threatening me?”

//Yes.

Corel sputtered and protested, but there was no winning a glaring contest with the golem. He finally left the tent in a huff.

“Well. That happened,” Viv summarized.

“Ahem. I know that tensions are running high but can you please keep your golem in check?” Brenna asked.

“He’s only tasked with defending me. You don’t have to worry,” Viv reassured, but the church servant did not relax. “In any case, we should be clear of revenants for the next two days. How are things on your end?”

“Births are going fine. We had mountain tribe people come and they agreed to help us through the mountains. I’m just very concerned about the lack of known wells in the mines you mentioned. We will be fine water-wise until then, but we only have three drawn cisterns for close to one thousand five hundred people. That’s five to six days of water for everyone. People die quickly without water.”

“I’m sure we can find a well near the foundries. They absolutely needed water. Even if we don’t or it’s too obstructed, we can go to the Yries, I’m sure they have sources. They would not have established a town without one. And they have stone weavers to help us.”

“Fine,” she nodded, “fine. There is also the question of food. We have emptied the granaries but, even then... we have two months worth. Three, if we ration and forage, though I’m not sure what there is to forage in the depths... It’s not enough to last until mid-autumn, not to mention through winter. Even if we find the most fertile ground on Nyil and Sardanal himself

wanks over the seeds, we won't have time to grow crops before people starve. I just don't see a way out of here."

Viv considered their options. It was not all that bad.

"Look, the mountain tribes produce food used in military rations which they sell to the temple."

"Yeah, and we export it to Enoria..." Brenna said with a bitter voice.

Viv waited for a while but apparently, the head nurse was tired and her brain could not follow.

"There isn't going to be any exporting done since all the logistics and payment is done by the temple and you guys are here, is there?"

"Oh, of course! And this is much more important than stockpiling rations for bad times."

"The bad times are now."

"Alright. The deliveries are set to start pretty soon. There will be a lot of tubers, but I guess we can make do. It won't be enough though."

"It's a start. The other source of food is around Kazar."

"Which is currently occupied by an enemy army, no?"

"We did not stand a chance when we held the walls," Tars said without malice, "I don't see how we are better off now that we are outside."

"Patience," Viv answered, "I have a few ideas. But first, we need to stabilize."

There was a commotion outside. A few people argued loudly, and she heard the din of a forming mob.

"I'll see what this is about," Viv said. The others nodded. She stepped outside.

A man was loading a small cart, his family and children crying on the side. The man himself had fat tears trailing down his cheeks as he piled bag after bag on the rickety thing. Another man argued with him, anguish clear on his face.

"You can't do this, Dorrel. They'll enslave you, you know they will."

"I'm sorry. We just don't have a future. You folks may have forgotten, but I'm a newcomer here. I saw my parents starve to death and let me tell you, it ain't a pretty way to go. I won't have my folks die the same way. At least, my kids may be free again, maybe. I just... It's all over, neighbor. You're still holding hope but it's all over. We're just poor folks on a road with nuthin'. I'm sorry, but it's true. Kazar is finished."

In Viv's wounded soul, there was a slight 'ting', like a chime rung and left to vibrate in a quiet room. The hum spread through her mind with a compelling intensity, letting her know that she stood at a crossroad.

Several paths were open to her, but there was one that may close if she did not act now, talk now. After all, nature abhorred a vacuum.

She hated it.

She hated it, because it reminded her that deep inside, she was still her father's daughter. All this talk about him playing dirty were true. He was a jaded asshole, and yet, politics were a dirty game to begin with. He simply didn't deny it to her. And she knew that he was right.

She could let it go and live the life of a mercenary, hoping that Farren might regain enough clout to send her to his big native city. She could cross the forest and find employment somewhere, which would not be hard. With hope, she would gather enough funds and influence to find a way to handle her rising attunement before black mana broke down her body from the inside. The refugees would be left behind, disperse, probably. Some would die, some would return to be enslaved. Some would join the mountain tribes if they allowed it. There would be bandits, a lot of those, in the following months.

Or she could grab the moment.

Her hesitation lasted only for an instant.

Deep inside, she knew that only regret would come from letting the opportunity go.

If she failed, well, at least she would have tried.

If she succeeded...

Viv closed her eyes and brought earth lessons to the front of her mind. Intricate concepts like social constructivism, which sees the importance of human interactions in development and knowledge, faded to the background, useful but better left hidden. She remembered Ernest Renan and the theories that led to nationalism and its excesses. Her enhanced mind structured and reformulated the arguments just as she formed colorless mana into a few glyphs. When she spoke, her voice traveled with unnatural ease across the quieting crowd.

"Kazar is alive. Here."

The familiar feeling of doing a presentation in front of a full room came back to haunt Viv. This time, there were real stakes as well.

"Kazar is not finished, at all. But tell me Dorrel. What is Kazar. What makes a city. Is it the walls? The houses? Hmm?"

"I..."

“Is it the tree? Is Kazar the tree?”

She had their attention now. It was all wind and bullshit, but it was also what they needed. It was lucky for her that most people here didn't even know how to read, or they might have guessed that she was just cobbling ideas together.

“No,” she continued, not breaking her flow, “it's not. Kazar is none of those things. The fields, the wells, hell, even the city hall, they are part of the city but they are not the city, because Kazar is not that. Kazar is a soul.”

She took a few steps forward to the nearest crate and walked on it so that everyone could look up to her. It was also a trick to make her seem higher.

“A soul that is made of the past and the present. The past first, the foundation. All the shared history. Now, I'm relatively new here, but I see Kazar in the beautiful fabrics adorning our homes during festivals, with precise embroidery but no dyes, because we don't have dye yet. I see it in the fields and the orchards, every fruit and seed a victory against the deadlands. I witnessed it in the peasant who looked up to see a revenant crossing his field and just went back to work. I saw it in the spring celebration, in the way that our guards walked into the forest without fear to save a caravan from beastlings. How we fought and bled with courage and unity. Every day I see it when we face overwhelming odds and scarcity and just keep going. Even today, I still see it.

“Yes, because a city is also in the present. It's in the willingness to look at the past, all those years of efforts and sacrifice to develop the town into what it is today, and to keep going together. That's what Kazar is, a common purpose, and as long as you keep that in mind, as long as you are all willing to continue this tradition of effort and defiance, then Kazar is still alive. Kazar is here, exiled, bleeding, confused and betrayed, but Kazar lives, and by all the gods we will see that tree again.”

New general skill: leadership at beginner 1

Viv had done it. She saw hope in the faces of all those around her. More importantly, she saw pride, the same backbone that kept the inhabitants of Nyil going until their death at the hands of monsters.

“Yea!”

“Hear, hear!”

“Now, people of Kazar, we are down but not out. We have food for a while, water, what we need is time. The guards and I will lead you to a place of safety where we can lick our wounds but it will take over a week so you'd better save your strength. Go and rest for now, help your neighbors if you can and keep your hearts strong, because it will get worse before it gets better. For Kazar!”

“For Kazar!”

Viv watched the crowd disperse with purpose, everyone trying to make themselves useful. The man who wanted to leave, Dorril, dropped the bag he was holding as his entire family dragged him into a group hug. The moment of peace was interrupted by two men in dusty armor walking to her. Viv was not alarmed, as she recognized the muscular forms of the only pair inquisitors around. Denerim was still respectable with his salt and pepper hair, short beard a bit scruffier than the last time she saw him. Orkan was his same gaunt, dark and handsome self. His tattoos pulsed a dull red.

“What the hell happened here?” Denerim asked, his eyes as wide as saucers.

Where to start?