

Viv sat back down and helped herself to another cuppa. It was good tea. The confectionaries in the middle were made from, as far she could tell, white egg and nuts and some sugar. The sweets tasted really good, with a fruity note. There could have been magic involved. She thought they might have been imported.

“When you are done, I would like to ask you about your nature as an outlander.”

Viv considered the question.

“Is it too late to deny everything?” she asked.

“Quite so,” the mage deadpanned. She added more water to the pot and picked some food herself.

“Rest assured that your secret is safe with me. My days of engaging in political games are long over, and this retreat I find myself in is, unfortunately, the best I will ever get. I am mostly curious. Your kind is extremely rare.”

“Is it? Someone mentioned the creator of the Hadal Strain Humans. Apparently they were an outlander as well.”

“Yes, one from a world with less magic than our own, or so I read. His memoirs have been outlawed in most of Param.”

“Which means that they are still widely read...”

“...by those with the influence and inclination, yes. So, do tell, how is your world? How did you come here?”

And now Viv was faced with the thing she had missed without realizing it. Someone to talk to.

About everything.

And yet...

“I would offer an oath of secrecy, but...” Varska said sadly while pointing at her face where the ugly scar ruined her skin.

“Yeah, what’s with that? Oh wait, I do not mean to pry.”

“Your Old Imperial is very strange. It feels more like a spoken language than an academic one.”

“It’s a skill.”

“Oh. Oh, of course! So that you could communicate locally. A gift from Nous?”

“Maradoc, actually.”

“The god of travellers. I should have guessed. And no, explaining the scar to you does not annoy me, but I would prefer to keep the circumstances of its acquisition to myself, if you do not mind. This scar is a mark of the pariah in the court of Helock, the City of Mages. Its fame has crossed the borders so that everyone may know of my shame. Only a handful of recipients are thus stamped every year, after all. The royal torturer inflicts it with a specifically enchanted branding iron. The mark is quite unremovable. Even ablating the affected tissue does not work, as it simply transfers to the resulting wound.”

“Wow. That sucks. Does it still hurt?”

Varska touched the edge gingerly, and winced.

“Not badly enough to ruin my day. It does remind me of its presence on occasion. I would complain but the truth is that it was... deserved. I was a court mage on the rise and something threatened my career. I was younger then, and drunk on my own importance. Reckless. I went too far and committed a grave sin, and here I am.”

Viv nodded, sensing that it was a difficult topic.

“As for me, I’m not sure how I came here. I come from a world without magic. A month ago...”

Viv started talking. And talking. Since Varska already knew who she was, there was really no reason to hide anything. In fact, she did not want to hide anything. She wanted to share with someone who might show her empathy, and she had a good feeling about the woman anyway.

And so, the flood gates opened.

Viv spoke of fear and pain and the wonders of magic, how Solfis guided her, meeting the Baranese knights. She spoke of the necromancers and Arthur the small monster who happened to be super cute, and no touching a scale off her tail. She mentioned how shocking it was to find teens at a brothel and the big ass tree and Marruk who was technically an alien or something? The verbal diarrhea did not stop for what felt like hours. She only paused to visit the lady’s room because the tea was apparently a diuretic.

Occasionally, Varska would refill the cup or refocus Viv with a word of comment. If the messy nature of the tale bothered her, she did not betray any signs of it. The story ended with the morning’s uncomfortable meeting with the mayor.

“Ah, I am partly to blame for this. Ganimatalo has enjoyed virtually full power over Kazar since I have withdrawn from politics. Perhaps it went to her head. Your wild path and bedraggled

appearance when you arrived may have given her the wrong impression that you would be susceptible to intimidation. The wealth and power she wields would be impressive to a hedge caster from some forgotten mudhole. Not so with an outlander.”

“Still pissed me off.”

“I will have a talk with her in the evening, to remind her of our respective roles in this city. As a caster, you are under my purview. I will make sure to... impress that fact upon her.”

“So I’m not in trouble?”

“You never were. You have the backing of the church and you are a caster. So long as you do not break the law, she has little authority over you. If you do not go looking for trouble, you will be fine.”

“Those mercenaries from yesterday will not let the insult go.”

“Then let trouble come to you, and be prepared. Ganimatalo is too canny to risk everything on a harrien-brained scheme. You are relatively safe. You mentioned that Solfis had combat capabilities?”

“Yep.”

“Keep it secret and it will help you in a pinch.”

Tea time continued into the afternoon, and moved to the topic of magic.

“No magic at all? Not even a little bit?” Varska asked, fully absorbed. They had moved to the large couches to continue the conversation.

