

## Chapter 115: Draconic

It was a beautiful day to be She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold.

The wind and the gray caressed her scales when she took flight, their presence light and familiar. Far above the city, the overwhelming smell of stupid borgling things faded into pure morning crispness. In the air, she felt truly free, truly herself. Fluffy white clouds called her to play as they drifted above, blown south and away from the deep blue ocean. She considered piercing through to the sun above but reconsidered. She decided to show foresight! Planning! Vision! Just like mother did when she wanted something.

Yes, She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold was a profound thinker and a visionary, a true light of knowledge. Her amazing mental prowess let her know in advance that she would regret her decision if she answered the call of the flight, for above the clouds, there was nothing to eat.

And she was really hungry.

She was always hungry, these days. Sometimes, mother said she had spent too much time in the sad cave before mother found her, and now she was catching up. The dragonette did not like to think about that time. The cave had been filled with starvation and pain and fear and what she knew now was hopelessness. Thinking was not meant to make a dragon sad! It was meant to make a dragon RICH. And sated. So she thought and did not have to think for long. There was always a reliable way to get food.

She angled her wings down and forward and used a little gray to move faster, the world bending just so to get her closer to her goal. The azure of the sky merged into the cobalt of the ocean almost seamlessly, but there was white as well, the white of low happy clouds, the ephemeral spume marking the waves, and the more geometrical dye of sails.

More specifically, fishing ship sails.

She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold looked around, bending the world a little to help her already prodigious sight. Just like mother's mate had shown her. It was already mid-morning and the huddling mass of masts had spread out to find schools of prey. Most of it would be too small to provide good nourishment. She could afford to be picky, these days. Also, it would not be fun and mother had taught her that good prey was fun to catch. Like the prince thing. Shortly, she found a charcoal rendition of herself reverently drawn upon a large sheet and dove, descending with speed towards this specific ship.

It was a large one, as far as human floaties were. She was pretty sure she'd seen it before, teetering on the edge of dangerous waters hunting for larger prey. It even had teeth mounted on large crossbow things to snatch unsuspecting food. Yes, she had probably used it before. Hard to be sure. Those borgling humans all looked the same to her, and their imprint on the world was so small. Not like mother. She hoped mother would grow scales at some point. All she was growing now was hair. Maybe she should eat more.

She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold let out what absolutely had to be a terrifying and mighty roar, a harbinger of the apex existence to come. The humans heard and spotted her. The one with the biggest hat pointed at her and all turned with hushed reverence. It was probably the head borgler. They borgled the most and could be recognized by having either the biggest hat or the most colorful plumage. Like birds. Very easy.

The dragonette landed on the railing and spread her wings to assert dominance. With aesthetically pleasing coordination, the humans bowed deeply to acknowledge their respective place in the hierarchy of everything. The hat man took a few steps forward and fell to his knees. He started to point and gesticulate towards some indeterminate direction to the side in a language She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold did not recognize yet and how annoying it was that humans had languages that they expressed by vibrating their mouth orifices and flapping their fleshy bits around like fat rolls on an old cornudon. She understood the gist of it because she was very, very smart. And also because they had done this dozens of times. She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold needed a lot of food and the lands around the city had little wildlife. And seafood was tasty also.

Taking off, the dragonette went to hunt. Oh, she was a smart hunter. The smartest. Mother had taught her the meaning of bait. She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold was not just smart, she was sneaky and patient. The best. And so she moved above the flowing tide, slow and low, doing a lot of thinks.

*Am fat bird.*

*Fat bird.*

*Very fat bird.*

*Come on eat me.*

*Eat fat bird.*

And it worked. One moment she was flying through air and gray mana, the next a spike of blue under her wing heralded the coming of an attack. A ball of infused water as large as she was launched up, catching her entirely. Then, it immediately pulled back down.

She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold went with the flow and retracted her wings, taking over some of the blue to stabilize her fall. As she hit the water, she flexed her own power and took control over more of it. Her dive ended in the center mass of a chewy-leg. Its two eyes widened and it flayed its eight appendages in a terrible panic, trying to grab the attacker it had thought was a victim.

The dragonette tore into her opponent with relentless fury, the water no obstacle to her. The sea was just another place of weightlessness. Claws raked a thick hide. Her teeth dug into the hard flesh and gnawed, tasting the sweet meat. The chewy-leg struggled to escape. It did not know that it was still stronger, still dominant, because it was a dumb predator caught off guard and it could not think. Not like She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold.

Their struggle continued as they slowly sunk in an ever changing dance. Sometimes the dragonette was up, sometimes she was down, but she was never stopping. The moment she did, the chewy-leg would realize she was less than a quarter of its weight and not that strong yet. It took a little while but eventually the beast managed to catch her six limbs into its eight and squeezed. She could feel its tiny suction-claws digging into her scales, trying to peel them off her skin.

So she did like mother and sent spears of power into its eyes.

The creature was fast and it dodged, but not fast enough. One orb was lost and the other closed when the spear removed some cheek. Blood leaked from the opening, thick and heavy. She knew it was ready to fall, and so she waited. Patient hunter. She would be rewarded soon.

The beast shook with pain, tremor traveling along the boneless body. The dragonette bit more and clawed more and did not let it rest. She pressed it until it was trapped and finally, finally did what she had been waiting for all this time. It turned and exposed its beaked core to take a bite off the magnificent dragon harrying it. Just as planned! The smartest dragon waited for the fateful moment with giddy anticipation. Truly, she was as smart as she was strong and fast and patient and good-looking.

The beak opened. The dragon breathed a plume of smokey dark fire. The superheated 'werfer' was so powerful the water around them boiled, which was also a very important pre-cooking step. Infused black mana carried destruction into the beast's innards, annihilating enough of it to end its life. It spasmed and constricted She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold in the grasp of its dying limbs, yet the dragonette held no fear. The struggle was over.

She willed a ball of blue light to breach the shiny surface of the sea above. It rose through the air like a second sun to announce the news of her glorious victory to the world at large. Soon enough, the flat bottom of the ship reached her and men dove under the water just as she finished disentangling herself from her prize. They attached ropes and pointy things and hoisted the beast out of the water. The dragonette launched out with a flex of will, taking to the air with a triumphant roar of rage that was very impressive and very adult because all the humans stopped and bowed deeply to her.

Now was the time for her due reward.

The crew gathered around the carcass, butchering it and bringing her the choicest morsels. She nodded at those she fancied and the men placed the precious flesh on skewers which they covered in spicy sauce. The captain himself got a brasero going to supervise the cooking himself, which he delegated to the head roaster. Once the meal was done, he kneeled in front of her and presented her with her due tribute: two gold talents.

Those shone just as beautifully as the first ones she had looked at, all those many days ago in the mountain. Shiny ridges caught the light of the noon sun in mesmerizing patterns. They were soft and warm under her claws.

After inspecting each one with great care — one of the fishermen had tried to give her a bad one and his eyebrows were still regrowing — the dragonette placed each on the slightly larger pouch around her neck, never wondering why it grew in size to match her nor why it was just as light as before. She patted the artifact with satisfaction, then attacked the meal laid before her.

The hat man and his chief brasero handler or whatever the humans called the individual in charge of cooking stayed by her side to attend to her needs. Sometimes, she would request some more sauce and they would diligently glaze the crisp flesh until she gestured them to stop. The feast lasted until she was full and sleepy, then the ship sailed back with the rest of the carcass and herself.

She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold woke up from her nap in the early afternoon and dove for a soak, then she left the fishermen behind to hunt for eggs among the cliffs.

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Night had fallen and the light of Nyil's moon shone on the strange floating rocks above the skies of Helock, with the distant shape of the chalice dominating its lessers. All of this Viv saw through the small aperture of a filthy window because she was inside a warehouse, bored out of her mind.

Hurry up and wait was the name of the game in Nyil as well. This was Solfis' operation, and she was in position to receive fleeing assassins if any escaped the golem's wrath. The operation had yet to start, however, and she and her picked squad of disposable goons guarded one of the possible exits in awkward silence.

Dust filled the air. Shelves lined the interior, all of them loaded to the brim with crates and barrels. It was warm and didn't smell very good. Viv could hear rats scurrying around dark corners. She idly scratched the back of her borrowed gauntlet to chase away a phantom itch. Maybe tonight they would finally put an end to Sidjin's saga of academic revenge and she could put that out of her mind. Focus on gaining Elunath's favors, since Solfis' strange new ally still refused to communicate with her directly.

Weird how what amounted to intellectual property theft ended up in a dark building with a lethal trap rather than in a courtroom. But that wasn't her fault this time.

Silence reigned outside despite the relatively early hour. The city was tense with a sense of foreboding that extended to the squad within. Viv had taken every precaution she could think of. She wore enchanted armor meant for assassins with a hastily patched hole near the heart, a sign it had been recently 'liberated' from its previous owner. Knit runes facilitated the use of black mana and some mail protected her vitals. She also wore a helmet of dark steel and her yries-made roundshield. The passage leading down had been warded and its threshold reinforced by an improvised shield circle just in case. Truly, she had prepared as

much as she could. Despite that, she couldn't help but feel a nervous tension. A little introspection told her why.

She wasn't in charge.

Not that Solfis couldn't be trusted, but most of the previous actions she had been in were planned and commanded by her with valuable input from qualified people. She had led the Kazarans to take back their city, then led the newly minted Harrakans to defend their land. The raid on Sterek's lab had been her brain child. Even in the rare case someone like Solar had led, she had been at the center of the action as a war caster. But now she was back to being a grunt, not even a strategic piece. Solfis, Sidjin, and Lim the Fell-Handed led the various teams responsible for closing in on the assassin den from every direction and killing them to the last to avoid grudges. She was just a cog this time, a safety valve for a secondary entrance.

Viv checked the spell arrays with her mind one last time. Everything was working as intended. It should be time now.

Somewhere in the distance, there was a crash.

The squad tensed, all four of them around Viv. Their posture went from casual to ready. They wore dark armor like her as well as an assortment of weapons. One even had a shield. Viv strapped on her own, the cumbersome and over-decorated disc familiar in her hands. She paid attention to the wards. In the distance, a muffled scream echoed. She was not sure if it came from outside or from the narrow entrance leading down.

They waited.

Maybe no one would come this way. It was a possibility.

Viv cursed herself for thinking that. Provoking the spark of luck was the surest way to conjure some sort of horror. Maybe the assassins would release a battalion of monkeys infected with a zombie virus, thus plunging the world into an age of terrible body odor.

While part of Viv's mind did wander, most of it was dedicated to the wards and their function. Magically enhanced intellect was truly something. It would not make you smart but it would make you stupid with peerless intensity and attention to detail. And of course, the wards activated soon enough.

"Contact," she whispered.

Nothing happened. The opening in front of them remained a dark pit, but Viv was sure of herself. Her wards were especially sensitive to black mana. Something had crossed them.

She was not going to wait. Anyone escaping an assassin's den and using black mana was a target for her. Viv was going to strike first, but something held her back, a remnant of her past. Rules of engagement. She had not yet determined those were hostiles, technically.

She sent a small net anyway and the shadows exploded outward.

Time slowed in her perception. She activated the gate's shield which blocked someone but two others stepped through the shadows to escape the enclosing walls of energy. While she was so close and paying attention, the use was definitely intent-altered black mana. She could almost taste it. She lifted her round shield and coated herself rather than attacking. Her danger sense screamed and something pinged against the steel pane held in front of her chest. An instant later, a light drain near her head informed her that another projectile had been stopped. She hadn't sensed this one coming.

Her four squad members were engaging the two shades. The head shade had blocked a nasty sword strike and was now rolling backward like a ninja, ready to move through the darkness again. Viv felt where it would reappear and nailed them in the back. They let out a high-pitched scream.

"Lyssa!" the second shade screamed, distracted. Clearly a young man.

One of her goons did not let that opportunity go to waste. The second shade received a blade in the neck for his trouble and fell, gurgling his lifeblood away. Viv opened her shield and cast at the same time, piercing the chest of the third one in multiple places. He fell without a noise. He had not resisted.

Viv considered the trio as she reactivated the wards. The goons moved their bodies in a pile on the side. From the cheap weapons to the size of their bodies under poorly dyed fabric, Viv could tell those were... apprentices. No older than eighteen for sure. The guild was evacuating their younger members into her net.

"Merde..." she cursed to herself.

Nyil had her killing kids. Never a good thing, even though they were trained murderers. She closed her eyes and focused, centering herself. The high mental stats she enjoyed allowed her to push aside guilt and regret with disquieting ease. It had to be done for Sidjin and for those who did not deserve to die because a rich person had decided they should. Soon, all that remained in her mind was the gaping maw leading underground and the protections she had placed there. Dull screams of agony and clashes of steel echoed, far away, their sounds strangely distorted by the distance. All five watchers waited quietly. Viv felt her anxiety spike despite the lack of action. It was as if something ominous was coming.

It took her perhaps two seconds, an embarrassingly long amount of time, to realize that it was not anxiety she was feeling.

Danger Sense: Intermediate 5

A part of Viv registered that this was two levels at once, another was casting the most powerful black mana hive shield she could conjure, and the last part screamed at the top of her lungs.

“TAKE COVER NOW!”

The thugs were a little slower to react but they dashed with skills around the building, putting as much distance as they could between the underground’s exit and themselves. For an instant, it was as if the world was holding its breath while Viv dove behind a shelf. She could barely spot an assassin walking up a support pillar. There was a stamp on a nearby crate, every detail clearly visible from this close up. All the little details of life like an abandoned cobweb or the grain of a nearby plank appeared magnified to her perception while terror needled her on, pressing her to pile protection upon protection.

“Hive shield.”

The segmented black sphere finally expanded around her in the dim light of the empty, silent warehouse.

Five blue spheres snaked out of the passage with lazy grace, each one angling randomly, each one as brilliant as a comet trailing ice behind. They cast a strange glow on the place. The power within each paralyzed her mind. She could not spot a weakness. She could not see where to strike to break them and disperse the monstrous payload held in their ovoid bodies. They were all so mesmerizingly beautiful as they spread around the room, bathing everything in an azure glow. Like butterflies near an erupting volcano.

They exploded.

Of course.

Viv grit her teeth when her world turned blue and very, very sharp. Shards of pale blue bit into her shield with vicious glee, fighting her annihilation with a will of their own. They were not just sharp, they also carried a numbing feeling in their mirror depth like a siren song. So pretty and so deep, so calming. Viv just had to let go and embrace them and all would be well. She was warm, so warm and relaxed. Just... breathe and shed her worries, her drive. The other side did not know suffering.

The part of her soul that was a little aware of its nature woke up and helped her resist. This wasn’t right. To live was to struggle. She had been caught off guard, thinking only stragglers would test them but something was coming and she had to resist it. She had to resist because no one would rob her of her decision to live or to die.

The same inner strength that fuelled her will to push against the easy path life had laid for her revolted at the thought of going to sleep. She had not left home in disgrace, graduated from special forces training, then crossed a desert and led a budding nation to independence to let herself die in some stupid warehouse. Annihilation rejuvenated the shield and pushed back against numbing coldness. Draconic arrogance battled the sweet embrace of sleep until, finger by finger, she lifted herself off the frozen ground.

“Aaaah,” she forced herself to say, to exist, to live, to break the oppressive silence.

“Ah. Ah. Ah. Test. I live.”

“So you do,” someone replied from a distance.

Willpower +1

You have reached a milestone! Your ability to influence and resist the influence of others has vastly improved.

Transcendental tenacity: you can remain conscious and cast even as your body gives out. You can remain conscious after overusing mana.

Your casting efficiency has vastly improved.

Lost Heiress (8/10)

Power coursed through Viv’s mind as it improved. She was still fighting the gripping cold of the spell but now she was winning handily. Even the pain of frozen shards biting into her fingers through the armor felt unimportant. She quickly took in her surroundings.

The warehouse was devastated. Not a single window remained. A cloud of frozen white powder hung in the air like mist, giving it a ghostly valley appearance. At first, Viv suspected it was just frozen humidity, but she quickly realized that it was, in fact, flour. The many crates and barrels lie gutted across the ravaged room, their contents spilled everywhere. When Viv stood back up, crushed wheat depressed under her boot. A piece of wood groaned.

“Here you are,” the male voice said.

Someone had heard. A shadow emerged from the dust, a man in a richly decorated blue robe. A bandoleer filled with potion hung across his chest while the glint of mail winked from under expensive fabric. He had gray hair and a calm, elegant face as placid and cold as a winter lake. Brown eyes followed her while she took a step back.

[Court archmage: an advisor and potent caster, versed in magic and governance. Very dangerous.]

She knew this man.

“You are... Tamar.”



“In normal times, I would insist on the ‘lord’ part. I suppose it doesn’t matter since I lost my position. After the death of Constable Tarano. Which you caused.”

She had last seen the man on the roof of the Green Edge fortress dishing it out against King Sangor’s elites and had since then completely forgotten about him. In the Enorian loyalist’s voice, there was a cold fury that reflected the plummeting temperature in the room. Even the warm summer air rushing in from outside failed to dispel its scornful intensity.

“But...what are you doing here?” she asked, fearing the answer.

The man took a step forward, a sneer on his face.

“What am I doing here? Sometimes, I ask myself the same question, Bibiane the traveler. What am I, a disgraced old fool, doing here?”

He stopped, looking at her. She had half a head on him but there was something in his posture so domineering she found herself cowed. An aura radiated from his calmly standing, one powerful enough to suppress her.

“It will do me good to talk, I think. You will find that your precious golem is tied with more capable fighters than you expected, so we have a few minutes. Yes, I knew you would come. I did place Sterek on your path, after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“I merely provided the funds and impetus to send assassins after your boyfriend. You do not expect the builders’ guild to agree to bankroll a hit, surely? I did so because I wanted you to suffer before I killed you, but instead it turned into a life lesson.”

Power radiated from the man. A barrier suddenly appeared and covered the entire edifice outside of the shattered windows. Viv could feel it through the walls, a rectangle of large proportion shutting her in. She thought about attacking, then hesitated. Time was on her side? Probably? She wasn’t so sure. With every moment, rescue grew closer and she was also recovering but the man had time to prepare. Unless he was too absorbed in his two-bits villain monologue.

“I thought you were a lucky bitch who cruised on charisma and a bit of talent, but I found out I was wrong when I saw the trace of your work along the river. Prime casting, that was. Then I assumed you were immensely talented and equipped with foresight. Only now do I realize that you are, in fact, a lucky bitch with charisma and a bit of talent. It’s that luck that angers me beyond reason.”

He glared down at her with a strange immobility. Viv had never witnessed such contained murderous urges before. At least not from a human.

“So why am I doing this? Knowing some outlandish fate will stop my hand at the last moment and give you a chance at survival? Despite all my preparations? All my skills? Because, Bibiane the Outlander, you can’t just get away with it again and again and again...”

Debris crunched under his shoe as, once again, he advanced. This time, Viv scrambled back, almost slipping in the process.

“Again and again and FUCKING. AGAIN. That insolent fortune carrying you through impossible odds. Do you know how long we true sons of Enoria fought? How much we sacrificed? Only to see you arrive with your stupid fate to ruin decades of planning because you are just that fucking special. There is always a way out for you, no matter how tight the mouse-trap. You are never fully defeated. You do not know despair and powerlessness. Seen everything you loved turn to ash in a single hour. And that annoys me because you do not deserve those chances, and my kingdom did. Oh, I know the world is unfair, no need to frown. And yet, knowing that... I still can't let it go.”

Power raced through the man's frame, making her grit her teeth from the sheer intensity of it. Mana rushed into his expanded form and to her sight, he looked like a colorful giant of blue and brown and red, a titanic being that transcended the limits of his flesh. And now, all that power and potential was aimed at her like a SAM at a glider and there was nothing to stop it but hope and thin air.

“So go ahead and show me how you make it out, monster. I want to see.”

Viv's time perception slowed again while her danger sense screamed at her, forcing her to move. Her muscles screamed as she dove to the side and still a bolt of transparent energy hit her right leg, piercing through her mana coating and half a centimeter of armor. At the same time, her telekinesis spell sent a nearby shelf crashing against the mage's shield. It left him completely unfazed but it did block his view.

Viv fell painfully on her side and raised a powerful black shield, this time leaving the annihilation meaning aside. She was only stopping spells, not objects, and there would be a lot of those.

“I don't need to see you,” the man calmly stated.

More lances of pure energy smashed against her defenses, straining them immediately. She hid behind a pillar and found the mangled remains of one of the goons. The shards of crystals were still embedded in his body. Blood marred the pristine surfaces in great vivid splotches.

She was so fucked.

No, not yet.

Viv used the momentary respite to counter-attack. Another kinetic spell sent another shelf against the man with the same complete lack of results. Tamar casually blocked an overcharged black spear with a localized shield. He still had at least three layers of protection active.

The man lazily moved on after her.

"I'm leaving this pillar intact because I don't want the building to fall on me," he informed her in a light tone.

Viv used werfer while backpedaling. Her wounded leg lanced her with every step. Some blood dripped on the frozen ground. The vast spell should have eaten through Tamar's protections but glyphs activated and the outer shield bubbled, countering the onslaught. The next wave of transparent blades smashed into her, pushing her against the wall where she collapsed. Her Yries shield had blocked one and the magical barrier others, but one had weaved and bit into her side. More blood fell on the ground, freezing in ruby-colored pearls when it hit a shard. A sudden, delayed realization hit Viv. She was completely and hopelessly outclassed.

Tamar was there, cautiously making his way through the wreck. He wasn't even looking at her. His gaze glanced over the flour dust and the window for intruders. The only reason why Viv still lived was because the man was overly cautious, expecting a meteor or something to give an opening. He didn't know how her luck worked, so he was extra cautious.

She needed out.

There was still a rectangular barrier in the way of her flight, and it looked sturdy. She had to gain some time. Deny him vision, at least, but he had achieved mana mastery for sure and she shone bright in his perception. No amount of thrown furniture and dust clouds could subdue her magical signature enough to hide her. She had to block his perception. Her need for an escape sent her imagination into overdrive, reviewing the recent 'teleports' she had seen from the assassins. Black mana acted like a rope or a twisted blanket they could ride. In fact, they needed a spot of dark mana to move somewhere. That's how she anticipated where they would end up.

If she could not blind him with debris, perhaps she could do it with mana.

Viv formed a blight spell, the cloud gathering in her hand, but this time she did not use the meaning of annihilation and it formed very quickly. Tamar gathered a fourth shield around himself while attacking at the same time. He was still not fully paying attention to her. A spear bit in her hand under the ring finger and ground against her bone. The pain was excruciating but her concentration did not falter.

The cloud left her stretched, freely bleeding hand, expanding in a cone to cover the archmage. At the same time, she jumped to the side and the next spells missed her completely. She had succeeded. It would only last for a couple of seconds and he could always run forward but for now, she had succeeded. And her mind recoiled from the revelation. The world linked her to the cloud, the cloud to Tamar, the warehouse to the city, the need to the effect. The cause, to the consequence. Darkness was evasion and denial and simply refusal of sight, of meaning, of understanding. It would saturate the other's senses until all they could perceive would be a lack of her. She had grasped the meaning before but she had not made it hers, but she did now. Black mana's third concept settled in her soul alongside annihilation and change, humming softly.

“Blight.”

The cloud expanded again, this time so thick and deep it absorbed the very light. Her armor turned ghostly and vaporous, more a wraith cape than intimidating armor. Even the mighty form of Tamar grew diffuse behind a spell she still controlled.

“It won’t help!” he roared, though she barely heard more than a sigh. Everything was thick and Tamar... Tamar was blind.

Wasting no time, she cast a silence spell around her to mask the sounds of her shoes just in case, then she made to attack the barrier. Her first spear clashed with powerful colorless glyphs, shaking them but not breaching, not yet. The court archmage moved forward with more urgency. The blight was persisting. Its presence pervaded the warehouse in a thick blanket from where a variety of spells were cast out in every direction. Debris showered Viv while she raced forward, clutching her pierced hand to her chest. There was a lot of blood.

Tamar ran out of patience. His muffled scream reached Viv and she gasped with abject surprise when red mana pulsed in his aura.

Red mana. Did he not see where they were?

The man was mad!

Completely and utterly insane. She had to do something, but what? The barrier still covered the exits. Or rather, a rectangle around the warehouse.

That was it. She raced to the door using a burst of speed and booted it down. Panic gave her wings. Black mana covered her in the thickest coating she had ever raised. No time. She dove in the narrow passage between the wall’s exterior and the barrier.

Tamar cast the fire spell that would banish her blight, destroying it in a flash of light.

The first ember ignited the thin particles of the flour dust with a great woosh. In an instant the entire warehouse went up in great roaring flames. Viv lost control over the blight spell in an instant. It did not matter.

Tamar was silent for a moment, then the screams began. Viv understood. This was not a spell he was facing but a natural effect. The barrier wavered.

“Excalibur.”

The short-range spell pierced through the weakened obstacle. She was out.

Viv ran as fast as she could. Adrenaline rushed in her veins while her feet beat the ground, pain lancing her with every step. The heat was now a wall at her back. It spurred her on. Its red glow fell over every shape of the street to give them long and threatening shadows. Already, distant yells and bells warned the city of the danger in its midst, but that would not matter for a while.

Danger sense warned her again and she tried to jump aside. She failed. Her body was giving out from too much sudden abuse. Pieces of masonry pelted her collapsing body. There was a crack. Viv was on the ground, fingers gripped against the unyielding pavement. Smoke and stones everywhere in her field of vision. Blood stained her armor, visible on the black fabric. She turned her head. It was the most she could do.

Tamar was standing in the middle of the street, backlit by the cruel inferno he had triggered like some hellish judge of the souls. Pinkish fluid oozed from a dozen fresh burns but his eyes glinted with delayed malice. Viv was completely out of juice and completely at his mercy.

“Is this it? No more tricks?”

“There... is one,” she croaked.

“If you have to speak, do it fast,” the man said as another blue sphere formed above his head.

“Solfis can track my vitals.”

Incomprehension made him frown, but it did not last long. The implication was clear. Solfis had known she was in danger the moment she was hurt.

For the first time that night, Tamar panicked. It did not help. The tall bone form of Solfis pierced through the blaze at his back and stabbed five sharp ivory blades in his chest, disregarding the layered shields. The archmage tried to cast one last spell at the fallen Viv but immense willpower did not work without a head.

Viv collapsed on the ground. her cheek went to rest against the cool stone. She was so very spent.

**//There is no time.**

**//We must go.**

The golem gently picked her. In an instant, they were on a nearby roof, jumping to another. People screamed all around in a great cacophony. Viv also heard the unmistakable roar of combat. Her tired brain summoned a thread of logic from its exhausted depth. That was not consistent with firefighting activities.

“What’s going on?” she whispered.

**//At least two food warehouses have gone up in flames.**

**//This one and the closest neighbor.**

**//It means the poor of Helock will starve.**

**//Several gangs have taken the initiative to act now.**

“Wait... do you mean...”

**//The ethnic cleansing starts tonight.**

## Chapter 116: Consequences

Solfis stopped on the second roof, placing Viv down on the flattish roof's surface with gentle care.

"We're not joining the others?"

**//Your high willpower is keeping you fully functional, Your Grace.**

**//However, you are bleeding out.**

**//I need you to take the flesh-mending potions.**

**//Now.**

Viv had a few of the life-saving vials on a bandoleer at the small of her back. They were still intact but as soon as she touched one, a spear of agony made her flinch. She looked down and saw her right hand covered with a grimy glove of blood. A black gash in the middle of her palm lanced atrociously. She twisted on herself instead to get the vial with her left hand and realized the armor was soaked. A deep laceration on her side oozed blood, crimson flesh and pale skin revealed under the cut armor. The blaze of the warehouse reached a crescendo and a flame rose above the roof to bring light to the darkness. Only then did she see the bloody footprints she had left behind. Viv realized that she was not okay.

"Alright," she said.

A bite and the stopper was off. She poured the precious liquid on her flank and watched skin cover the wound as if it had only been cosmetics she could wash away. The new dermis was pale, smooth, and very soft. Vulnerable. She decided to do her leg next. That wound was worse.

A bit of the flesh had been shredded to the muscle, forcing her to push jutting tissue back in with an awkward finger. The strange mix of magic as potent as sci fi tech and using her filthy fingers made her chuckle. She was feeling light-headed.

"Oh that's not good."

Adrenaline was pumping her life force away with every beat of her heart. She poured the rest of the potion and felt a peculiar sense of stretching when things returned to where they were supposed to be. She could still see some exposed meat but there was no potion left.

**//Another vial, Your Grace.**

Viv used the second of two to finish healing her leg. The third ampoule contained a general-purpose antidote instead, and would be of little use right now.

**//Now for the right hand.**

“Fine.”

Despite her pain tolerance skill, it hurt a lot to unclutch her fingers.

“I think it hit the bone.”

**//That is correct, Your Grace.**

Solfis then grabbed her arms, forcing the liquid down on the gash and pushing a knuckle against her palm, setting a broken bone in position. The witch’s ordeal was short, but long enough to introduce the neighborhood to a collection of French expletives.

**//The bone is set but it has not fused back.**

**//Please do not move this hand until you have seen a health professional.**

“FUCK YOU!”

**//She who anticipates suffers twice.**

**//Is it not one of your mottos?**

“Solfis, you are supposed to be on my side. We sass other people and act obnoxious and they hate us for it. How dare you turn on me like that?”

**//Changed taunt module setting to: hypocritical.**

“Ugh. Alright, fuck it. Let’s group up with the others.”

**//Agreed.**

**//But first, drink the potion’s remaining contents.**

Viv bottomed up what was left of the crimson liquid and immediately felt better. Her legs grew less wobbly while her vision cleared up noticeably.

“This is some good stuff.”

**//I would hope so.**

**//At seventeen silvers a pop.**

“Ouch.”

Viv had just burned through six gold talents’ worth of money in under a minute. Worse, she was sure some of the liquid had ended up on her bloodstained armor instead. The waste

annoyed her. Even though the circumstances were unusual, it grated. Solfis did not give her time to brood though. He picked her up and kept jumping from roof to roof.

Around them, the city was coming to life, but it was not a good life. Crews gathered in small squares and landmarks. Viv could already see a pitched battle breaking out a few streets away. The crashes of broken doors gave a counterpoint to the screams of women and children in this hellish symphony. More fires erupted in the distance as she watched. The next jump revealed a pair of prostitutes gutted at the entrance of an alley.

“What the fuck? It’s only been a minute! They can’t already be...” Viv whined.

But the world didn’t care and the women stayed dead. Solfis didn’t slow down either. The skeletal frame smoothly jumped down and dropped her in front of a circle of rough men and women in armor. Some looked a little worse for wear. Sidjin broke through the protective detail and hugged her before she could react. He pulled back and looked at his own off-white armored robe which was now stained red in multiple places.

“Err, are you alright, darling?”

“Physically I am. We can talk about it later. We should leave the lower districts before it goes fully bad.”

**//We will retreat to an undercity entrance.**

**//You two must not be seen in the noble quarters in blood-stained armor.**

“I could get a change of clothes,” Viv admitted.

“Then let’s go now,” Sidjin said.

He sounded so calm and composed. Viv was not having a good time. Despite knowing on an intellectual level this wasn’t her fault, that the riots were inevitable so long as proper authorities allowed it to happen, she felt deeply unsettled. It was just starting and it was already so bad. Even Afghanistan had not affected her that much, at least that she could remember. Maybe she was just naive.

“Focus, darling. You can’t help if you’re dead,” Sidjin whispered.

The group adopted a loose square formation with the casters in the middle. It was clear that the goons were unused to organized fighting from the awkward way they left gaps in the wall, but it would probably not matter. They ran. Normally, the streets would have been dark at this time of the night, yet the glows of distant arsons bathed everything in an infernal red, turning the familiar avenues into grimmer versions of themselves. The air smelled of blood and ashes, an acrid stench that stuck to Viv’s tongue. They passed by several corpses. A minute later they came across two dozen looters dragging a family out of their home. The two armed groups hesitated. Viv didn’t. She aimed at the man holding a young boy by the scalp and blew his head off. The looters dispersed.

They didn’t stop. The rescued civilians didn’t wait. They gathered to leave.



**//Your Grace.**

**//You seem to care about the fate of civilians.**

**//Yet they are not your people.**

“You know about altruism and empathy, Solfis.”

**//Would you like me to use my means to protect them in your name?**

“Yes.”

**//You have to pick one ethnic group.**

“Anybody who breaks doors down to kill civilians should be fair game.”

“You cannot spare them,” an unfamiliar voice spat from behind.

Viv turned in shock. She and Solfis always spoke in Imperial, a dead language few aside from scholars and casters ever used at all. The goon who had spoken had the lighter greenish skin of an Enorian and an accent, but she was still surprised to be addressed by an educated thug.

“If you spare them, they grow up and kill you,” the man added with conviction.

“We don’t judge people according to what they might do in ten years,” Viv corrected. “Which is why you still live, by the way. Solfis, pick whichever side is the most convenient but rein the people in. Anyone who breaks down doors to kill children is a coward anyway. They’ll listen to a group of scary men in dark armor.”

**//ORDERS ACKNOWLEDGED.**

**//But first, we must get you back.**

**//You are in enough trouble as it is.**

Viv thought the golem sounded like some psychotic AI mom right now but decided to keep her observation to herself. Since the tavern was quite far, it took them some time to reach it. Two other marauding bands found them but wisely decided to turn around after a good look at them. Most were muscular men and women with hard eyes and surprisingly good weapons. The first had been made of northerners, the second of a mix of ethnic groups. They came across a barricade manned by pale-skinned Helockian natives, those wearing actual gambesons. Shortly before they arrived, a young Hallurian boy dragging his sister saw them, rushed in their direction, then turned down an alley at the last moment. The following mob of blood-crazed northerners smashed against Viv’s group a moment later. The melee was short, violent, and one-sided. They disengaged. Viv did not pursue.

“Clever boy,” she muttered.

**//I have recorded his profile for potential later recruitment.**

**//We are almost here.**

The city had devolved into a nightmarish landscape, blazing with the fires of hell on a background of screams. It was far too late to try and stop anything, Viv thought, but she'd be in the hospital the next day. Making plans and seeing a future took her mind away from the bodies.

A barricade blocked the way deeper in. Solfis had the thugs jump to a nearby roof rather than negotiate for passage. The militia of southerners and Hallurians holding the defenses didn't try to stop them and they found a known entrance a moment later, hidden near a warehouse. One of the goons removed her hood, revealing the harsh traits of Lim the Fell-Handed. The grim northerners led Viv and Sidjin back to the room where they had left their stuff. Viv had to wash herself quickly using frigid water. It left her shaking. The bath turned pink and her old clothes felt strange on her skin. Cold too.

"You are too pale," Sidjin said. "You must have lost a lot of blood. Your hand is wounded too," he said.

Viv lifted her right one. A subcutaneous hematoma expanded from the pale new skin. A purple circle expanding out. It still hurt.

"Right. We need to get you to the faculty and have you rest a little. You can help later."

"I don't want to be a hypocrite."

"We're all hypocrites, Viv, but we don't all try to fix it. You must rest."

Lim took the pair on a small skiff and rowed them to the back of the city. They ran up the shore and found the back entrance to the Academy locked and guarded. Viv was still let in after the wards verified her identity. She walked through the back of the park with its meadows, pleasant air coming from the sea, the ponds, the sorcerous light in a daze. Here, everything was peaceful and dandy while innocents died only a few kilometers away. She could jump on the walls and use a long view and there would be murders to see. Nausea filled her. Should she have stayed? But Solfis and Sidjin were right. She was exhausted.

Viv almost bumped into the crimson-clad form of the dean. The man stood on her path with a staff that glowed a soft red. He didn't say anything. Viv didn't say anything because her mind was a blank. His face was a mask.

"Are you done?" he finally asked.

Viv's tired mind conjured up an answer. Was she done? For tonight, yes. For Sidjin's defense, also yes.

"I am," she replied.

"You should have heeded my warning. Every action has consequences, now you must live with yours."

A little bit of anger pierced through the fog of exhaustion.

“This would work well if I were asking you to wipe my ass, but I’m not, am I? Out of the two of us, only one had the power to stop this atrocity and it wasn’t me.”

“Why do you have to be so headstrong?”

“I’d be dead otherwise.”

The dean glared.

“I’m starting to regret admitting you here, but you would have probably caused more damage if left loose. Go to the infirmary first.”

Viv resumed her walk, but the dean wasn’t finished.

“One last thing. You think I did nothing but that’s not true. I did what I could to minimize the bloodshed with the tools I had. Tomorrow, you will do so as well. Report to the administration after the first bell.”

“I can go to the healing faculty by myself.”

“People can survive without an arm. The urgency is to save and stabilize people, not make them whole. You will report to the administration building to help with search and rescue. This is not a suggestion.”

“... very well.”

Viv went to the infirmary, a small building with a sleep mage in blue robes, an intern of sorts. The woman used a spell to make sure her metacarpals were in the right place despite Viv’s innate resistance to life mana.

“Sorry about that,” she told the persisting girl.

“No helping it,” she replied.

A more complex potion finished healing her. Viv returned to her dorm room and crashed down. She was asleep in seconds.

\*\*\*

*The city is on fire.*

*But no one attacked!*

Viv woke up to crimson eyes widened in honest concern. Arthur’s large head rested on her chest, propagating heat in the already warm light of light summer dawn. The dragon’s lustrous black horns caught a reflection and shone green and red for an instant.

“The citizens have turned on each other,” Viv replied.

*Humans turn on humans very often.*

“Not enough food. They gather by origin and fight each other for it.”

*If not so soft and squishy.*

*Move on and find food.*

“Yep. Anyway, I’m going to help a bit.”

*I come as well!*

*Find small humans.*

*To worship me.*

*Recruitment drive!*

“I’d appreciate the assistance.”

Viv didn’t change, though she did wash her face to clear off the sleepiness. What surprised her to most was that she was feeling fine, physically. Potions could be insanely potent, especially those that did so much. She was pretty sure she had drunk the equivalent of three months of elite knight pay within a few hours.

But she was a caster and casters were above, that was how it was.

Viv swallowed the fact that much potion could have stabilized at least three dying people and decided that she would make it up today. The door closed behind her, but she found Ereska waiting in the main room. The pale woman had dark circles under her eyes and she was loaded for bear with a bag and a solid robe filled with pockets.

“You are going to help as well?” she asked.

“Yes, although I absolutely have to. The dean ordered it.”

“You can fill me in on the way.”

Viv did so, staying vague on purpose. They grabbed sandwiches at the refectory and filled their bags, then they rushed to the administration building. A busy Darla directed them to a carriage that departed immediately.

“I’m surprised they’re just letting you out,” Viv told Ereska.

“They know that I’m not on good terms with my family because of their stance on the riot. They probably judge that it is easier to send me with an escort than to prevent me from escaping. Some of the younger students remain under strict supervision but accomplished casters like ourselves are too difficult to control.”

“Always surprises me that the Academy isn’t enforcing more stringent oaths on their students,” Viv mused.

“It shouldn’t,” Ereska replied, eyes half-lidded. “Many places of learning tried it. Only the Academy remains. But I digress. What did you have in mind? In terms of helping, I mean. I always thought your specialty was killing things.”

“And cutting things, and lifting them now.”

“Search and rescue, like Darla said.”

*I find people.*

*You rescue.*

*Then we take payment!*

The two women looked down on the excited form of Arthur. Viv mournfully admitted to herself that rampant capitalism had come to Nyil, and she was to blame.

\*\*\*

The cleansing was not over, far from it. Sounds of fighting still came from far and wide, but even the more peaceful parts were empty. Soldiers patrolled the streets of the noble quarter, blocking all gates leading down and checking the identity of people coming through. The lower quarters had settled for a low simmer instead of the fiery rage of earlier. Few civilians came out, and most of those that did were fleeing for their lives. The various alliances of circumstances had gathered in districts fortified with barricades and, sometimes, private security forces with weapons and armor. Heavy patrols watched the cart pass like hawks.

“The builders guild has secured the city center. With the merchants guild taking the low markets, they have formed an axis defended by mercenary forces. Most of the conflict will be at the periphery,” Ereska observed as they moved at a brisk pace to where the smoke was thickest.

“It’s going to get worse, right?” Viv asked though she knew the answer.

“Right now there are patrols and some private forces in the streets. People like us as well, or nobles who refuse to stay idle, but it won’t last. We will head back tonight and the violence will resume. This time, it will be deliberate. A lot of blood was shed yesterday. Now, every thug group out there is ready and waiting. It will be much worse than yesterday. And we will take no part of it.”

Ereska fixed Viv with a glare.