“Nope. Or if there is, it is hidden or too unreliable to matter.”

“Fascinating! But then... you are a caster now. What a change it must be for you.”

Viv babbled about how exciting this was, and how alive the mana felt in her conduits and in her mind.

“Interesting,” Varska observed, “I was taught that wielding magic was a contest of dominance with the apathy of the world. Perhaps your unusually high affinity affects you? Archmages and such rarely share their own thoughts on the matter, yet I would wager that their experience compares to your own. You said that Solfis helps you?”

“Yep. He has training methods from the Old Empire.”

“Then I cannot compete, but you mentioned the lack of resources on glyphs and spells. Would you perhaps be interested in a bit of learning?”

Viv stared at the woman as if she had grown another head.

“Hell yeah? I mean, is this a trick question?”

Varska chuckled, the sound light as chimes and still sad. Just like her smiles, it had a brittle quality to it.

“I would be delighted to help you with that specific part of your learning. As a witch, your understanding of mana shaping and perception is more instinctual than that of a more traditional mage, and I believe that your current training regimen suits you more than any others short of private tutelage under a renowned archwitch. Glyphs, on the other hand, are universal. What I do not know, we can both read in the tomes I brought with me on my exile.”

“Sounds good. I should head back. Same time tomorrow?”

“If it pleases you, yes. I should be able to make some room in my schedule.”

Varska’s voice was slightly self-deprecating. Whatever stuff she had done, the punishment had broken her pride.

Viv went down the stairs. There were no signs of Grema the housekeeper, though Viv smelled cooked meat through her door. Apparently, the grumpy woman had come with the tower and she and Varska kept exchanges to a minimum.

Marruk stood up from the small wall surrounding the tree base as soon as Viv walked out, intense relief clearly visible.

“Oh shit, I completely forgot to tell you. Everything is fine. Did you wait there for the whole time?”

“Yes! Today was very confusing!” the Kark woman bellowed with some justified annoyance.

Viv felt sorry, then she felt stupid. Not only had she spent much more time than planned with Varska, but she had told the woman almost everything. Everything! If she ended up latched to a vivisection chair in the morning, she only had her own naive stupidity to blame. Why, oh why?

But she knew why.

Because she felt lonely.

There, she said it. She had felt lonely and could not relate to most people. Varska had checked all the marks of that one close friend and Viv had swallowed the bait, hook, line, and sinker. She only had to hope that her trust was not misplaced.

To soothe Marruk, Viv brought her to eat dinner at the temple's *de facto* restaurant. A few vegetable buns were enough as a peace offering and they soon left, exchanging murderous glares with the mercenaries milling around. Viv finally got to see the temple guards in uniform as well.

As expected, they look deadly. Chainmails and shields and sword and maces of excellent make differentiated them from the rabble. They were mostly male but Viv saw the tall amazon woman she had come across in the Spotted Feather among their ranks. The other defining thing was the scars. Some of the guards were missing ears, or fingers, or even in one case a whole arm that had been replaced with a prosthesis. Viv found herself disappointed beyond measure.

"Gods and magic and still cannot figure out how to fucking regrow a limb? What the hell?"

She would have to ask Farren about that.

But now, it was time to go home for the night.

Two shapes approached the deserted compound where the witch had made her den. They wore earth-colored cloaks with complex patterns to help with camouflage. There was no one around but those two had not survived so long by taking risks.

"Front door trapped, I think," the taller one whispered. His brawny companion pointed right and the pair skirted around the walls, looking for a point of ingress. They knew that the Kark and witch had gone to town, so the house was empty. They now expected the front and back door to be rigged with traps, the magical nature of which the tall one had detected. It was part of his path.

"Here."

There was a shuttered window, but it was made of wood and nothing that could stop them. The tall one used a long and thin tool to unfasten the latch. He slowly, silently pulled the shutter open.

"Hold on, there is something blocking the—"

All further considerations were discarded when something clamped on his arm with titanic strength.

“AAAAAAAAAAAH!” he screamed as his bones gave.

“SKREEEEEEEE!” something replied.

The tall one pulled and the brawny one helped. It soon became apparent that the thing fighting them in this improvised tug of war was quite light, when it slammed against the wooden partition with a dull thud. The prize was released, and the tall man cradled his savaged limb. The would-be thieves legged it with magically enhanced speed.

Inside of the house, a reptilian creature licked her chops. She tilted her head in consideration and judged the taste as ‘passable to middling’. Her sampling done, she returned to the roof for some more well-deserved sunbathing.