“We will take no part of it. No heroics, outlander. You wouldn’t get gratitude and the dean has you in his targeting array. Keep your head low and save people.”

“Yes,” Viv replied, rolling her eyes.

Ereska went on to mother Viv on social expectations for mages in the great city of Helock. It felt weird having such a mundane conversation while passing corpses and blood stains. This lasted until Viv felt a queer sense of dissociation.

If she wanted, she could step down now, find Solfis and spend the entire evening cleaving looters into fun-size bits, thus saving a few innocents at least. Until someone came and stopped her. It was possible. But Viv knew she wouldn’t do that because she needed the Academy’s support system and, at heart, she cared about her own survival more.

“Squee?”

“It’s nothing. I just don’t like pointless deaths.”

Soon, their cart arrived at a ravaged district near the riverside pier. Many houses had burnt here as well. From up high, one could see the path the fire had taken as the wind pushed it inland. Quite a few people were rummaging through blackened husks of houses with sooty faces trailing with tears. Smoke still emerged from half-hearted fires, lingering long after dawn. The survivors swarmed the mages and small dragon as soon as they were down.

“Right,” Viv said. “Arthur, find us people. We’ll cut them out and stabilize them.”

“I can heal and staunch fires,” Ereska said.

They moved to the first house, which was still burning.

*People under.*

*Must free.*

“Really?” Viv asked. She could feel the heat coming from the smoldering pile of timber and stone, all that remained of a rather large edifice. A man kneeled prostrate before the destroyed building.

*Underground.*

“Right, let’s clear a path.”

*I remove fires.*

*Mother’s hands soft and squishy,*

*No scale no claw.*

*Like snack.*

“You can do that?” Viv asked.

To answer, the dragonette opened her mouth and... breathed in the fire and ambient red mana. It just gathered in her mouth from the building, turning into a small radiant ball. The flames petered out and her horns shone.

“Hmm. Wow. Impressive.”

*It is fire.*

*I am biggest fire.*

Arthur nodded, pleased with her explanation as if it made perfect sense and in a way, it did. She had simply done what Viv did when she used her yoink, but with red mana instead. Viv was pretty sure it was beyond any human sort of elemental archmages but that was fine.

The prostrate man turned and saw them then. he was a heavysset fellow with muscular arms and a long beard, half of it lost. Pinkish skin covered half of his face. He had to be in great pain but he merely extended a callous finger and pointed it at Arthur.

“D... Dra.. dra... dra...”

*My name is She-Who-Feasts-On-Many-And-Gets-Much-Gold!*

*Gaze upon my magnificence.*

“Thank you for your help, She-Who uhhh.”

*Silence, human!*

*When using your mouth flaps to communicate, you should address me by my borgle: Arthur.*

*For simplicity.*

“Yes, great one... my family...”

*Fret not, frail human.*

*We will help you.*

*They are not cooked yet.*

*Show deference to us.*

*And give reward.*

“You can have all the iron in my store if you give me back my family...” the man bellowed, more tears falling down his cheeks.

Viv watched a miffed dragonette realize that most humans did not, in fact, own gold. The witch considered introducing her scaley adoptive daughter to such concepts as ‘market analysis’, but decided that could wait. It was time to work. Viv used telekinesis to push rocks off the direction Arthur indicated while Ereska used brown mana to the same effect. Sidjin’s observations that colorless mana could do everything others could, but with more effort was proving to be true. It took them a few minutes but eventually they discovered the man’s family tucked away safely in their cellar. They had survived thanks to an aeration shaft leading into the street, a large towel, and a generous use of blue mana to create water. The reunion warmed Viv’s heart a bit but by that time the rest of the street was clamoring to get them to save more people. They could not dally.

Unfortunately, the rest of the session did not go as well. Some of the rescued folks were horribly hurt, others simply beyond help. They saved a woman who had curled over the body of her child before their house collapsed on them. The boy had not made it. Only a father had made it out of a family of five. Every life saved came with its lot of misery, every survivor had to be dug out through broken toys and shattered bodies, the cooling remains of a happier life. It was gruesome work. Sometimes, Viv had to use black mana to shear through beams and large stones. They stopped several times to drink, eat, and recover their strength, but not for long. People looked at them with longing and despair, knowing they were the best hope they had at finding living relatives yet knowing Viv and her group were casters while they themselves were poor commoners, undeserving of the attention they received. No one blamed them for not doing more. It made Viv feel sick.

Sidjin arrived at noon with a temple healer. The man wore a war robe and immediately helped, a filled monster core held in his hand. With him around, their speed more than doubled. He would squeeze Viv’s shoulder between rescues.

“Let me handle that one, alright?”

“I’m not too tired yet.”

“But you are a little tired. This is my first free day out in Helock since the assassins started to come after me. I owe you my freedom and if I can use it to help people, all the better. Don’t worry there will be more work to be done.”

And there was. They finished this part of the city in the early afternoon, having rescued thirty people and pronounced three times that number lost for good. Their next destination was higher up near the edge of the city traveling inland. Many Hallurians lived near the city gates and worked in trades and industries dealing with all the goods traveling from nearby villages to feed that unsated great maw that was the city. Viv was once more reminded of the unusual size of the Paramese capital of magic. In ancient Europe, nine people in ten made food while the remaining one made history. A town could only grow so much before food and logistics reached capacity. Only stats and mana allowed Helock to exist, its overgrown



population gluttonously eating the works of hundreds of acres of plantations. Of course, it was no longer enough now. The beast had grown as much as it could.

The angry crowds had gone through the more fragile shantytown like a knife through paper, destroying them as they went. Viv and the others spent the entire afternoon until late evening digging through rubbish, tarps, and planks. They saved many more people here but those rescues had nowhere to go. They had no fortified compounds to harbor them.

“Fuck it. Do you think our side could take them in?” Viv asked Sidjin, staring at the milling crowd scouring the wrecks for food and trinkets.

There had to be three hundred of them. The rest had successfully fled.

“Maybe for a couple of days. The docks area is one of the more diverse ones. There are already Hallurians there.”

“Then let’s go. Before the night falls.”

It took surprisingly little time to round up the rescues. Neighbors helped neighbors carry the wounded. They made their way through the city quickly, with patrols standing aside to watch them pass. Ereska had remained silent and Viv wondered if she had gone too far in her eyes.

“Does this violate the neutrality clause?” she asked.

“No? Maybe? I don’t care. We’re acting instead of sitting back in the refectory with a warm cup of klod, lamenting the sad state of affairs. If anyone objects when we get back they can kiss my ass. If anyone objects now I’ll shove a stalagmite up their unmentionables. There are children here.”

To Viv’s unending surprise, no one tried to stop them. Oh, they did have outriders following the group, keeping their distances, but a single look at who led seemed to be able to deter them. It seems no one wanted to take a jab at Sidjin at least. The man walked in front with confidence in his broader shoulders, a shimmering shield surrounding him at all times. Anyone inspecting him would see a fourth step war mage and probably reconsider. They got to the enclave Solfis occupied at dusk and were let in after Viv dished out a few gold talents’ worth of bribe to smoothen things out with the local mercenaries.

*I stay.*

*Fish big fishes.*

*Get gold.*

Viv didn’t have the heart to tell the dragonette that it was probably a lost cause. At Solfis’ insistence, they left through the tunnel and came across another group in a similar boat. The strangers manning the skiff all wore dark cloaks though there were no weapons in sight. After a few seconds of hesitation, both ships passed each other without a single word

uttered. What happened in the secret tunnels stayed in the secret tunnels. They used the same exit as usual to reach the plateau above the city, the one where Sterek's lab still stood.

"I might get it for myself and start a business," Sidjin said.

"Yeah I'd love to return to Harrak after the end of the semester. If I can shorten the distance through a teleport, that would be great."

"Of course, darling, and you will always travel for free."

"Much appreciated."

"Now who might that be..."

Sidjin was looking forward and so was Ereska. In the distance, two men in the tabard of Helock waited by the deserted, dusty road between the low walls of two cattle farms. They could not be just guards. Too clean, too decorated. Their swords spoke of wealth and expertise. Viv inspected them, even though that might be rude.

[Investigator, not very dangerous, follows a path concerned with ferreting out the truth. Cunning. Close quarter combatant.]

[Prime Investigator, dangerous, follows a path concerned with ferreting out the truth. Leader. Killer. Close quarter combat expert.]

Ah. Not here at random then. The trio of mages keep going as if nothing were amiss, only for the two to casually block their way. Viv felt a pulse of earth mana from Ereska, soon joined by another, colorless, from Sidjin. They had done this without a word or without tracing a sigil.

"Good evening," the older man greeted.

Both of them had hale skin and a perfectly trimmed beards, though they were clearly not related. They lacked the down-to-earth approach she had seen from other guards and she suspected those two might interact with the more affluent part of the population.

"Sorry to bother you so late. We work for the intelligence branch of the army of Helock, may Sardanal keep her forever. We were looking for Viv the Outlander. It's you is it not?"

"They're alone," Sidjin said in a low voice. "It's not a trap."

Ereska nodded as well.

"No trap here, citizen and guests," the older man continued, "We just want to ask you a few quick questions and send you on your way. It's getting late after all and you have had a busy day helping the city go through some... growing pains."

"It's much better to answer now," the young man added. "Saves everyone a lot of time."

It pissed Viv off. Not catching her by surprise nor even the good cop bad cop routine, not even being annoyed while tired. What pissed her off was the man's comment.

The silence extended awkwardly.

"Right, we'd like to know how it all started. We think you know," the old man asked.

Viv measured her chances. Maybe it would be better not to cooperate to avoid any risks of saying something she might regret. Only idiots believed that they couldn't get in trouble because they 'had done nothing wrong'. On the other hand, they could give her lasting problems and possibly worsen her already fragile standing in the Academy. What she knew from investigator Tars back in Kazar was that they could sense the truth, so maybe there was an angle to pursue. It would still be risky. She wanted to try it. Ereska slightly elbowing her to answer comforted her in the belief that the right to remain silent wasn't something that worked well on Nyil.

"What started?" she asked.

"The events that triggered the riots. I believe you were around the warehouse district yesterday evening? Some people mention seeing you move with black-clad people and a mysterious, heavily made up individual of great size."

Hah. Worst description of Solfis ever. Viv considered her opinion and realized she felt truthful about the matter.

"I had nothing to do with the start of the riot."

Viv considered that this was truthful because she had been a bystander. Tamar was the one who had devastated the warehouse. She'd been outside, running away at the time. She felt she was innocent. Responsible for being around, certainly, but in no way guilty. Someone had tried to kill her for crying out loud.

The investigator must have felt the conviction in her words, but the prime investigator squinted, perhaps sensing she was not being entirely objective. It was probably a necessity considering the amount of monsters who saw themselves as innocent. 'She made me do it' and all that. Nevertheless, they had little to go on.

"But you were present at that time. What did you see? What started all this? You must have observed something."

Oh, that was an easy one.

"Oh yes, I saw it well. It was started by several years worth of disinterested laziness by you and your entire government with the absolute belief that population needs to be culled and if it happens to the poorer members of society, well, tough shit. It was triggered when your collective lot decided it was easier to let go and maybe wait for the Hallurian warlords to solve your population problem for you rather than invest in expansion, fleets, frontier villages

or even just birth control measures. Growing pains indeed. Chronic pain, you mean, a persistent crisis born from apathy and the belief either the next generation of rulers or the next generation of invaders will solve that issue for you. Yeah, I did see it. In excruciating detail.”

“Now now, there is no need for anger, Miss Outlander. Perhaps you have different customs where you come from but here we expect third step people to exert self-control — “

“Have you had a walk through the city?” Viv interrupted, her voice unnaturally loud thanks to a small magical boost. “Today, I mean. Maybe you should investigate that instead. After you dig out your twelfth dead child, you are welcome to return and talk to me about self-control and overreaction. In the meantime, I’m not interested. Not. Interested.”

Silence spread across the empty path. Ereska conspicuously examined the time on some bronze contraption, then she crossed her arms.

“The riots fragment the city. I believe we are warranted in wondering who, or what, set them off. This is merely caution. No need to be defensive,” the younger investigator finally said.

“And I told you I didn’t do anything to start them. It wasn’t me,” Viv replied, slowly measuring each word.

“Just like the young lady informed you earlier,” another voice came from behind.

Viv realized Sidjin had been smirking and she now figured out why. Garbed in crimson, holding a staff and radiated heat, the dean arrived. He was alone, but he was one of those people who didn’t need an escort. He seemed to fill the entire road. Rather than blocking the way in, the investigators were now boxed between two very hard places.

“Dean Tallit. Sir, good evening,” the older one said with an attempt at calm, but Viv could see sweat bead on his forehead.

“Yes, yes. Now, far from me to question why you would care so much about who triggered an event you yourselves considered inevitable in your latest reports, but there is a time and place and...”

Viv was suddenly standing in front of an oven. No, the desert sun. At dawn.

“This isn’t it,” the scarlet star finished.

The impression faded until Viv wondered if she had dreamt it. The two investigators stood unmoving. They did not say anything when the casters passed them by.

All four walked to the gates in silence. Only when they arrived did Viv finally say what she felt she had to say.

“Thank you,” she told the dean.

He sighed heavily.

“I’m not your enemy. I hope you have seen that now and since your lover is safe, maybe you can focus on your studies while we clean up the city. Your highness, would you stay for the night?”

“Just Sidjin, and yes, I’d love to.”

## Chapter 117: Loyalty.

Viv sat on the battlement of the Academy’s outer wall, watching Helock burn. Black plumes as thick as hills rose from the Cereal Gate to the south and the wharves by the sea. A northern wind carried them lazily over the ocean where they would fade in the blue of the late summer sky.

She had been on Nyil for a year and a half.

A sip brought the fresh aroma of an infusion, a summer special. Up here, the air was pure and the stones cool. She could hear animated conversations behind her, some more angry than usual but nothing out of the ordinary for stressed young adults. It was as if the calamity outside did not extend past the inner city walls. Even the government district could probably turn and close their eyes and all would be normal except for a faint smell of ash and burnt meat. Here in the Academy, breakfast was free and drinks cost two coppers. Out there, thirteen hundred people had died in a single night, according to Ereska’s intel.

Viv took another sip.

There were no UN mandates here, no dominant military alliance, but that was not the main problem. Even the lack of exposure from journalists or the internet didn’t really matter. At the heart, the issue was that people didn’t give a shit. Out of all the nations of Param, not a single one cared for the other or believed in universal values and the common good of mankind — or indeed sentient races. The most empathetic answers were ‘yeesh sucks to be them’. The worst called for more slaughter of innocents which didn’t really surprise her. This general apathy reminded Viv of that winter expedition six months before, shortly before Prince Lancer invaded. They had found hundreds of people starving to death and most of the soldiers on her side hadn’t cared. They were strangers. Burdens, at best. Paramese people were not desensitized, they had never been sensitive to start with. It was cultural.

Viv’s mind wandered. Why were the inhabitants of Nyil human? That begged many questions both theological and possibly... whatever the study of parallel universes was called.

“Viviane?”

A voice woke up from her funk. Classes were canceled for now and students were forbidden from leaving without a good reason, a limitation Viv had been unwilling to test. No one should be looking for her right now, interrupting her hypocritical brooding with earthly matters. Anything to forget she'd decided to stop caring and let people die because she wanted to look after herself first.

"Viviane!"

"Rakan? What are... you look awful."

The Hallurian was filthy. He wore rough travel clothes with tattered hems, obviously old. Soot covered him from hair to toe, except for his bloodshot eyes and trails of tears and snot.

"What's going on?"

"It's my sister."

Rakan's sister. Cogs ground in the witch's mind. Rakan's sister, whom he deeply loved. Freed him from certain brainwashing against all odds. Carried his meek ass across the desert. Hunter. Was out killing monsters, and was supposed to return...

"Ah," Viv eloquently replied.

"She's not there. I can't find her! HER INN IS GONE!"

"Alright, calm down, breathe first. You can't help if you're panicking. You went out to find your sister?"

"Yes, right before the ban. Yesterday evening. She was supposed to come through the Wheat Gate with her associates. I can't find them. I can't find anyone. We have to go, check again. Make sure."

"Right. I think that would be finding a needle in a haystack. Right. Okay. Sidjin and I escorted a group of survivors to the shoreline. Maybe someone saw something."

"Other Hallurians might know. She is famous. Distributes meat every time she returns; maybe someone will know something? Maybe she's there!"

Viv assessed the chance of getting Rakan to stay and deemed it to be zero, banning any use of violence. Maybe the Academy would stop him. Maybe. But then let them take responsibility for their actions.

"Alright, I know we can technically leave if we have a valid reason and this feels like a good one. You go clean up and refresh while I gear up."

"We can't wait! She could be—"

“SILENCE!”

Viv’s outburst surprised Rakan who stopped in his tracks, more shocked than angry.

“You can’t save anyone in that state and they might not let us out. It will help to show we are prepared, alright? Focus. I need you at your best.”

“Yes, sorry. I need to be an adult, act rationally. Sorry.”

“I get your pain, Rakan. Now go. Meet you at the gate.”

Viv tossed the rest of her tea over the parapet — and a shame that was — and ran back to her dorm. A few of the students shook their heads or commented in low voices as they watched her race by, but she paid them no heed. Her reputation was well-set. Another bout of ‘initiative’ would not make a difference.

Ereska heard the door and came to her side.

“This is unwise,” she commented.

“Rakan’s sister went missing.”

The Helockian young lady sighed.

“Yet inevitable. I cannot come with you, I’m afraid. The families have voted in an extraordinary council yesterday. No Helockian combat-capable mage is allowed beyond the walls unless they are part of the active military, and I fear I qualify.”

“And your self-exile does not suffice to justify an exemption.”

“I am not even exiled, Viviane, legally or otherwise. So no, I will not be enjoying a special treatment.”

“That’s fine, Ereska. You already helped me before.”

“It is my fellow countrymen I should be helping, but I digress. I still have something to contribute.”

The young noble left to fetch something while Viv finished strapping on her street clothes. She could have used armor right now but it might be sending the wrong message, and Solfis had kept those anyway. It felt strange not to wear a helmet in such a situation. Had to protect her noggin since it was just too easy to get brained. In any case, Ereska returned when she was done with a potion in a tiny vial. The liquid had a breathtaking azure color like a deep sea dream, beautiful beyond words. Painters back on earth would have killed for one of those.

“Wow.”

“Yes, Sarinatali does good work and she likes pretty things. Take it.”

[Powerful potion.]

“Essence of solace. A single drop through a victim’s lips will keep death at bay for a little while, enough time to get them to a healer. You still have flesh mending potions, right?”

“Two of them, yes.”

“Use them if someone is hurt, but if the damage is too extensive, it might kill them. Fuse the wrong things together.”

“I hope she is fine.”

“So do I, and hunters are hardier than most so there is a good chance she has survived no matter what. Take it anyway. And return the rest to me because it costs twelve golds per vial.”

“What?”

“Only the best ingredients can manage that effect, only the solace can give poisoned mages a chance at survival. Return it when you are done.”

“Thank you, I will take good care of it.”

“See that you do. Off you go now, before our talented friend decides to leave by himself.”

Viv left, stopping only long enough to get water and food under the disapproving glare of a cook. A letter was left at Sidjin’s temporary lodgings since the man was absent at the moment and Viv thought he might want to join. Rakan was already there when she reached the administration building, bypassing a pair of heavily armored warmages. The second one tossed a coin to the first.

“Told you,” she said.

Viv grit her teeth. She found a tired Darla’s behind the counter. The woman whispered in a stone that let out a strong aura of colorless magic. Viv would eat her left shoe if it wasn’t something in the variation of ‘Boss? She’s here.’

“Yes?” the tired administrator — Viv was sure there was more to it — said.

Viv elbowed Rakan. He always said he had to grow more assertive. The young man took a resolute step forward, almost stumbled, and placed a freshly cleaned hand on the desk’s polished dark wood.

“My sister is missing. I’m going after her.”



Darla blinked, slowly. She glared at Viv who merely shrugged. The divine spark of luck had a tendency to get things moving but it certainly hadn't turned the city into the flaming cesspit it was right now. Humans hadn't needed any help for that.

The woman sighed and sat back heavily in her chair.

"Tarana, I remember her. She was here with you on the first day. She's missing, you say?"

"Yes. Since yesterday."

"And you want to go out and find her? What if I close the gate?"

"I'll jump down from the wall."

Darla massaged her temples. Viv realized that under the composed appearance, she probably had a medical school level of sleep deprivation. It had been a very long week and it was far from over.

Her gaze landed on Viv again and stayed there, trying to bore a hole through her skull.

"Why is it always you?" she finally asked.

"We've been over this already, I get shit done."

"Do you even have a plan, or are you just going to roam the streets waiting to be overwhelmed?"

"His sister was supposed to stay at an inn by the Wheat Gate but the entire area is devastated. We intend to go to one of the shire enclaves to talk to a group of refugees who might know where she is. Hallurians."

"And how do you know there are Wheat Gate refugees there?"

"We led them there ourselves," A voice said from behind.

Viv smiled when her boyfriend stopped by her side, giving her hand a brief squeeze. He looked refreshed and already wore some battle robes. His backpack bulged with supplies.

"Then what?" Darla said, though Viv could see the woman opposed them more out of stubborn reptilian brain reaction than actual reason. It was time to change gear.

"Look, we will just go out and try to find her. No heroics, no battle, we'll ask questions and be back by nightfall."

"You will?" Darla asks with some doubt.

“This is a search and rescue mission. We are not here to cleave a bloody path through the city or help one side against another. If you are concerned, I could use a chaperone. Someone who knows the place.”

“Someone like me?” the other woman replied with a smirk.

“You look like you’re falling apart but yeah, sure.”

For an instant, there was a sort of annoyed defiance Viv had seen before in exhausted soldiers. It only lasted for an instant before Darla took control of her emotions.

“No, if you wish to get yourselves killed, we will not stop you, but you do not have the Academy’s approval and we will remove your protection for the duration of your trip. If you are attacked or captured, that is your business.”

“They will be fine,” Sidjin said, and Darla finally lost her spite in the handsome smile of the fallen prince.

“Just... go. I’ll let the guards know not to stop you.”

The trio left without another word. They crossed the boundary into the noble district and walked at a brisk pace.

“There are no buggies and no one will rent us a horse, so we should go on foot,” Sidjin said.

It took them far longer to approach the gates, which were manned by a veritable detachment. Viv had never really seen Helock’s more conventional forces but they were quite impressive and the warmages walking among them even more so. Archers and soldiers in heavy armor waited in clear lines. A bored and surprised captain stopped them.

“The families have voted. No citizens may... you are not citizens.”

“Indeed not,” Viv said.

“Don’t suppose you have some form of identification?”

They did, in fact. Viv and Rakan presented their student cards while Sidjin had a license he had gotten to practice magic legally within the city. The captain shrugged and checked his instructions again, but eventually decided that it was not his circus and to just let them through.

“I’ll notify the Academy,” he warned.

“They know we’re here, captain,” Rakan said in a hollow voice.

“Right. We close the gates at nightfall. If you’re not back by then, seek shelter.”

“Will do.”

“Wait. Stop.”

The captain looked closely at the trio, especially at Rakan.

“You, the war mage, you know what you are doing. The witch as well, perhaps. You boy, you do not, so listen closely. You think you’re strong and you probably are. Can turn people inside out with a flick of your finger, no doubt, but the people out there are mad. Animals. They won’t care. You don’t want to get swarmed and if you fuck up, it can happen.”

“We will cover each other,” Sidjin said. “I know a thing or two about not getting swarmed.

“Maybe you do. Off you go, then.”

There were more guards on the other side. At least two hundred who let them through without issue. Already, the stench of death and fire left a cloying taste on Viv’s tongue.

They set out.

Someone had cleared the streets of corpses, or at least the most accessible ones. Trails of dried blood led to central spots where they disappeared, the bodies most likely picked up on a cart. It didn’t help with the smell. Sometimes, Viv could see birds pick at discarded body parts. The three mages moved quickly and in silence. Fortunately, Viv knew the way fairly well.

“Thanks for coming with us,” she told Sidjin. “You were ready in a heartbeat. I appreciate it.”

The fallen prince smiled ruefully.

“Glastia has a rich folklore centered around its many princes, darling. Most of the time, they do the saving. If I were the crown prince, you could claim half the city and my hand in marriage at this stage. By comparison, this is nothing.”

“Are you dropping hints or?”

“No no, we talked about marriage in your culture. I know you intend to take your time.”

“Right,” Viv said, suddenly blushing. It had just never occurred to her and... he was right. Although the two matched really well, they had only been together for a few months. And she was not ready to settle. At all.

“I am serious, Viviane the Outlander and Lost Heiress to a strange land. You may be a controversial figure to others but I do not care. For me, you have done more than can be expected from close family. I am with you no matter what. And yes!” he finished, anticipating the interruption, “before you try to soften my words with that biting humor of yours, even if you lose yourself and commit dark deeds. I do not worry too much, however. So far, we have killed no children.”

Viv coughed to mask her embarrassment, an embarrassment that doubled when Rakan joined in a tired voice.

“It’s loyalty. I read about it a lot.”

“You read about it?” Viv asked, surprised.

The young man nodded.

“It’s the most valuable commodity in Halluria, even more valuable than water. You can’t count on your warlord or your clan. Sometimes, you can’t even count on your family. A hallurian can either play the game of death to ascend the hierarchy, or they can find a few people they can trust. Loyal people. Build a life with them...”

He shook his head, dispersing the haze of painful memories

“I’ll find her no matter what. Sorry. I was trying to say that you are loyal, Viviane. It’s one of the highest compliments I can make.”

“You two are going to make me blush in the middle of a rioting city. Maybe I’m just... helping those who can help me.”

“That’s not why you created the regrowth spell,” Sidjin countered.

“She’s just being shy,” Rakan said.

“Trying to present herself as the big bad witch from the west. The prince killer,” Sidjin added.

“Terrible and feared across the land.”

“Alright, alright! Enough of this!”

Suddenly, something nudged Viv’s attention to the sky. Perhaps a movement, perhaps danger sense warned her of an incoming threat. She looked up and saw a monster diving towards them.

Time slowed. A bolt of black appeared above Viv’s shoulder while black mana surged from her feet up to cover her in armor... until Sidjin’s hand grabbed her shoulder, shaking her.

“What?”

“Those are troops, not monsters.”

Viv blinked, stupefied.

“What?”

“Griffin riders. Helock’s shock troops.”

“What?”

“Just look, woman.”

The witch thought her lover mad but the creature landing before them wore a harness and metal plates, clear as day under the light. It was an avian creature with powerful back legs, two wings, and a sharp beak made for gouging. Viv judged it was larger than most warhorses.

[Tamed Griffin, extremely dangerous. A monster raised from birth to bind with their tamer, who rides them into battle. The bond is powerful and can only be formed once. Gray mana shield. Expert aerial fighter. Vicious fighter.]

A man sat on its back, legs tucked in not to interfere with the wings. He wore armor and wielded a long spear with a bulbous head covered with enchantments.

[Griffin tamer, dangerous. A special path that only those with taming and arcane blade potential can walk. It takes a long time to train a single combatant. Minor caster. Decent close quarter fighter.]

[Sling spear, a powerful weapon designed for jousting and flinging projectiles powered by a gray and blue core. It can be extended. A special trigger lets the wielder throw a powerful, short range explosive spell. Must be recharged frequently.]

As usual, the inspection skill fed the information directly into her consciousness rather than appearing like a book she would have to read. She also got the diffuse impression that the pair together presented a much more dangerous challenge than the sum of their parts, like a knight and their horse.

The weapon looked really expensive and high maintenance. The armor looked impressive as well, both light and hardy. While she watched, the griffin croaked strangely while its rider lifted a bird-like visor to inspect them. He spoke a few words in northerner that Viv did not recognize. Sidjin replied smoothly. The rider remained silent for a while, considering his words, perhaps, so Viv looked up.

Forms fled between the floating rocks above Helock, though none approached the massive form of the Chalice. Sometimes, the light reflected on metal plates or the edge of a blade. Most of them flew in groups.

“You are not of Helock, so you can move,” the man finally said in broken imperial, his attention centered on Viv.

“Yes.”

“You are the one with dragon,” he also said accusingly.

“Hmmm. Yes?”

“Can you tell it stop racing us. We are working. Busy.”

“Wow, I’m actually relieved. I thought she would be trying to eat you.”

“Tried but saw me and stopped. Says she does not eat human INTO MY HEAD.”

“Yes, she speaks like that.”

“Says because not know how to cook. You be careful.”

“Yeah yeah.”

The rider gave her a last glance then rode out. Viv thought he looked kinda cool after she was done brushing the dust from her face.

“Normally they stay in their mountain base south of here,” Sidjin said. “They must have been deployed to keep an eye on what was going on. Prevent the riots from spilling.”

“This guy looked pissed off,” Viv said.

“They are the elite of the elite, the best tamers on Param. And now they are being used to wipe the Town Council’s ass so...”

“I suppose,” Viv grumbled.

“We should get going,” Rakan reminded everyone.

They were almost to the Five Fishes Inn when they finally ran into real trouble. A barricade had been set a distance away from where they knew Solfis’ domain started. Dark-skinned northerners controlled that one and they didn’t look friendly. The trio took a side street but heard the sound of pursuit.

“Stay and confront?” Viv asked.

In answer, a transparent circle popped around the three mages. Sidjin was raising a complex shield.

“Yes,” the war mage said. “Mages don’t handle running very well.”

“And what do we have here?” a thug said in broken Enorian.

Men and a couple of women in rough clothes emerged from side alleys, wiry bodies visible through stained clothes. There was a certain beastiality in the way they moved, the way they looked, hunched forward in anticipation.

Viv really didn’t have time for them.

“No idea how you guys can be stupid enough to — “

The man kept talking, but no sound could be heard. His companions stopped where they stood, suddenly aware something had gone wrong. A few took a step back, more lucid than the rest.

Viv loved sound magic.

“Hush now, shhhh. We are busy, so I’ll make it simple. You fuckers disgust me but I promised I wouldn’t be the blade of vengeance so I’ll give you ten seconds to fuck off before I cut every single one of you to bloody ribbons. Ten.”

“Wait!” Sidjin said.

Viv frowned but let the mage take a step forward. The riot leader was frothing at the mouth though his followers seemed lost on how to proceed. Truly, Pratchett had gotten it right, Viv thought. The IQ of a crowd was that of its dumbest member divided by the number of participants.

“What my friend here is trying to say is that we are busy, you disgust us, you are also facing three war mages and though you feel strong right now, you’re merely street scum with clubs, not the dragonslayer reborn. So you have nine seconds or we will cut you to bloody ribbons. Nine. Eight.”

The thug leader charged with what might have been a blood-curdling scream. Viv would never know. What surprised her was how stupid the man was. She had always seen ringleaders as cold-minded opportunists. Apparently, riots brought the worst out of people.

Before Viv could use her intimidation, Sidjin casually lifted a hand and the attacker rose in the air by a good meter, limbs flailing. Viv could see that her lover had latched a kinetic spell to his target in four different places, a display of his amazing control.

“Seven.”

Sidjin smacked his victim against the nearby wall, breaking him out of the silence spell. A painful yelp escaped the man’s throat, quickly silenced when Sidjin flung him into a workshop’s barred gate.

“Six.”

A third toss silenced the man forever.

“Five.”

The rioters left.

“Hmm, it worked. I gave the display two chances out of three,” the prince casually said.

They departed once again, finding the edge of the safe zone a little while later. It was still early morning by then. The guards let her through without asking questions and a street urchin quickly led them through several checkpoints without prompt. They found themselves in the inn a moment later. It still smelled like stew. A young boy manned the cauldron, continuing the tradition after the untimely demise of the previous innkeeper. It was Lim the Fell-handed, Solfis' second who came to see them. The grim northerner still looked like a mid-level manager to Viv despite her body count.

"Hello," she said in Enorian. "Why are you here?"

"We are looking for his sister," Viv replied. "The Hallurians who came here yesterday might know where she is."

"I will come with you and ask."

"Is that fine?" Viv asked with some suspicion.

"Your creature, he is busy. Bounty hunters come for him to capture. He is meeting them in the underground."

"Wait, really? Does he need help?"

"He said you would say that," Lim replied with a cruel smile. "He said to tell you: 'I have better fun than with the spiders.' He said you would understand."

"Damn. I could have gone without the reminder."

Viv didn't know who could have sent people after Solfis but she was sorry for the poor bastards who would face him in the dark in a cramped environment. With water. You might as well send knife-wielding teens in air ducts to fight the fucking xenomorph.

"He also said that he found things for Elunath in the assassins' base."

"Ah."

Lim pursed her lips in disapproval.

"I still think he fucks you in all holes, Elunath. Bad deal. You should sleep with him and put poison in wine. Give antidote only if he cures you."

"I'll take that under advisement," Viv said, "But honestly, I'd rather just plain attack him than bed this asshole."

"I'd prefer that as well," Sidjin said in a dry voice.

"Nobles," Lim scoffed, "never want to get hands dirty. You will learn."

"Right. The sister?"



“I find her for you. I am very good at finding. Finding to save, this time, for a change. Let’s go!”

Lim walked out without waiting to see if they would follow. Outside, people moved about. Everything felt cramped with personal effects and crates of supplies stacked everywhere. Children were playing in large groups under the stress-filled eyes of huddling women. The mood remained somehow optimistic.

Everyone either gave Lim a large berth or a respectful nod and if people were curious about Viv and her companions, it was the sort of curiosity tinged with self-preservation. The northerner weaved smoothly between stacks of barrels and clumps of people until they found a warehouse by the shore. The contents had been piled to the ceiling in neat rows to give the Hallurians some space. A pair of representatives immediately stood up to welcome them. At first, only Lim spoke but Rakan soon joined them. He sounded frantic.

The discussion lasted a good three minutes in northerner during which Viv stayed quiet. When they were done, Lim left immediately with the others trailing her again.

“They say she was one of the few who fought, that she tried to lure people away,” Rakan told her as they moved.

“Rioters?”

“Yes. By shooting them with her bow.”

Viv thought that would be a big problem if they eventually caught her.

“But she didn’t return. She was supposed to but she didn’t,” Rakan continued.

Viv realized he was on the verge of tears. She placed a hand on his shoulder and forced his panicked gaze to settle on her own. Her soul flared, instilling resolve in him through leadership.

“There could be several explanations for that, alright? No matter what, we will find her. Yes?”

“Yes. Sure. We will. If she, if she...”

“Rakan. First, we find, then we think. Focus.”

“Right.”

They walked.

Lim led them out of the enclave at a solid pace, then through back alleys and hidden paths with a familiarity that spoke of years of experience dodging the main thoroughfares. Once, they came across two sentries they could not avoid and Rakan left them as whining piles on the ground before the group could consider a detour. They found the Wheat Gate district and

the destroyed inn before noon. From then on, Lim guided them through the empty streets, doing something weird with her hand where she would move her fingers a certain way while inspecting her surroundings.

“The refugees told her where they’d seen her last,” Rakan explained.

They let Lim work in peace. The woman guided them around, slowly at first, then with increasing speed through the poor district at the periphery of the city. There were spots of old blood around, black and flaky now. Eventually, the trail led into a one-way street.

Rakan sore softly.

There was a lot of blood around, especially at the end, but it was not what had gotten his attention. The young mage raced forward and picked up the broken short bow. His hands shook.

“It’s hers. They must have cornered her here.”

“The bodies were picked up,” Lim said. “If there were survivors they must have been carried to the nearest temple.”

“Let’s go” Viv said.

The northerner knew the city well. She guided them to a small, secluded place of worship. Viv knew from the garden that it would be dedicated to Enttiku, the goddess of death. They were let in without problem when they said they were looking for someone. The entire place had been turned into a makeshift hospital. Overworked nurses ran around, carrying fresh bandages and water. Lim asked for someone fitting the description but no one had the time to help them, so they split up. Viv and Sidjin discreetly charged some enchantments, mostly lighting and water-purifying arrays. Viv knew something was wrong when she looked up to find Rakan petrified over a small, improvised bed. She raced to his side.

The person in it could only be described as ‘butchered’. She was a massive sore of broken bones, inflamed tissues and bruises. her face was mush. Viv could only tell her gender because of the black hair, matted and caked with dry blood. Painful wheezes emerged from the broken wreck of her face. The young mage pointed at her arm where a tattoo could be seen between a purple blotch and the white shard of a jutting bone.

“Tarana... Why?”

He babbled in Hallurian, so Viv hugged him and hailed a harried priestess. The black-clad woman first frowned with frustration, but she moved closer all the same.

“Thank you for charging spells around here. What did you want to... oh. Her. We stabilized her with a prayer, hoping someone would come. I can... temporarily heal her to let her say goodbye, but...”

Rakan wailed so Viv hugged him tighter.

“What are the chances that she could be saved by a really, really good healer?”

“I’m sorry, we’re at capacity...”

“Not what I’m asking. Could she be saved by a great healer?”

The priestess blinked, then frowned.

“Well, yes, if you can get him here within two hours, that is.”

“I’ll need a stretcher, please. I can pay.”

“I’m sorry, she’ll die if she’s moved.”

“I have some essence of solace,” Viv said.

The priestess opened her mouth to reply, then reconsidered. She kneeled and placed a hand on Tarana’s body.

“It could work. You will have a few hours, no more. The body cannot be sustained indefinitely. I’ll get you the stretcher right away.”

“Viv,” Rakan said, “Viv, don’t give me hope if...”

“We will get her to the medical faculty of Helock. They owe me healings. That was our deal.”

“If they are already crowded...”

“I have acquired some goodwill so it’s time to use it. If she can be saved, we’ll save her, alright?”

The young man nodded, then wiped his eyes.

“If anyone tries to stop us, ANYONE, I’ll —”

“Alright killer, cool down. You’ll need that energy on the trip back.”

They were off within a minute. After Viv fed the insensate Tarana a drop of potion, two hardy volunteers delicately moved her to the stretcher and the group left. Lim led the way back.

This time, they took the most direct way. Rakan cleared the path through the expedient means of tossing fireballs at everything and anyone on the path, which had the virtue of sending a clear message. No one stayed to test them. They crossed the city to the noble district, then through it and the Academy to the Faculty of Medicine. A massive queue extended to the fields but Viv waved her student card and they were let in first. She stopped at the entrance.

“We need Tod,” she told the receptionist.

“Archmage Tod is busy, everyone —”

Viv resorted to the very rude method of muting the woman, who appeared quite shocked by the treatment.

“Archmage Tod and I have an arrangement, the one to regrow limbs. The bargain was that I could pick people to be healed for free, so I’m merely asking him to honor his side of the bargain. Now, you can get me to him or I’ll flare black mana in the ward until he comes to investigate. Your choice.”

“There was no need for — “

“She’s dying. You’ve had a long day but she’s dying. So, uh, you’re getting on my nerves right now.”

“Fine! Fine.”

Tod found them, had a look at Tarana and directed her to a surgery room, ignoring Viv entirely. Rakan went to follow them. Lim and the volunteers left soon after, the first to take the secret passage back to her lair and the second to their homes. It turned out they were stranded herders who had wanted an escort back. This left Viv sitting on a stone bench in the outer garden next to her lover.

“I think we got lucky this time,” Viv said.

“Part of it was luck, but part of it was creating the opportunities you needed to seize the chance.”

“I know, I know, just, things don’t always end up so nicely. I’m relieved.”

They waited in companionable silence for a while. It was still early in the afternoon. They had some time. Moreover, Viv felt bone-tired.

“Will you ask him to join you? After that, I mean,” Sidjin asked.

“Rakan?”

“Yes. He knows you will try to recruit him. He will volunteer, in fact, I’m sure of it.”

“I’ll have him if he wants to join. The new Harrak is much keener on voluntary service than the old one.”

“Will you ask me, then?”

Viv looked at Sidjin, the fallen prince attractive with his mussed hair and the soot on his cheeks. It gave him a roguish, adventurer appearance.

“Don’t think I can pay you enough.”

“I accept payment in... services.”

The prince nimbley dodged her hook, catching her fist.

“Crass. I hate you,” Viv accused, though she was smiling.

He chuckled, but his answer got cut short by Arthur landing excitedly a few steps away.

*Mother.*

*Mother.*

*Mother.*

*There are humans.*

*And they FLY!*

*Humans!*

*With weird bird.*

*I have idea.*

“Does it include killing a rider and stealing their griffin so I can ride it myself?”

There was a long, embarrassed mental silence.

... *No?*

“It won’t work, they bind for life.”

“Squeeeeeeee.”

“I promise I’ll keep working on my colorless magic until I can levitate. It can’t be much more complicated to fly. Maybe with an enchanted harness.”

*You promise.*

*I teach you how to fly.*

*We eat squid together.*

*Become big and scaly.*

“Not sure for the scales but for the rest, yes. One day we will fly together.”

## Chapter 118: Examination

Afternoon sunlight reflected on Viv’s shield and its latest addition, a letter from an unknown alphabet hammered on by a Hallurian smith.

What had started as a light shield was now considerably heavier, its surface lined with symbols, a veritable roadmap of Viv’s progress and the friends she had made along the way. The Yries-made enchantments were still intact and fully functional under added plates grafted on like barnacles on a warship’s hull. The tree of Kazar, the shield of Neriad, the veterans’ mark, the sigil of the mountain folks, even the layers of fur left at the back by the Merls. She had made an impact over the last year and a half. A good one, for some.

The rest could go fuck themselves.

Even the description of the shield had changed. Viv wondered if it was due to her familiarity with the item.

[Yries enchanted shield: made with care for a friend, this shield has since collected marks of respect and gratitude from very diverse people. The innate protections remain intact under an increasingly heavy layer of armor. Has stopped several blows despite the current wielder’s lack of expertise. Extremely resilient.]

Hey, at least I hold it in a way that the edge doesn’t smash me in the nose anymore, Viv told herself with some annoyance. This had not led to any skill for her. It took more than a few hours of effort for the magic of the world to decide to help.

It was true, the shield had blocked several blows. An arrow in the cannibal compound and a downward dagger stab when she had gone after a captured Arthur. It was indeed solid. The description had it right, though, the main aspect was emotional. A reminder of what she had achieved in protective form.

“Admiring your own reflection, dear?” Sidjin asked in a teasing voice.

Viv frowned at her fallen prince boytoy.

“It’s not even flat. On a related ‘not flat’ note, why are you naked?”

“Why are you not naked?” the prince replied, extending his arms to the secluded clearing they were on and the tent they had set up.

Viv considered his words and admitted that they made a lot of sense.

The pair spent an hour relaxing comfortably, then the time came to work. They dressed and meditated for five minutes, centering themselves for the task to come. Viv checked the circle one last time out of habit, then centered on the teleportation gate destination array.

The last hurdle towards making a stable teleportation for Viv was not seeing space as a fabric, which seemed to be hard to grasp for the local humans, but the calculations associated with origin and destination. Sidjin was a mage who used rigid, codified coordinates for distance and direction to link one portal with another. Viv realized her magic didn't work that way. Mana buckled at those strict guidelines, not least because Viv realized they were, in fact, incorrect. Too approximate to link two points hundreds of miles away from each other. It should not work, but because mages made magic work through a more rational approach, it did for them. It was good enough to function, really. That would not fly with her instinctive method, so rather than using coordinates, she used a code. A portal had a set of glyphs that marked it and its surroundings. For example Helock would be 'city, magic, flying, stone' and a few others while the wilderness they were in for testing had 'clearing, peace,' and 'naked' in it. So long as it made sense to Viv, that was fine.

One of the issues was that a witch portal would be too peculiar to be activated by someone else. On the plus side, it appeared to be more stable than a mage portal, requiring less material and less mana to activate. That was what the preliminary tests had shown. Now the time had come for the real deal.

"Whenever you're ready darling."

"Thanks Sidjin. What if we break the fabric of space and time itself?"

"Then we can travel back and do it again! We will not, however. We are merely connecting to points in a temporary fashion. Legerit of Baran proved that Nyil would smother harmful effects to itself, if not the creatures that inhabit it as the Harrakan disaster shows, by conducting an experiment in two-sixty eight on the premise that —"

"Yes, yes, thank you dear. The joke would have sufficed."

"You know better than to get me started on colorless mana studies. In any case, enough delay! Proceed! I believe in you and your weird witchy ways."

"Hmph."

Viv walked to the circle and took a step in, careful not to damage the lines. They had not used metal but traced divots into a flat stone disk Sidjin had casually raised from the ground. As soon as she did, a strange current raised the small hair from her arms. The spell was not even fully charged yet.

She poured power from her core into it, feeling mana swell to answer her will. All of it made sense to her. Space was a fabric, only flat to her limited human senses. Gravity made it malleable. Nyil, the world, would let her touch it for a little bit, pinch it, as it were. There would be no breaking, no, merely small ripples. A small aperture so tiny only humans would

use it. It would go from this isolated clearing, a peaceful place still bearing the memory of a couple making love, back to the city of sorcery, its place of learning, the enchanted walls, flying rocks hanging above like divine jokes or swords of Damocles. A passage would open. Two would become one, then two again, allowing passage for a fragment of an instant in the grand scheme of things. So easy. No need to force, not like those mages do. Just... go with the flow to create something unique and daring but ultimately harmless. Space could not be broken by the likes of her anyway. This was merely brushing a carpet with some strands standing at different angles.

Massive power, stored over an hour by a powerful caster, swirled in front of Viv. The powerful energies could level the forest if she lost control, but she would not. Colorless magic had no real will of its own, only the caster did. It would not rebel. Not against her, at least. Slowly, carefully, she coaxed the ball to go deeper towards the inside in a direction humans may not tread. there was upward, forward, and to the side, but there was inward as well. It was so logical, so obvious. When the sun hit the place right, it created a shadow in three dimensions. Viv could just feel it work.

“Gate,” she whispered.

Simple and clear, no need for frills, for theatrics. Two places would be one, then two again, because she wanted it.

The circle dove inward until it was so thin a quark could not have crossed it, but that was fine. It connected and now she could enlarge it a bit, just enough to let a mounted rider through. Practically nothing. There it was. The same sun but at a slightly different angle through the windows of Sidjin’s new lab, the one Sterek had to abandon.

Sidjin floated the tent through, then led their horses as well. The beast snorted a bit in panic but did not resist any more than that. Viv had a last look around to check if they had not forgotten anything, then she was through.

The spell faded behind her, its purpose fulfilled.

Viv blinked.

“Wow.”

Mana mastery: Intermediate 2

Arcane Constructs: Intermediate 3



It made so much sense. Everything did on a fundamental level. Reality was plastic when suffused with so much mana. It permeated everything she could see. There was a code, no, there were codes of which one was eminently suited to her. She could see it, feel it, wield it, she could tire less and recover faster. This world was... wonderful.

“It seems like you had a breakthrough. A big one.”

“Yes. Magic is so smooth. I gained Mana mastery at intermediate level two. I did not realize the difference would be so pronounced.”

Sidjin nodded slowly, suddenly solemn.

“A momentous achievement. And sometimes, skill level is not everything. A fortuitous epiphany in the middle of a tier will have more impact than numbers can reflect. Thank you for trusting me with this news. I remember when I broke through to intermediate myself, back on Glastia’s walls. I felt I could hold the world in my palm. I wish I had someone to share that moment with me.”

He smiled ruefully.

“It only took me twenty years to achieve that result and you managed it in less than two but I am very secure in my own talent. This is nothing.”

“Hey, hey, watch this!” Viv said, beyond excited.

She took a step forward and dropped in her own shadow before reappearing by the door, a burst of darkness-infused mana left behind.

“That, however, is utter horseshit.”

\*\*\*

It was not the government that stopped the lower city carnage, nor time, nor even a cool breeze coming from the south carrying with it dust and the promise of rain. It was Helock’s worst enemy.

Halluria, it was said, had stirred. Roving bands had breached the Baranese borders and conducted raids on frontier villages. Garrisons had repelled the worst of them in mutual bloodbaths, as had been the case this past century with Baran at the apex of its power. Nevertheless, Halluria was vast and its reserves of bloodthirsty, ambitious marauders virtually endless. The tide would come sooner or later. Whispers traveled from city to city, speaking of a great host raised in defense of civilization. There would be levies and taxes and dead sons but for now, the sky was still blue and the fields were ripe. Food shipments crossed the gates from many directions. Thousands of mouths would not need them

because they were frozen rictuses smiling at the moon from atop corpse carts and funerary pyres. All would be well. The people licked their wounds and returned to work. A month of retaliatory murders followed but, all in all, people were sated. Life returned to normal.

\*\*\*

Viv stared at the face of General Jar Jaratalassi, the weirdly named, dogmatic professor of magic military doctrine. The scarred man sustained her polite glare with his usual stoney demeanor, the two of them dancing a strange dance that had kept the other students betting, guessing. He, who disregarded instinctive casters and their unreliability from the bottom of his soul. She, who thought Nyil would fuck Harrak over unless she innovated. He, whose honor prevented him from flunking her. She, who religiously gave him the answer she knew he wanted. He, who could tell she was full of it and would try bullshitting her way through any military encounter with outlander knowledge. She, who knew he knew and asked tangential questions on which specific unusual tactics had worked, where, and when. He, whose unyielding principles forced him to answer in detail. They had never stopped testing each other's limits and now the man was handing her a sheaf of densely written papers with complex diagrams showing troop movements. It was her magnum opus of asslicking orthodoxy. It was a monument to traditional Paramese warfare. It was an analysis of a Baranese defeat against a powerful Hallurian incursion, offering an alternative strategy that could have avoided the disaster.

Said strategy was shamelessly based on Jaratalassi's own performance at the exact same spot twenty years later.

It was the most dishonest academic work Viv had ever submitted, however, it was also the most researched. Nothing had been left to chance. Every option had been explored. Viv's work was so absolutely fucking airtight she could defend it in front of a jury and was already considering how to include it in the Harrakan doctrine which, as of now, didn't exist outside of her mind.

On the first page, a red, shiny stamp had been applied. It said 'approved'. There was a cute little star added, a sober expression of the man's regard for the presented work.

Viv grabbed the sheaf but the general didn't let go. They stayed like that, frozen for a moment. When General Jaratalassi finally spoke, his voice was unusually kind

"Congratulations on being the first witch to ever graduate from my class, Miss 'Saint-Lys'. I applaud your performance and hope I will be seeing you next semester."

Viv felt touched that the man had taken the time to learn more about her profile, or at least, the official one.

The truth was that Saint-Lys should never have been her name. It had been selected by one of her paternal ancestors because it was rare and sounded posh, a good asset for a family of scammers, liars, and conmen. Her real one had been lost to history. By paying his

respects, Jaratalassi had unwittingly stabbed the bitter blade of guilt deep into her breast. She was a bullshitter with a veneer of respectability, a ruthless shiv goon hidden behind a pearly mask.

But that was fine.

Fake it till you make it.

“It will be my pleasure, sir, looking forward to the practicals,” she replied, truthfully.

“Out of curiosity, are there strategies that resemble the one I followed at the battle of Kariss’ pass in your world?”

Viv hesitated, but only for a moment.

“There is. We call it ‘deep defense’ or ‘elastic defense’ and it has worked very well in a few decisive battles.”

“So you already had a basic knowledge of tactics. Hmm. I admit to being curious. Do not disappoint me now.”

“Oh, I promise I will do my best.”

The two exchanged a last pleasant smile. Viv gave it a chance in three they would end up at the opposite ends of a battlefield at some point in the distant future.

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“Your essay was interesting,” Viv’s etiquette teacher said. “Your idea to maximize general happiness certainly has potential, although the basis that something may be intrinsically good or bad is... disputable.”

Viv shrugged. Utilitarianism was an old theory, one with its limits, yet one she had studied in school. It at least considered the greater good as desirable. Compared to the average Paramese, she was downright progressive. The teacher seemed to appreciate that. The Academy valued the spread of knowledge and trained capable mages regardless of their origins. Deep inside, they wanted to make the world a better place for mankind. They were just not brazen enough to say it.

“However,” the teacher continued, and there was always a but, “I have a problem with your applied etiquette methods.”

She sat back into her chair, interlacing her fingers. Viv remained seated on her side of the desk, waiting. The exam was over. She was certain she had passed, although she was well below average. It didn’t matter much to her.

“Etiquette,” the prim woman said, “etiquette is codified respect. I have already mentioned it at the start of the class. The purpose of standardized curtises, bows, handshakes, baisemains, and all that pomp is to show respect. Only through etiquette can people of vastly different origin and social background mix without anyone taking offense. Wars have started over a misunderstanding, a perceived slight so great it could not be ignored. It has happened. It will happen again without etiquette. And the core of etiquette is respect. If you do not convey respect, if you do not mean that respect, no amount of perfectly angled head tilts will matter. Viviane, you ooze defiance.”

The witch shrugged. That wasn't news to her.

“And here it is again. Deep inside, you don't feel the need to express respect. I will give you a passing grade because our strict, Academy-defined rating criteria say I should but you will get a fail in the practical part and I will bar you from taking any diplomatic classes unless you fix that attitude. We work towards harmony here. My faculty has no room for hellions.”

Viv nodded and waited. The teacher smoldered in her seat like an old ember, which probably meant she expected an answer. Viv licked her lips and considered her words before leaning forward.

“Don't take this the wrong way but... do you know who I am?”

That got her a raised brow and a bit more than a smoldering, but Viv didn't let the woman ignite her temper with righteous fury quite yet. She had a point to make.

“I am currently the elected and permanent head of a freshly independent city, plus a few villages now, huddling at the edge of the deadlands. I represent those people to those who know about our situation. For all intents and purposes, I am the leader of a sovereign nation.”

“There are military bases in Baran that are larger than your entire domain.”

“And there are cities in my world with more people than the entire continent of Param. It changes nothing. I lead a group of people. Those people united against foreign aggression. We have fought, bled, and died so we would be free, and I carry those wishes and the burden of all this sacrifice even today. As their representative, any act of submission I perform is one Harrak performs. That is why, dear professor, I have played along with classes, I have learned the motions, but in real life, I bow to no one. I am Harrak, and Harrak has no masters.”

The teacher gave her a considering look.

“Will you bow to Elunath?”

“He and I have a contractual obligation. I will not sell out my adopted people to save my life. I will remove myself from the throne for the duration of my service if he saves me. In the meanwhile, I stand by what I said.”

The older woman conceded.

“I believe you. Nevertheless, I cannot accept you in my diplomatic classes if you cannot act as an envoy. For your own personal development, I would consider getting a private tutor on sovereign to sovereign rites. It might be useful if you do intend to keep your small city-state thriving and independent.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I know someone who is an expert at contact with other cultures. He is quite experienced.”

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**//I am not sure the timing is wise, Your Grace.**

**//I am currently searching for agents capable of participating in the expedition.**

**//However, I have yet to find a free agent capable of facing a necrarch.**

“We already have one,” Viv said, grabbing a pin and leaning over the massive map in the Five Fishes basement. She shoved a few of them over the river Shal heading west, then south from the Enorian northern capital of Losserec-on-the-Lake. It stopped short of the deadlands.

“Sidjin has taken over Sterek’s contract. He will establish a network of teleportation gates two thirds of the way to Harrak and according to his contract, he can let anyone he chooses activate them so long as they are individuals. We will use the semester break to travel back to Harrak and get the one man capable of downing a full-fledged necrarch.

**//Solar.**

“Exactly.”

**//Brilliant, Your Grace.**

**//However, are you sure he will accept?**

“Yes, because I will offer him what he wants the most: his freedom from ruling Harrak. We both know he hates it.”

**//But who will replace him?**

“I will. You see, I can operate Sidjin’s gates. More importantly, I can make my own.”

**//Your Grace, this is tremendous news.**

**//It means...**

“That I will finish the gate network and link Helock to Harrak. Secretly, of course. I will be able to travel from one to the other in a single day. It will take massive amounts of mana and I will be exhausted afterwards, but the next semester has frequent weeks without classes

dedicated to practicals. We'll make it work. But that's not important. What's important is that between Sidjin, you, Solar, and I..."

**//We can take down a necrarch.**

**//It will require preparation and specialized gear.**

**//Leave it to me, Your Grace.**

**//You have done very well.**

**//Once more, my trust in you proves to be warranted.**

**//I shall look forward to adding its head to my collection.**

"Solfis. Focus on the bigger picture."

**//The largest collection Nyil has ever seen.**

Viv sighed and let it go. The golem was merely being facetious. She took the item he had prepared for her then left, not particularly pleased with her next destination.

\*\*\*

"The minerals will save me some time, and there are a few rare ones in the lot. I will give you two years for the lot," Elunath said. "I am rounding up."

He had not even looked at the crate. Viv had felt the formidable aura of the man merely extend until it covered the container, withdrawing shortly afterward.

She opened her mouth to protest but the elemental archmage raised a hand to shut her up.

"And five years for the gravitite stone of unknown origin."

Viv stopped and nodded. It was generous for what Solfis estimated would be 'fair'. It rankled to know she was still basically paying for an option to buy, but it was still that or dying. Unless Solfis' mysterious contact came though, which she was growing dubious of with every passing day.

"Six years nine months for the assorted supplies required for the spell. Well done on getting them, by the way, but you are still missing the most important piece."

"The black mana core, I know."

"See that you do not forget. I must be told in advance if you give up on finding one yourself. They do not grow on trees. If I am too late to acquire one..."

"I will die. I know."

"It would be a shame to lose such a promising partner."

The archmage lifted a nasty assassin dagger between two fingers. It was so dark it appeared woven from the night itself.

“Three days,” the man said.

Viv grumbled and grabbed it back. Maybe Irao would find a use for it.

“Thirteen years, nine months in total. Your current time of servitude stands at eighty years and three months. Was there anything else?”

“No.”

“No, sir. You will have to show deference when under my service so you might as well get used to it now. Before you see yourself out, there was one last question I had for you.”

“Yes?” Viv asked with circumspection. It was the first time the archmage had shown any interest in her.

“There are rumors of an anomaly roaming the bowels of the city, a bone construct of great power. You would not know anything about that, would you?”

“I know a little,” she answered noncommittally. The archmage would detect a plain lie.

“I would wave thirty years for a chance to examine its casing, if you can find a way. Don’t go after it yourself. It has proven to be quite lethal.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Viv replied, “was there anything else?”

“No. You may go. “

Viv locked the door behind her. Elunath could do it with an effort of will, yet he insisted on people doing it and doing it quietly as well. The man was completely anal when it came to manners.

At least, now she knew who had sent those bounty hunters after Solfis.

She wondered if Elunath would hunt by himself. Doubtful for one who seemed to care about their own well-being so much, but a girl could hope.

\*\*\*

The morning was cold and windy for the first time this year. A gale from the sea carried droplets and the faint smell of iodine. The change of season was coming.

Just like a few other classes, dueling would finish early to allow students to focus on their most important discipline, namely the classes dealing with their chosen colors. The older classes would mix and match but the first years had their own category on account of their fights being uninteresting. In normal times anyway. This year, Professor Dirge had made an

exception and chosen to display the final as an introduction to other matches. The contestants were, without surprise, Viv and Rakan.

"I feel strangely nervous," the young Hallurian said, scratching his head. He had decided to let the thick black strands grow. Some of his kin kept the whole hairstyle complete with dreads and accessories while others shaved it off entirely, depending on how they felt about their cultural heritage. Rakan was exploring his options, which was good.

"There's just a lot of experienced people here," he sighed.

The rafters were filled with young mages and a few witches, many of them decked in heavy protective gear. The first day would be relaxed but as duels continued, the more serious contenders would move up. That wouldn't concern Viv, however. She and Rakan were out no matter what. Despite controlled auras, mana seemed to dance, ebb and flow around the casters, painting an ever-changing riot of colors in her sights. The usual arena had been reinforced for the occasion with a few additional staff members and a medic on standby as well.

The two contenders walked to the arena when asked, then after a few short introductions they were left facing each other.

"You may begin," Dirge said.

Spells exploded over the arena.

Viv raised two eldritch walls of the path of fireball, detonating it early while a downward burst saturated the area with black mana. Colorless javelins harried Rakan as she walked to the side, keeping her eyes on him. Her projectiles smashed against quickly alternating shields, then a massive burst of gray emerged from him and Viv knew her lungs would no longer draw oxygen. She released a burst of black mana in the air and disrupted the spell, the rest of which he had to drop when her bolts finally pierced his shield. He had another up before the following sound attack could make him throw up.

They exchanged more attacks with Rakan getting progressively overwhelmed. Viv's increased mastery meant that she could weave and direct mana with a speed and grace even the gifted Rakan couldn't hope to compete with, at least not yet. In desperation, he poured a vast portion of his remaining mana into a spell that looked suspiciously like one of Varska's main lines. Viv had not seen him practice it before, and she suspected Ereska might have given the little twerp some advice. Pointy shards emerged from the ground behind him.

"Ballista."

The hail of stone spears rose, then fell, but Viv was ready.

"Net."



Black tendrils emerged from before her, slicing the projectiles into fun-sized bits. She grabbed most of those directly in front of her with an overcharged telekinesis spell and returned it to its sender. Rakan shielded his face with his arms as reflex but his stone shield held. Viv could tell he was on his last leg though.

“Blight.”

The darkness-infused cloud of nothingness expanded over the arena on Viv’s half. Rakan put all he had left into a front shield of various colors. He jumped in fright when Viv tapped on his shoulder.

“AH! Shit.”

She held an Excalibur in one hand.

“Victory is yours,” he allowed.

Silence followed the short if intense display of battle prowess, then the spectators roared their approval. Feet and hands drummed on the wooden benches as was tradition across the continent. Words and comments surged across the crowd in quick succession. Rakan shook Viv’s hand then the pair stepped down the arena, receiving a symbolic ribbon from a smiling Professor Dirge. It wasn’t much but she appreciated the thought. The pair walked back to their rafters to drink some smuggled tea, watching the next duel with interest. That interest waned very quickly.

“It’s going to be amateurs for the next few hours, or at least very one-sided fights,” Viv said.

“I know how bloodsport works, Viv,” Rakan told her with a smile. “That said, impressive performance. You didn’t even have to use that stupidly strong ability of yours.”

“The instant teleport?”

“That. You just negated the skill edge for the entire assassination path.”

Viv frowned.

“Skill edge?”

Rakan rolled his eyes.

“Ugh you are so good at some things I forget you can be entirely clueless with the basics. Skill edge, it’s, errr, a concept in the study of path, the interface and Nous’ legacy. I took it as an elective. How to explain. You know different paths have different specific skills right? Like heavy infantry have shield walls, archers have fast shots and cavalry have grouped charges?”

“I didn’t know that. I was informed asking was rude.”

“It is but those skills have been documented throughout the centuries. You know heavy infantry walking in a line with shields will have a shield wall, that’s their entire reason for existing.”

“That makes sense.”

“And within the confines of those skills, even a low attunement individual will accomplish feats they do not understand with some impressive mana efficiency ratio. In a sense, skills are a way for non-casters to specialize in very specific tasks they will excel at. The interface guides someone into achieving through effort and repetition what they could never do through understanding, whether that understanding comes from their intellect or their instincts. Our skills are mana sight and mana manipulation, or enchantment. Other paths will have ‘thrust’ or ‘rune inscribing’, skills with a much lesser scope but a greater focus. We are more flexible but it comes at a cost. However, you know why we are still more powerful in the end.”

“With time and effort, all becomes possible.”

“Almost. We also have more time, usually. Willpower and endurance are associated with longevity. Endurance makes the body resistant to the ravages of time while willpower negates the reality of its effect. You are looking at the mirror and say no, I look younger than this, and then to an extent, it works. Anyway, sorry, I could talk about this for hours. The point is, mages who survive have time to practice until they become so good at something, it is as if they had the skill for it.”

“And the instant teleportation is like that.”

“Yes. An assassin path staple, the shadow step or blink or whatever fancy name you call it allows them to close the distance then escape with their lives. And you have reproduced it with a spell. Perhaps you do not realize it yet but this is an extremely powerful advantage. I wish I had a high black affinity now, just so I could steal it from you.”

“Just find a way with colorless mana!”

“Sure just after turning Halluria into a fertile land of goodwill and abundance and also after I have eaten freshly cut permonn slices off the tits of Warlord Uton’s favorite concubine. Nothing insurmountable. Alright, now that I have buttered you up nicely, I wanted to ask when you intended to recruit me and if I could bring my sister?”

“Hmmm.”

That was rather abrupt.

“Now if you want,” Viv said.

“What are your terms? You know I owe you my sister’s life. I would still appreciate it if...”

“We don’t do forced labor anymore in Harrak. I specifically requested it.”

“... and people listened?”

“Yes, on account of me being the boss. I would have used more convincing arguments if I had to. Fortunately, Solfis listens to me and they know what he’ll do if I give him the go ahead.”

“What will he do?”

“Have fun.”

“Alright, enough about the monster.”

“Yes, my bad, you want a firm answer and I am wasting time. I can pay you to be the resident head mage. Most likely we will have mage candidates if not now then soon, statistically. They will need to be trained. There are enchantments in the walls, hunts to be done, beastlings tides to shred through. Research on imperial stuff. So many things, so little time. I can pay you, of course, and we always take on hunters.”

“Yes. I would love that. Especially teaching, I think I would enjoy teaching very much. Yes, that would be fine. I ask for standard pay for a mage of my rank according to Helockian standards. Unless you’re broke.”

“That might happen.”

“That’s fine then, we’re in this together. Do we need a ceremony? Do you have to place your hand on my head and everything?”

“We’ll make it official when I return. We are friends, Rakan, we’ll stay friends. I’m not the bossy kind. We work as a team or not at all. And I’m not putting my hand on your head because you are sweaty.”

## Chapter 119: The Fetch Quest.

The convoy followed a torturous route through the forest, expecting trouble. Armored soldiers in loose formation formed a vanguard, their eyes fixing the thick forest with vigilance. They had their weapons sheathed — for now — but their shields were fastened. They formed an intimidating group.

Next came columns of lightly armored spearmen on either side of a large, steel-clad cart. Others followed, smaller and holding supplies. Archers gathered on top of those with their bows strung and arrows in reach. Cages closed the march, filled with miserable sods cowering under the murderous attention of nearby swordsmen. All in all, there were almost two hundred professional soldiers ready for war. They made their ways along the muddy road of early fall. None of them were surprised when, at the twist of the path, the road was blocked by fallen trees, nor did they voice concern at the figure at its top.

The man waiting for them was not human. His reddish skin and amber eyes marked him as a Kark. Stout and short, the stranger wore makeshift armor made of stolen parts and wielded a spear that had seen better days, though the tip remained sharp and clean. He and the caravan leader's eyes met. In them, they each found an animosity that went beyond anger to emerge on the side of grudge, a promise that today, one of them would get to see their own guts. It was the sort of rancid hatred that took time to properly macerate, and main ingredients were grief and cruelty. Grief at the loss of friends, cruelty towards the foe.

Men and quite a few women popped from their hiding places among the thin trunks and high fens, slowly, like mirages. War paint and primitive camouflage had allowed them to merge with their surroundings. Their own skills had challenged the caravan's vigilance and won. They formed packs of nimble warriors armed with spears and savagery while lone, bow-equipped wolves skulked at the edges, feathered teeth waiting in their quivers, drooling poison. They had made no sounds.

They were mostly men as corded as ropes, dry, bearded and wild. Tatters covered them but those who paid attention would see the glint of metal under the rags. Almost fifty Kark formed a solid core of better equipped warriors. There were women as well, with hard features and harder stares, waifs and crones, all gaunt, all waiting with gritted teeth. The late afternoon light showed the bloodshot white of their eyes and out of the three hundred pairs, not a single one revealed even a hint of mercy. They were here to kill.

"Halt!" the caravan leader bellowed.

Helmets closed, blades were drawn. Above, the archers nocked their arrows. Lines of spears formed. A man in a robe exited the armored carriage and made for the front, staff held between gauntleted hands.

The silence was so deafening, it was as if the forest itself held its breath. The air tasted of that peculiar scent of weightlessness just before thunder roared, and it did, but not the way they expected it.

"So... where's Marruk?" A voice asked in Enorian.

Like a single man, half a thousand people turned their gaze to a suspiciously empty patch of trees the guerilla fighters had inexplicably left alone. Black mana dispersed and they now realized a new group waited by their side inside an intricate circle. There were horses, a pair of Hallurian youths with terrified expressions, but those were secondary to the three entities standing at the front without a care in the world.

The first was a handsome, princely man with curly dark hair and a smirk that covered half his mouth, the other slightly twisted by an intimidating scar. The second was an exotic woman with hair of a blood-tinged brown and eyes like chipped emeralds. She was pale and smiling. The last was some sort of giant bone abomination with claws the size of short swords and two Will-O'-Wisps where its eyes should be.

The two sides were too stupefied to react, but a nearby bush shivered and answered.

“Viv? Is that you?”

The bush shifted to the side to reveal a trench dug in the ground. A few archers with longbows grumbled and spat as their hidey hole was revealed, but they remained where they were while a woman in full plate climbed out.

“How did you get there? I didn't see you at all!” Viv said.

“We were already here one day ago just to be sure scouts wouldn't find us out.”

“Alright.”

“It was horrible. I wouldn't recommend it.”

Viv watched her ex-bodyguard-turned-mercenary-turned-bandit-lord and found that Marruk looked fine, if tired and a bit on the thin side. The highwayman career wasn't conducive to a stable diet so she could understand, but it still made her feel bad. Marruk's armor was pitted though clean, and her flanged mace showed significant damage. Fortunately, it didn't need to be in perfect shape to apply blunt force trauma.

It still irked Viv a bit.

“So... are you here to stop me? Because I already ruined the ambush we set up for their mage and... Well. It would be bad. I would be...” Marruk said.

She moved her lips, looking for the right word.

“Do you expect me to abandon my friends to work with a corrupt noble from a foreign land?” Viv replied with a smirk. “Think about it for a while.”

Marruk chuckled, but her brief hilarity was interrupted by the caravan leader.

“What is the meaning of this? Who are you? Are you with them? Know that you are interfering with the good conduct of an Enorian military op—”

Mana twisted. The man could still speak but no words could be heard coming from his voice.

“Shhhh. Shut the fuck up. The adults are talking,” Viv casually replied.

The caravan ranks shifted uneasily while their mage stepped to the leader, warning clear in his posture. Viv ignored it, and his attempt to form a circle.

“Where was I? Oh yes. We’re here to get you out and either to a northern city near the Steppes or back to Kazar, depending on what you prefer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

The Kark mulled this over while five hundred combatants waited in mumbling confusion, unsure as to what was happening. The Kark by the fallen trunk walked out of the road, shrugging and joining a group of allies.

“What about the others?” Marruk asked.

“They can come as well.”

Dangerous moisture appeared on the woman’s ruddy cheek. Probably the weather.

“Kazar then. I think. I’ll let people choose.”

“Good then.”

“There is,” Marruk interrupted with vehemence, “one last thing,” she finished.

Her gaze turned to the caravan.

“It so happens that we are still short-changed by the local lord and I’d like that money, since we are technically, ah, in a blood feud.”

“Just the money?”

“All thirty-seven gold talents of it. Rounded up. Because fuck them.”

“Thirty-seven gold talents and you will be satisfied?”

“No, but I would leave. And it must come from their treasury, not your pocket. They must pay.”

“Fair enough.”

Viv turned to the caravan leader who was now on the verge of apoplexy. She lifted the spell.

The man immediately screamed.

“You dare! Do you know who I am? And you! Why didn’t you do anything?” he asked, turning on the mage.

The older man smiled kindly, his graying beard shifting. Viv inspected him.

[Court mage, third step of the path. Dangerous. One who casts and advises in equal measures. Patient. Monster killer. Herbalist. Precise. Decent war caster.]

As expected.

“You’d better not interfere while we dispense justice or you will face the full wrath of Count Selno! I’m warning you, our mage will smite you where you stand,” the leader threatened.

“Regarding this, ‘sir’,” the mage replied, and Viv could hear the hyphens around the title as they dropped with venomous content, “I believe we should hear their offer.”

“What?” the leader asked, flabbergasted.

Ignoring him, the mage turned to Sidjin and bowed slightly.

“Sir, are you the Exiled Prince Sidjin of Glastia? The Red Mist?”

“That is certainly one of nicknames they used back on the wall,” Sidjin replied amicably.

“And you would be Bob, the outlander, yes? The one who slew Constable Tarano?”

“To be fair, he started it,” Viv shrugged.

“And may I ask you to prove your identities?”

Sidjin lifted a single finger and a car size double helix of mana blade whirred to life, the twinned sections moving in opposite directions. The woosh of displaced air flattened the grass by the man’s feet. It looked like the arcane equivalent of a blender and filled the exact same function.

Viv clad herself in black mana until she wore the nightmarish form of her spiked armor, strands of energy emerging from her shoulder blades like so many segmented legs. A wave of draconic intimidation forced some soldiers to step back, despite the mass of their allies standing by their sides.

Many among the caravan guards watched the spells and came to an easy, immediate, and unfortunate conclusion.

“And, uh, I do not know what that is,” the court mage said, turning to Solfis after a few moments of hesitation.

**//AN UNFORTUNATELY COMMON OCCURRENCE.  
//WHEN ONE DOES NOT LEAVE SURVIVORS.**

This convinced a few more people.

“So to reiterate, I believe we should hear their offer,” the court mage concluded.

“The offer’s simple. You will give us thirty-seven gold talents —”

“ — And my friends.” Marruk interrupted.

“You also release the prisoners. You turn around and return to the nearest town. In return, you get to keep your personal belongings and the amazing gift that is life.”

The caravan leader licked his lips, frantically watching the scene unfold. He grabbed the mage by the shoulder and whispered, though Viv used a single spell to eavesdrop.

“Are we just going to drop our pants? Do you have no honor?”

“My inspection skill says any of those three by themselves would turn this battle into a slaughter. The bone thing doesn’t even have a danger rating. It just says we’re fucked. You do your last stand if you want but I’m out of here, I didn’t sign up to have my mug used as an ornament. Good day, sir.”

“Dammit.”

It took some time and resulted in an almost decapitation, but eventually all of the prisoners were freed, the gold was obtained, and the caravan headed back in sullen silence. It was just so weird that everything had ended without bloodshed, Viv thought. For once. The rebels had welcomed the freed prisoners and shared what little food they had before huddling in a vague column, aimless.

“Here is the plan,” Viv said out loud. “We will head north on the road until we find a portal.”

“A portal?” a few people mumbled.

“A magical portal that will transport us south, out of the count’s land, in the blink of an eye, one we have prepared in advance. From now on we’ll have to walk. Don’t worry, we’ll find food for you lot on the way.”

Marruk joined Viv at the head of a confused procession. The witch herself looked back to see disbelief plain on the exhausted fighters’ face and, under that, the dangerous germination of hope. They were not out of the woods yet. Strictly speaking.

“You found me because of the bank?” Marruk asked without preamble.

“Yeah, they said you had joined a band of Kark bandits. Or disgruntled mercs, depending on who you believed. It was a simple task to follow rumors and use Arthur as a scout. She’s flying above, somewhere. What happened here, anyway?”

“That boy, Sekur, he led his band here to work for coin. Count Selno hired them to dispose of rebels. Rebels that rose because count Selno, he is the biggest asshole around. He starves



people. So Sekur meets the rebels but the rebel boss, man called the Reeve, does not fight them. He says Count Selno will betray and to take him prisoner. Sure enough, Sekur asks to meet the count on a field. Selno asks for the reeve but Sekur asks for payment. It goes bad. The Kark and the rebels fight off guards and escape together. Now the guards look for Kark and they find me!”

Marruk huffed her displeasure.

“Sekur and his men, young males, poor, not a single armor between the lot of them. Scrawny!”

On the edge of Viv’s vision, she spotted the object of Marruk’s tirade flinching as if he’d been physically struck.

“Cannot believe they mixed us. However, I am angry. So I found them and joined, taught them asymmetric pummeling like we did to the prince.”

“MARRUK THE SOFT-SPOKEN SHOWED US THE WAY. DISHONORABLE BUT SMART,” the man himself commented.

There followed a small yet very loud speech of Sekur explaining that, though giving up a blood feud before the other party had died and making ambushes dishonored his ancestors, he agreed with the woman that protecting the living had become more important.

“We are of the same tribe, one of the two the northerners decimated,” Marruk explained. “We adapt or we die.”

“The ancestors will forgive us this transgression. If we win!” Sekur screamed again.

“They were just tired of being hungry. And penniless,” Marruk muttered in Viv’s hearing, scowling mightily.

“Hmm, does he always speak at this volume?”

“All Kark do. What is worth being said is worth being said loudly. No whining. No badmouthing. Such is our ways.”

“It is as the war leader says!” Sekur thundered.

“This is going to get tiring very fast.”

“As I was explaining before SOMEONE interrupted us,” Marruk continued, “I found them. We fought. The Reeve dies in battle but more rebels join us. They picked me as general because my plans work. It has been so since then. We take the gold and the count’s men make villages pay more. Despicable.”

“Agreed.”

The conversation died out soon after and Viv moved towards her boy toy who had been silent until then.

“I didn’t know you were so big and so scawwy, your blendership. Red mist, was it?” Viv asked him, elbowing him gently.

“Yes, because the arcane spiked rotators I used would make the beastling —”

“And here I thought it referred to your painting skills!”

Sidjin blinked and seemed to get his mind out of whatever spot it had wandered to.

“Sarcasm. Of course. Sometimes, I miss the palace. Beautiful women would pamper me all day long, asking me to recount tales of my many exploits without facetious comments.”

“Yes, but could they do this?”

Viv manifested straight, slightly pointy shapes of black mana all over her face, simulating a beard and mustache combo Tolkien’s dwarves would not have shunned. She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“I am truly blessed,” Sidjin replied.

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The rest happened exactly as Viv had expected. The band returned to their camp to pack, then a company-sized group of assorted marauders and cutthroats moved south through the land. Viv and Sidjin spent their entire days riding before and after the column, intercepting patrols Arthur spotted and talking to them before trouble could erupt. Those who recognized Rakan and Tarana as Hallurians were discouraged to raise a fuss, and the possibility of facing hundreds of combatants backed by three mages for no discernable gain proved to be enough. They also bought food and supplies for the army, and it wasn’t cheap. Fortunately, Viv was flush with money from her days at the medical faculty. The highwaymen also proved extremely resilient to long walks and difficult conditions, a side effect of their paths. It took only a week to reach the edge of the Deadshield woods without any notable incidents. In fact, the most time-consuming activity for Viv proved to be the drawing and testing of witchy teleport platforms, Sidjin being legally bound not to make any of his own for the duration of his employment.

The improvised convoy bypassed the last major city, Reixa, but they did stop at Anelton at the edge of the Deadshield road where Viv had held a one hour siege against a bandit.

What was his name again? Helix? No, Elex. Whatever.

The ravaged city had not regained its former glory, but some of the survivors had returned and many intact buildings had been ‘acquired’ by opportunists in search of free land. There

was quite a bit of traffic going through the woods and not all of it was troops going to man the forts.

“Lots of refugees going to fatten the monsters. Not sure why they think it’s worth the trouble. Bunch of unruly savages ruled by a mad queen probably eat the lot as soon as they arrive. Just as bad as the revenants, I always say,” an enterprising innkeeper told Sidjin.

Viv had taken to hide her hair now that it appeared that fame followed her where she went. It didn’t help with the eyes or skin tone but in the shades of a badly lit tavern, it worked well enough. She didn’t let the man’s comments get to her. As far as she was concerned, cannibalistic mad queen was a massive step up from promiscuous great whore. At least they were afraid now.

“Speaking of, your lordship. You want company to warm your bed tonight? Finest girls from Reixa in a proper bed before you cross over.”

“You offer this in plain view of my wife?” Sidjin replied. “You are certainly bold.”

“The more the merrier, I always say. Some of my girls can please you both. Why, —”

“That will be fine, I do not wish to indulge too much. I heard you were the man to talk to about specific tents?”

“Of course! A gold talent for a set of eight. A steal!”

“That’s a threefold markup. May I ask you to reconsider ripping me off so shamelessly?”

“Anelton’s far and the roads ain’t safe, melord. A man’s gotta do a living.”

Sidjin smiled and tilted his head. Viv was definitely sure he had a way to improve his haggle. On an inspiration, the prince turned to her and winked.

“Care to give him a reason, darling?”

Viv revealed her hair and leaned over the counter, both hands planted on the weathered wood.

“Give me a fair price and I might forget that man-eating comment next time I go through here with an army instead of refugees.”

She watched recognition light his face. They got the discount.

\*\*\*

The trip through the woods went much better than Viv expected. The now retired highwaymen — and women — didn’t complain and didn’t stop. The Kark made no objection either.

“We cannot return north without covering ourselves in glory first,” he bellowed one fine evening.

“What he is trying to say is that if he heads back with his tail between his legs and not even enough iron to buy a single old Pakar, no one will marry him,” Marruk added.

Viv was amazed how much shit Marruk said about her compatriots and how much they tolerated it. She prompted the stout woman about it later.

“They know I have much iron. I am a competent war leader. I also...”

Marruk huffed in annoyance.

“I let it be known my mother had been a shaman. Shamans normally carry the wisdom of the ancestors. But I don’t!” she complained, raising her fists to the sky in impotent fury.

“Are you annoyed because you feel responsible for them?”

“Yes...” Marruk grumbled.

“And they are boneheads?”

“Not a single brain to share among them all. No plans. Screams all the time. Requests for honorable, single combat! Where do they think they are?”

“Was it not you who said you wanted them to change?”

“They have not changed,” Marruk growled between grit teeth. “They think we act different because we are here, like crazed hunters away from their wives. They have not changed at all. Yet.”

“Maybe you should talk to them.”

“I am no good at talking.”

“Marruk.”

“Yes. Yes, yes, damn you. FINE.”

\*\*\*

With Arthur covering the air and ravenously feasting on the flying wildlife, they arrived at Kazar two weeks after leaving Helock. It had to be a world record even the gryphon riders could not match. Unless that adventurer Sidjin had mentioned who could teleport had done it before. In any case, she felt a measure of excitement when some of the bends of the road grew familiar. In the early afternoon of the thirteenth day, they found the clearing where

Lancer had died and were raced by Hadal children to the fair grounds. Viv took a deep breath as she emerged from the edge of the forest. There was black mana in the air.

It also... didn't smell very good.

"Huh," Viv said.

The fair grounds were a makeshift ghetto with rickety constructs where beggars waited listlessly. A shanty occupied a nearby field and dug into the forest a bit. Dirty, emaciated children watched them arrive with wolfish gaze. A small assembly waited in front of Viv. There was Solar and his wife Amiri, both looking like they'd been caught with their hands in the biscuit jar, Wamiri being a little more defiant about it. Farren the Hand of Neriad was here with a few temple guards, looking exhausted. Ban had prepared a honor guard of heavies and they were the only group that stood straight. A few other notables and people she didn't know watched her from behind with expressions ranging from curious to furious.

"Welcome back," Solar breathed. "We have prepared a small feast and, ehm, welcome back."

"You knew I was coming?" Viv asked, slightly surprised.

"Your Arthur told us this morning. She has grown! Ahem."

"Where is the feast?"

"The town hall."

"Let's go then. Can someone help those newcomers settle?"

"How many of them?"

"Three hundred, give or take."

It seemed like the end of the world given how the others were either wincing, massaging their temples, or boiling with rage.

"We can set them up in the barracks, we've made new ones, but it's going to be a temporary measure. Like many others. Look, let's talk inside."

Viv nodded and split from the group with Marruk, Sidjin, Solfis, Rakan, Tarana, and Arthur. The procession made its way through the main road and Viv realized the population hadn't been told she was back.

"Hey it's Bibiane. Welcome back, Your Grace!"

"Oh gods you're finally here, thank Neriad."

"Please fix everything like last time, yes?"

“Did you bring more grain?”

“Finally someone who can get all those strangers sorted out. One way or the other!”

There were a lot of guards in the dirty streets. Kazar had lost some of its pastoral charm and gained quite a few urchins. The air smelled more rancid and some of the shutters and doors had been reinforced with nails and steel bands. For all the apparent problems, people still greeted her with a smile and wave more often than not.

The town hall’s feast was a blessing for Viv who had not eaten anything decent on the road. As usual, Kazar’s food lacked the spices and diversity of Helock’s cuisine but the ingredients were top notch and that was all that was needed, sometimes. The mood remained somber and Viv walked from group to group, catching up with people she knew and getting to know others. Some were adversarial, some less. She didn’t learn details but that was fine, this was a social event. The general mood was that Kazar, and by extension HARRAK, was buckling under a massive influx of refugees and population growth. Simply, the place had been at peace for fifteen years and there had been few casualties during the war. Between this and the increased safety for children now that Hadals roamed the wood, even the space Viv had already cleared was becoming insufficient. This created tension between the old guards and newcomers. Some also struggled to adapt to the nation’s progressive treatment of non humans, with some prejudice deeply ingrained. Simply put, HARRAK was a victim of its success.

Viv shortened the feast and retired to her tower, where she spent most of the evening poring over reports and documents. Her increased mental abilities and the polymath skill let her absorb a massive amount of data, helping her classify them into several major categories.

- There were too many people and not enough land for food production. They had enough grain for now but the reserves would eventually run out.
- They could not build houses fast enough despite a newly arrived couple of brown mana mages.
- A mysterious group of thieves was terrorizing the neighborhood.
- There were too many children, both born here and refugees
- Since there were no rules against it, a good third of the female Witchpact crossbow wielders were either pregnant or having babies. They were healthy young women and were forming families. Viv should have expected that.
- Revenant attacks were on the rise. Some had been lethal.
- There were brewing tensions among the different groups.

Despite all of those problems, Viv was optimistic because Kazar had lasted without her. It had only done so for a couple of months, but... it had done so. With a system she had implemented and adapted from modern democracy.

Kind of cool, when she thought about it.

It was late by then and she went to sleep with Sidjin after the pair fortified the house again. The next morning, her boyfriend took off to check the buildings and see if he could help. She

was grateful and let him know in clear terms, though that took another hour. After that, Solfis was left in a corner, Arthur guarded the door, it was time for meetings.

The first to come up was Solar. The tall, powerfully built swordsman sat rigidly in the guest seat and clenched his jaws.

“Say it,” he hissed.

Viv knew what this was about. The city was in significantly worst state than she had left it. On the other hand, it was clear to her that those had been extenuating circumstances. She would surprise Solar... and then she would hire him for her expedition.

“I am sorry.”

The swordsman blinked.

“What?”

“I know you expect me to bash you so I’ll just state it plainly. I won’t. I asked you to hold the city and make sure to protect it and its institutions. Which you have done. The place is still standing, people are still alive. You are a blademaster, buddy, not a mayor. You did a great job. If a leader gives its subordinate a task, it is the leader’s responsibility to check that the subordinate has the tools and capabilities to complete that task or at least ways to find those. I didn’t expect a miracle. You did what you could. I’m thankful.”

“Seriously? You won’t blame me for the problems?”

“I told you. I asked you to stop Harrak from collapsing. You did it. You are not an administrator by vocation. It’s fine.”

“Huh,” the man said, relaxing against the back of the chair.

“If you want to stop —”

“Gods yes!”

“Then stop. I remember that you didn’t want the job to begin with. Before you go...”

“Ah, we are not going,” Solar said.

Viv raised an eyebrow. Solar was a bit of a wanderer from what she could tell and his companion Wamiri was from across the sea. She expected them to be gone as soon as they could.

“Wamiri is expecting,” Solar explained.

“Ah. Why is everyone pregnant? What’s in the air?”

**//Legs, Your Grace.**

“Thanks Solfis, very classy. So. You have decided to stay? Here?”

“It’s not a bad place.”

“Alright. It makes it a little awkward but... I need you for something.”

“What?”

“I need help killing a necrarch.”

The declaration fell like an expensive vase. Solar was left gasping.

“A necrarch?”

“Yes. You, Sidjin, Solfis, and I. We have a plan and equipment but... we cannot do it without you.”

“It is...”

Viv expected a flat refuse at that moment, yet something curious happened instead. Solar sat straighter and the air around him changed until the man felt more solid, somehow, more intense. Viv got the curious impression that if she extended a hand in front of him, it would return bleeding.

“... a fascinating idea... Wait no. No. I am supposed to consult the mother of my child over such questions. yes. A necrarch... by the light gods that would be such a magnificent battle...”

He turned his attention to her.

“If I do so, no more jobs. I am a free man.”

“I believe I already agreed to release you from your debt against you holding the fort while I was away.”

“I consider I have partially failed so it does not count. But yes, a life debt against the blood of a necrarch. This would do. Let me talk to her, I should be able to convince her that it will be fine.”

He made to leave then turned one last time.

“Hopefully.”

The door slammed shut.

“Next!” Viv said.



It was going to be a long day.

\*\*\*

Viv watched the second person to come with interest. She was an older woman with a faded yet expensive dress of a design the outlander had never seen before. Her hair was cleanly cut and held in an elaborate tail that curved around head before delicately resting on her shoulder. At the feast, she had curtly introduced herself as Baroness Azar. She looked prim and elegant in a cold and confident way that irked Viv on a fundamental level. A very short introspection made her realize why

The woman had the mannerism of Madame Hortense.

The worst elementary school teacher who ever lived.

A hateful harpy with a deep resentment for children, fun, and life in general.

“Well, are you not going to greet me?” the woman asked with a peculiar pronunciation that Viv recognized from the school and elsewhere. The lady was Baranese, a noble according to her mannerisms.

“Tradition dictates that the petitioner should present themselves first.”

“Hmph! That should be after you invite me to sit!”

“We are not in Baran.”

“Indeed not, to my deep regret,” Azar replied, hands stretched in despair. “I have crossed half of the continent to bring you back your enslaved people and this is how I’m received! I must tell you right now, my dear, that I am unimpressed. This place is a proper mess, which can be reasonably expected to a limited amount but what do I hear? You are gone! Gone? The ruler of an expanding... backwater mess, gone? Have you no notion of rulership? I fully expect you to step up because — “

Viv didn’t know what stopped the talkative baroness. Perhaps it was a social skill. Perhaps it was the expanding, insane smile she felt blossoming on her lips. Perhaps it was the discreet sound of Solfis opening the nearest window to resurrect an old tradition.

“I just want to say two things. First, thanks for bringing back the lost families. Second, it’s just such a shame the Paramese languages do not have a term for *defenestrate*,” she said genially.

Baroness Azar uttered a small, almost cute yelp when she passed through the open sill.

“I think I clipped her leg,” Viv commented afterward.

**//Indeed.**

“But she lives, right?”

Downstairs, high-pitched cries of outrage drowned out the morning hubbub.

**//Indeed.**

“Welp. NEXT!”

Viv wasn't sure how she felt about it.

\*\*\*

Farren and a few others came to give their own reports. By early afternoon, Viv had outlined the measures she could implement that would set the Harrakan territory on the path to recovery.

**//I will need a week of intense training with Solar to coordinate with him and improve our teamwork.**

**//You may have enough time to implement most measures before we leave for the lone mountain and the necrarch's den.**

“You don't want to train Sidjin and I?”

**//If you are involved in direct combat, something will have gone terribly wrong.**

**//Your task will be barriers and traps.**

**//A week of training will not make a difference.**

“I trust in your experience. Alright, NEXT!”

The man who entered the room was handsome in a slightly rakish sort of way. He wore an actual doublet with glass stones and painted golden threads that made it flashier than it had to be. He immediately took a seat and leaned forward, over the desk and close to Viv's face. She didn't move.

“Hello, Miss. Or boss? What do you prefer?”

“People usually address me as ‘Your Grace’ in official settings.”

“Your Grace, hey? Mouthful. Think I'll call you Viv.”

“You will not.”

“Alright, alright, no need to make a fuss! I was just trying to be nice,” he said, pulling back and raising hands in defense.

“Are you sure you're fine holding the meetings today? You still look frazzled from the long road. A bit tired, maybe?”

"I appreciate the concern Mr..."

"Edric, but my friends call me Ed. You could too! Haha, I am jesting. You can call me whatever you want, little lady. Me and the lads heard you got a lot on your plate and we happen to be problem solvers. The quiet kind, efficient. We get things done you see? I see a bright future for you and I, if you let me help you. Shoulder some of that burden. Lots of problems around, right? Maybe too much for a lone little lady."

Viv kept a pleasant smile on her face as she looked at 'Ed' like one inspects a freshly dissected toad.

"Oh, it will be fine," she shyly admitted, "I have not come empty-handed. I'm sure I'll smooth things out soon enough."

"You sure you don't want some help?"

"Maybe. But not without testing you first, Ed," she said, then she giggled.

Behind her, Solfis' eyes shone with interest.

"Smooth things out, ey? You're not talking about the refugees I suppose. Mind letting me in on it?"

"Oh, I'm not sure I should say."

"I promise to keep it a secret. The word of Edric is worth gold, they say. Come on, you pushed me off, can't you give a man a bone? A hint?"

"Well," Viv hesitated.

"Come oooooon, a secret completely kept is no fun."

"Ah. Alright."

Viv leaned forward, her face a little flushed, and spoke in a conspiratorial tone.

"I earned quite a bit regrowing... you know what, for the nobles of Helock. Their legs too, sometimes. But anyway, this will solve all our problems, I'm sure of it."

"If you says so, lady. I'm impressed."

"Was there anything else, Ed? There are still people."

"Ah it's fine, don't want to bother you too much. Don't forget your promise! You have to test us so we can dazzle you with our skills, yeah?"

"Sure, I won't forget."

Ed left and closed the door behind him. Viv's face, which had been shy and pleasant, turned cold.

"Well well well. I am pretty sure we just found the thieves terrorizing the neighborhood."

**//Would you need my assistance?**

"You need to focus on the training if Wamiri says yes, which she has not yet. I'll handle it with Ban and the heavies."

**//Understood.**

It appeared a little fall cleaning was in order.

## Chapter 120: Fall Cleaning.

A group of shadowy figures moved under the aegis of a powerful shadow. A handsome man led them hand in hand across the main square of Kazar under the dying leaves of the Lilac tree. They moved in perfect silence. Some of the guards walked by and missed the group completely. In fact, they did not even look in the proper direction.

The second man stopped by the town hall's entrance and worked on the barred gates. The third man had said that the tower was too heavily protected now, but the gold wasn't there. No one had carried a heavy charge into the fortified edifice. The guards had, however, taken the most defensible cart into a secured warehouse.

The second man finished and the gate was opened, its enchantment remaining silent. The group snuck through the narrow opening and closed the path behind them. The portal pivoted on oiled hinges in preternatural silence. They did not leave traces behind.

Once in the town hall's compound, the first man led the other through stone paths to their target. They met no one on the way but still exercised caution. They had not lasted this long by being careless. The third man checked every intersection for alarms and every arch for wards. The fourth man said there were dogs but the dogs were asleep. All was going well.

They found the place locked tight.

It was a structure of decent size, probably used for supplies rather than long term storage. The third man walked around the structure and jumped on the roof but found no ingress. There was only the large entrance, locked and warded with care. The team stopped and huddled.

"I can sense gold inside," the fifth man said, "at least... twenty-five talents. Perhaps more."

“Not exactly a fortune to change the tide of war,” the third man said.

“That’s just the gold,” the first man said. “There could be silver as well. Gems. Cores. Good enough for me. We get it and then we leave.”

“We do?” the second asked.

“Yeah. She may be naive but those Hadal pricks trust her. They could say yes where they refused Solar. And we don’t hold a candle to those fuckers. Enough talks, let’s get in.”

The second man worked on the wards while the rest of the team oiled the hinges. Nothing would be left to chance. Every ward was undone with utmost care, even if it was not connected to the caster anymore.

“The tower is too far and they didn’t have enough time. Otherwise we’d have to dig a hole through the far side.”

“Small blessings.”

Finally, it was done. The group opened the door without alarm and stepped in. The group did find a curious bundle of covers on the far side. The second man took out a lantern from his bag and lit it. The glow cast a light on the inside, but nobody outside would see anything.

There were really a lot of covers on the ground.

The men stood, nonplussed.

A reptilian head covered in white scales unexpectedly emerged from the pile, glaring bleakly at the intruders. Its malevolent slit pupil widened in surprise, then in the darkest of furies.

“Squee? SQUEE?!”

A screech of pure rage shook the air, the expression of a hatred beyond words, beyond reason. It spoke of an outrage that only death would clear and the pound of flesh would be harvested right here, right now, without delay. An image formed briefly in the minds of the men.

*GOLD.*

*THIEVES!*

The dragon stood on her hind legs to her full height, wings expanded — she was taller than most of them — and breathed fire. The blast torched two before they could duck. She was on the survivors before the first smoldering corpse could even touch the ground. The second man stumbled when his feet sunk into a patch of mud. The very air grew thick and stifling. The first man ran because the dragon was using magic to an extent where the warehouse and its surrounding had become a hostile place. He ducked to the side when the creature found the third man and ripped him apart.

He ran.

He did not do so for long.

A skeletal form emerged from behind the town hall's personal quarters and picked him up by the collar in a smooth motion before he could even backpedal. The creature lifted him until he was level with a pair of emotionless yellow orbs.

**//Well well well.**

**//If it is not Edric.**

**//Or should I address you as Ed?**

"Ah. Ah! Maranor's tits."

**//Now now, 'Ed'.**

**//No need to blaspheme.**

**//At least, not yet.**

"What the fuck are you?"

**//I happen to be a problem solver.**

**//The quiet, efficient kind.**

**//I get things done.**

**//Do you follow?**

Edric's eyes widened in fear.

"You! You were in the room when I talked to that bitch. You fucking trapped us!"

**//If you recall, Her Grace lured you with the bait of an imaginary fortune.**

**//Though I admit it was inspired to use her Imperial Highness the Princess Arthur to... exact vengeance.**

**//My algorithms prevent me from being too cruel as it adversely affects efficacy.**

**//I do, however, appreciate it when others indulge.**

"Who betrayed me? Was it Karel? I bet it was that fucking weasel."

**//Betrayal?**

The creature's orb widened slightly in a motion Edric felt was purely artificial.

**//We arrive and learn that a group of bandits has been robbing around the town.**

**//You arrived slightly before or during that time.**

**//You come to Her Grace and describe yourself as part of an unscrupulous group of discreet problem solvers.**

**//And you did not expect her to be suspicious?**

**//Criminals are seldom the smartest population yet you still manage to scrap the bottom.**

**//I am impressed.**

“Please let me talk to her. I’m sure we can reach an arrangement!”

**//I’m afraid Her Grace’s sleep is too valuable.**

Behind them, the screech of rage had turned into a low, enduring low growl over the sound of ripped flesh and fabric.

**//And here I was hoping to hang the bodies as a warning.**

**//Perhaps in bags?**

**//But I digress, where were we?**

**//Oh yes.**

**//You were going to tell me where the valuables you stole are in return for a quick, clean death.**

“Wait, wait, you don’t have to kill me. I can help. I know a thing or two. Do you need help with solving crimes? Because you got some issues.”

**//The only reason you survived so long was that investigator Tars was trying to prevent riots.**

**//And Solar was unexpectedly rude to the Hadals.**

**//I will admit that you also possess a low form of cunning that has allowed you to go unnoticed for some time.**

**//However, your luck has run out.**

**//You will contribute to the reduction of crime by dying.**

“It ain’t right! There are laws! Theft is not punishable by death!”

**//That is correct.**

**//Breaking into a government building, however...**

“Shit.”

A low growl came from behind, one charged with the promise of fire.

**//You have little time to decide.**

“Fuck you. Fine...”

\*\*\*

Viv sipped on a hot cup of klod while watching a corpse swing from Kazar's hallowed tree.

It pained her to admit that it brought back memories.

Solfis had outdone himself, this time. The golem had dragged the body of the dearly departed Edric — gone too fast after merely a few minutes of acquaintance — and hanged it from the neck with what appeared to be human hands stuck to the corpse. There were at least ten of them. It was as grisly as it was peculiar and Viv was hesitating to order it removed before the temples started to whine.

The golem had even retrieved the stolen property, which were now being returned to their owners.

"Perhaps I should have taken another approach. I apologize," Baroness Azar said from behind.

The proud noblewoman had survived her recent defenestration and returned to Viv for a second round. Viv could appreciate her persistence. She also wondered what would motivate a prideful landed lady to accept the humiliation with good grace and try again a day later.

"I admit that the difficult circumstances went to my head. Organizing things in the city has proven to be frustrating, hence my curt manners."

"Your curt manners were an attempt to intimidate me into submission and if you lie to me again I will plant you in the courtyard, face first this time," Viv commented.

There was silence for a time.

"Very well. I see that you prefer a blunt approach. Will you believe me if I say I want to help?"

Viv turned to the older woman, the only trace of yesterday's ordeal being in her guarded eyes.

"I will if it is the truth. Why do you want to help? If you were, you would be the first person who comes here out of the goodness of their heart since last year. Out of almost two thousand people."

"Those people are refugees who have come here to find a better life. I have come to create it, make it with my own hands, as for why... do you know who I am? Please do not take my words as empty boasts. My identity will provide much context for the explanation I wish to provide. I am Baroness Azar of Sorewan. The Shadow Duchess."

"Oh."

Even if Viv had barely passed the etiquette class, she was still familiar with the continent's greatest political figures. Sorewan was a region of Baran, near its center, the vast kingdom's most affluent domain and provider of most of its steel and half of its weapons.



“Then your daughter...”

“Is currently queen, yes, and my late husband was a general. One of my husbands, in any case. Do you regret tossing me off the tower yet?” the woman asked with an amused smile.

“I’ll do it again.”

“Hah! Perhaps we can work together. Although, please do not throw me out, I have a limited supply of good clothes.”

“Wait, that makes no sense. You have everything you want.”

“Yes, and no.”

Azar walked and stopped by the window. She turned to Viv and there was something about her Viv found trustworthy. A brief inspection of herself revealed no signs of manipulation. It was the woman’s calm charisma at work.

“I seek purpose.”

“Excuse me?” Viv asked, surprised.

“My daughter has a solid majority on the council. The Kingdom is united behind the king to face the latest Hallurian incursion. My land flourishes. For the past decade, I have done little except consolidating and defending my power. A long time ago, Sorewan was torn apart by guilds and neighboring duchies until I came, but these days, everything feels... easy.”

“So you what, buy and free slaves then decide to drop everything and serve a foreign power?”

“Do you know your greatest strategic threats at the moment?” Azar asked.

“Errr. The undead, Enoria, my own demise.”

“Your own —”

Viv realized even that little comment had been too much. The baroness’ eyes widened, then her mouth formed unspoken words.

“Extremely high attunement, of course.”

“Keep it to yourself.”

“Yes, I will. No need to threaten me. Although, is it not common knowledge?”

“Farren and a few others know but it should not have spread yet.”

“For the best. The small folk do not like this kind of threat hanging over their head. And yes, to return to the matter at hand, your main enemy is undead and, as it happens, overpopulation. You have more than doubled the number of inhabitants here in a year, have you not?”

“If you count the returnees as new people, then yes.”

“You face undead in an attempt to save refugees and reclaim Harrak for mankind. Few causes are more worthy than this one. I... want a purpose again. One I can fully support. Only then will I feel alive. However, I have left my estate in the hands of my partners and taken only necessities with me. You will not have the support of Sorewan, only my own, if you do choose to employ me. I urge you to do so. You know what I have achieved and you also know that your city lacks the upper layer of society and the training that comes with it.”

Viv found the offer tempting.

She had so far handled the politicking and base maneuvering herself, discrediting her opponents and mobilizing the population, but it was hard work and she had much to do. What Azar said was entirely correct. Harrak didn't have proper schools yet and it was growing too fast. Soon, the budding empire's size would become too great for the handful of competent civil servants the late mayor Ganimatalo had gathered. They needed administrators and they needed them fast.

“What happens if Baran and Harrak's interests are at odds.”

“That will not happen before I die of old age, dear. Sorry to dash your dreams.”

“Are you willing to swear fealty to me?”

“Of course. I certainly hope that all of your civil servants are oath-bound. It is not a fool-proof measure by any means but it certainly limits the most dire of offenses. Please note that I will keep an option to leave, in which case I promise not to work against you for ten years, but I will not be bound for all of eternity. Is that acceptable?”

Viv thought it sounded fine. She turned to Solfis, now waiting in its retracted form by the entrance to the upper levels.

**//This scenario is not unique, Your Grace.**

**//I have templates of oaths to Sardanal designed to induct foreign administrators to the Harrakan cause.**

**//It is said that a great governor is worth two legions.**

“Fine then. First, I would like to test you,” Viv cautiously said.

“That is acceptable,” the woman replied, though Viv could see the hint of condescension in her voice.

From her perspective it would probably be like a self-employed young upstart asking a retiring tycoon to demonstrate their abilities. Nevertheless, Viv had a project and it was the perfect opportunity to see if the baroness could adapt to Harrak's circumstances.

"I need someone to set up a school and daycare system."

"A what?"

That was Viv's solution to the orphans, street urchins, and maternity leave issues all rolled into one. A comprehensive institution would get the kids off the street and teach enough of them how to read and write so that the top performers could be trained as civil servants, lawyers, officers, and whatever else required literacy and a good head.

There might be a little indoctrination thrown in the mix.

Solfis had designed the program.

"I do not mind but... let me be clear. I have not brought a lot of funds and I cannot justify using Sorewan funds for Harrak, or what will one day become Harrak, I suppose."

Money would definitely be an issue.

"I'll funnel some as soon as possible, but in the meanwhile, do you agree?"

"Of course. A good idea, a good investment that demonstrates foresight. I approve. It will be done."

"Thank you."

**//I shall let you discuss the details.**

**//Solar is waiting outside with his sword.**

**//It appears Wamiri granted her blessing.**

**//Training will start immediately.**

**//Please note that I will extend the preparation time by three days.**

That left more than ten days for Viv to start fixing things, and that was the proper term. She would not be solving issues, she would merely be providing solutions that would take a long time to implement. Right now, Harrak was a clusterfuck of biblical proportions and only quickly enforced measures would prevent it from turning the city into a pit of lawlessness. All the challenges Viv had listed stemmed from the unique situation Kazar and its surroundings found themselves in.

On one hand, the old population had too much food and no access to imported goods since the caravans had stopped for a year. On the other hand, the newcomers had miscellaneous items they could sell for food but no way to produce anything. This was not sustainable at all. Many of the poorest people were on the verge of starvation-driven crimes. In order to solve the situation, Viv busied herself.

Her first stop was at the bank, where she negotiated lendings using her own cash as collateral. Thankfully, there was a lot of it and the Manipeleso lads allowed her to leverage the amount, expecting most of the funds to be returned successfully. With money in hand, all of the more destitute families could eat and build workshops or prepare to work the land that would soon be made available. With a sense of purpose and a clear objective in front of them, the vast majority of refugees focused on taking back control of their lives.

She also made sure Rakan and Tarana were settled. The poor Hallurians had been swept into the movement, though they did not seem to resent Viv at all. In fact, they were eager to meet the locals. Rakan went to work with Sidjin immediately, the two nerding it out on brown and colorless mana. Meanwhile, Tarana met the Hadals and got immediately fascinated with her fellow exiles and their expert hunting ways.

For lodgings, Sidjin, Rakan, and the low level earth mages who had joined the city decided to help. They didn't build entire structures. They built the foundations and raised the walls, leaving the people to build their own roofs, shutters, and doors from the abundant timber. It saved a lot of time and mana for the mages and allowed them to lay the groundwork for several compounds every day. Progressively, those that lived in tents and shanties left for more durable stone structures where they would have privacy.

Viv announced that she would be leading a trade caravan to Enoria when they departed, which spurred another burst of activity as many of those who had stockpiled goods now had an opportunity to sell them. The reestablishment of trade routes would go a long way towards normalizing life. Unfortunately, no one but her could use her portals so a safe teleportation through the woods would be a one off. It would still help.

Viv was slightly concerned that people would talk, and others would realize she could teleport as well, but she also considered such discovery to be inevitable and it might as well benefit the Harrakans.

The second-to-last priority was to free more land. There was no question that many of the refugees were farmers and they needed soil to work, so she had a few obelisks prepared. Carving them up was a matter of hours. The massive progress she had made in enchanting and mana mastery proved itself useful here, though familiarity likely played a role as well. There was no telling what a powerful enchanter with centuries of practice could eventually come up with.

Actually, there was an example: Irlefen. He had designed Solfis.

That certainly made her wonder what the old monsters could achieve and why the world wasn't a post-scarcity utopia yet. Maybe it was the monsters. Maybe people were just cunts. Speaking of, she would have to see if she wasn't breaking some intellectual property rights with her cobbled design.

From the third day on, Viv started to move at the edge of the green land. Some of the places that had been a mana-saturated desert when she left showed signs of greenery, flowers and vegetable patches with fields ready to be seeded next spring. It was nice to see. Finding places to set the obelisks was a difficulty she had not anticipated, but Farren was able to

help her with that. The young head cleric had spent a lot of time mapping the edge of the habitable land and he knew where the best opportunities awaited. Sometimes, they would create a small island on a hill because it was defensible rather than extending in a simple line. She installed everything in record time and the civil servants were granting plots to eager refugees before she was even done.

With most of the Harrakan energy canalized, the last aspect she wanted to address was the military. Ban, leader of the heavies, had been in charge and done a decent job keeping people trained and fit, but they had been mostly milling around with no clear objective. Viv gave him some.

With some of the children already busy helping set up the daycare, both the heavies and the witchpact soldiers were more available, so she set up combat patrols dedicated to chasing and eliminating revenants at the edge of the newly freed land. Patrols were authorized to keep the loot they found so long as they destroyed the bodies. It made everyone motivated and made everyone generally more battle-ready. Viv also organized mandatory formation drills, helped by Solfis.

So far, Harrakan forces had only fought two 'major' engagements if the term was even valid. The city battle had been a messy affair but relatively straightforward. Everyone had stayed together and moved in a line. The prince's fall had been even simpler. Everyone had been placed somewhere to wait and charged when given a signal. Simple. Viv wanted them ready to maneuver in a real field battle. That would take a lot of training, especially with a lack of officers. She charged the surviving noble knight with this task and gave him the authority to select people he thought would perform best for promotion, after she and Solfis approved of course. With this, the army actually got off their ass to protect the population in a systematic manner.

That solved, they began to solve most immediate problems.

The next was less popular. They needed more money so Viv announced raised taxes according to one of Solfis' suggestions based on Harrakan enclaves on the south sea islands. It was a simplified system that let people pay in grain if they produced any, and mostly taxed high value stuff. It was widely tolerated since a lot was going on at the time. People were simply too distracted.

On the fifth day, Irao came to visit Viv. For once, he knocked.

"It's been a while. How are you, how are the Hadals?" Viv asked with a smile.

Irao paused to consider her question in silence for half a minute, his white, hairless face thoughtful. He was staring at the ceiling with his slitted yellow eyes.

"I am concerned. The Hadals are doing well. Our numbers are increasing for the first time since the purge."

"Errr, what are you concerned about then?"

“Do you mistrust me? Have I caused you anger?”

That surprised Viv quite a bit since it was the first time Irao had displayed any signs he cared what others thought about him.

“No. What makes you believe I am angry at you?”

“I refused to help Solar because he was quite rude and accused me of harboring the thieves.”

“I wish you had cooperated, yes, but I do not blame you for refusing after being insulted.”

“Then why are you not asking me to come with you?”

“You mean... the hunt?”

“Solfis and Solar are training to kill a Necrarch. I saw them, I heard them, I recognized the gear. Why did you not ask me to help?”

“I... always assumed you didn't want to fight unless your people were in danger.”

“I do not want to assassinate. Hunting is fine. Most of my people are hunters now. Why do you want to kill a necrarch?”

“I need its core to turn part elemental or my high attunement will kill me.”

“Then it is important. Ask me.”

“Irao, would you please come to hunt the necrarch with us?”

“Yes. It will be a good way to test my skills after a long time. I will cooperate with Solfis. It will be a good hunt.”

“Thanks.”

Viv felt genuinely better after that.

\*\*\*

Solfis stood near the command table which also happened to be in the tower's receiving room next to an adequate supply of tea.

**//A necrarch has a danger rating of seven according to the Imperial Monster Handling Repository.**

**//For reference, the maximum danger rating before cataclysm is seven.  
//Although the notation itself is arbitrary, it reflects the extreme difficulty hunters face when engaging one.**

The golem lifted three fingers, the movement strangely human, or it would be if the claws were not quite so sharp.

**//First, the intellect.  
//Necrarchs are cunning.  
//Baiting them using normal means will not work.  
//Most traps will not work.  
//Direct combat is required.**

**//Second, the battlefield.  
//Necrarchs have a lair.  
//They will be familiar with the location and extremely mobile within.  
//They will also retreat if at a disadvantage, and possibly lay a trap.  
//If wounded, they can retire to their lair to absorb stored energy and heal themselves.  
//We must explore the place while fending the creature off.**

**//Third, the necrarch's combat abilities.**

The golem moved to a side table and produced a long list which he gave Viv.

**//The most important aspect to remember, for you, is that you cannot possibly face it.  
//A necrarch is faster than most fourth step dedicated warriors.  
//A necrarch can take a punishing amount of damage while remaining at close to peak performance.  
//A necrarch never tires.  
//A necrarch's strength is enough to tear through heavy armor in a single body blow, gutting its victim.  
//Most importantly, a necrarch can cast spells.  
//As such, anyone under the fourth step or without significant resistance to black mana penetration will instantly die to one of its spells.  
//In essence, numbers are meaningless against a necrarch.  
//The necrarch will just use the victim's life force to heal their wounds.  
//Luckily, I know all this and came up with a plan.**

The golem pointed at a rudimentary map of the lone mountain based on Viv's recollection.

**//We will set up camp here near the entrance and wait for dawn to enter.  
//Necrarchs are more active at night.  
//We will enter and map the area.  
//Once I detect the creature's approach, we will stop at a chokepoint and face it.**

"What makes you think it will attack us?"

**//Necrarchs are territorial.**

**//They will attempt to defeat intruders quickly.  
//Only if they fail to do so will they start using strategy.**

“Could we not box it in?”

**//Success of such a maneuver is uncertain.  
//I would prefer to go for the safest solution.  
//It might take several engagements, but we will corner it.  
//Then Sidjin will trigger one of his signature spells on its retreat path.**

“How confident are you that you can face it in battle?”

**//This frame will keep up with it, although I could not defeat it alone.  
//With Solar and now Irao, I am confident we can eliminate it, barring accidents.  
//I have prepared black-mana resistant clothes for everyone except Irao.  
//He assures me that the spells will not be an issue for him.  
//I need to train some more with Solar and Irao, first to familiarize them with typical necrarch fighting style, second to improve our teamwork.**

“We only have a short window. Will it be alright?”

**//Very little work is required from combatants at the peak of their path.  
//We will be ready to move out very soon.**

“What’s my part in all of that?”

**//Your role is threefold  
//You are to assist and cover Sidjin while he works by reinforcing his shields.  
//You are to set up a charging station to charge me using the ambient black mana near the lair.  
//You are to absorb lingering spells to stop the necrarch from turning the environment against us.**

“That works.”

**//It goes without saying that you should not get into harm’s way.  
//This battle is completely beyond you.**

“Understood. I’ll be careful.”

**//I know you will.  
//There was one last thing I wanted to ask.**

“Hmmm?”

The golem made showed a map of the area around Kazar this time, this one heavily annotated. On one side was Harrak huddled against the forest, with a tiny, tentacular network of small villages expanding from the city in cautious frog leaps. Father north and



west was the vast expanse of relatively unknown deadlands, leagues upon leagues of dusty hills hiding the decrepit husks of estates and hamlets filled to the brim with all manners of undead, many more dangerous than revenants. A desolate spot near a ridge stood, circled with black ink.

**//This is the fortress city of Shinur's Gate.**

**//It sits on a ridge and offers a good defense of the only easy path going farther inland from the edge of the forest.**

**//Unfortunately, it offers lesser protection against the undead, our main enemy.**

**//It is still the most defensible place we can hope to liberate within the next decade.**

**//With proper preparation, we can turn it into a fortified beacon from which we can attract nearby undead before they can form hordes.**

**//And before said hordes can fall on less defended villages.**

"You want us to conquer a real city?"

**//I prefer the term "retake".**

**//And yes.**

**//There is an additional point of interest, beyond the facilities.**

**//Shinur's Gate should still hold a great amount of manufacturing equipment, especially textile related.**

**//It should also hold over four thousand gold talents in a secure vault under the main bank.**

"Ah."

**//We will need a lot of funds if we want to make use of the influx of refugees.**

**//This would be a good alternative to being in massive debt to the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange.**

"Say no more, I am convinced."

**//Then I shall give the order to prepare.**

\*\*\*

Arthur stood on her hind legs, her head level with mother's as the extraordinary human focused on the next hunt.

It was a glorious prey. Arthur approved.

She knew the core would help mother become whole. She just hoped she would see the trap Elunath had laid before her. Arthur had seen Elunath from the sky. He was a duplicitous entity that would seek to capture her, but Arthur was confident mother would not let her wings be shredded.

Mother turned to see Arthur and smiled at her magnificence. Arthur demanded a horn massage and got it, though they did not tickle that much these days now that their growth had slowed.

It was just fun to see mother zap herself on the excess mana.

After she was done, Arthur requested meat and got it, then she flew across the green fields to where Marruk was helping her kin settle down. Arthur's domain was expanding under the tireless labor of her minions, as was proper.

The Kark herself greeted her as she approached and provided the requested pats as well as some more meat. It pleased Arthur to see the other Kark stay at a respectful distance.

After receiving homage from her human and her Kark, she considered her genius. The human she had helped had risen from lost, manaless whelp to queen. The Kark she had inspired had grown from a shy lone warrior to a gruff warband leader.

Obviously, Arthur was gifted with matchless management and mentoring skills.

It would be perfect for when she opened her own bank.

The future was golden.

Arthur took off to hunt for squirrels.

## Chapter 121: The local talents

Viv watched the bewildered Harrakans exit her portal, spreading out on the open meadow and marveling at the wonders of magic she had just unveiled for them. Ten days of harrowing trek across the Deadshield spared. Ten days of terrifying encounters with monsters and beastling tides, with the forest's disquieting effect bypassed with the facility of a high speed train ride minus the time. They ambled out, blocking the way of those behind. Viv could still see the green on gray background of the deadland behind the portal's aperture. Mostly, she wished they'd hurry the fuck up because keeping that thing on was hard.

"Move, move!" Ban bellowed, and the selected merchants sheepishly dragged their cornudon-drawn carriages across the plain. The wooly beast didn't seem too bothered by the change of scenery, the most enterprising already grazing on unchewed grass.

Maybe they were simply too dumb to care.

Over the next minute, Harrak's first grand caravan trailed through the opening at a brisk pace. Its members had been selected among volunteers and path traders whose lives had taken a turn for the worse, forcing them to become refugees. Now, they had a second chance and many were eager to make a killing on the markets of Reixa and other Enorian cities. The only downside was that they would miss the harvest festival with their families. It was a huge deal Viv could sympathize with, as it seemed to be the local equivalent of Christmas or Eid or Hanukkah or the Spring Festival: a family celebration meant to gather relatives. It was too easy for her to forget that the Enorian people had vibrant traditions and a long history of their own when she still considered herself an outsider.

"Your Grace," Ban said, his face twisted in a scowl.

The old soldier looked even grimmer and crustier than before, his muscles corded like steel wire under the heaviest armor the Yries had ever produced. He was also well on the fourth step, which made him one of the deadliest fighters of humanity.

[Tip of the Spear: commander of the first regiment, first company of the Harrakan heavy infantry, the heiress' guard. Expert close quarter combatant, unbreakable, tenacious, adaptative fighter, fast learner, loyal, undead slayer, man killer.]

A long, braided white beard fell from his helmet down to his navel and white, embroidered pennants flew from his black steel armor, decorating an otherwise plain armor. He looked much more respectable now than he used to, back when he had been a retired veteran. The fact that his entire gear had been enchanted to the gills by the smiths of Neriad helped with that as well, Viv suspected.

"Ban," Viv greeted in return.

The old man had kept the Harrakan military in top shape through exacting training and even increased its numbers, though it had been a force without purpose, with no clear threats aimed at the nascent kingdom. Now, though, he would see action again.

"I believe you should let us come with you, as a honor guard."

Viv shook her head. Ban had let his disapproval known but had not voiced it until now.

"The heavies have plenty of strength but black mana resistance is not one of them. Trust me, it would be a waste to have you die against the necrarch. You are much better used escorting our very first caravan since the independence."

"You said the roads are much safer now..."

"For Enorians, yes."

It was time for a quick lesson in basic politics. Fortunately, there were similarities between Earth and Nyil mythologies.

“Look Ban, you know how Maranor stands for justice here, yes? And her weapon is a sword, not a shield? How many law bringers pick a sword as their symbol?”

“Hmmm.”

“Justice is not about protecting people because it’s almost impossible to achieve. Would be nice though. Justice is about righting the wrongs after they have occurred. The Enorians will protect their own and punish marauding groups of bandits swiftly now that the war is over. If the victim happens to be foreigners, however...”

Understanding pierced through Ban’s mind and his eyes widened. He was not born yesterday.

“If the foreigners come from a separatist city that humiliated their army twice...” the old man continued.

“Then perhaps the local nobles will not look too hard into any mass disappearance. The local traders may bemoan the loss of opportunity but most citizens might enjoy seeing us taken down a peg. Reminded of our place in the food chain, as it were. Now, if it were just a couple of caravan guards, the opportunist would probably take their chance. If, however, the caravan is defended by elite infantry and crossbowmen...”

“Then they will know that we will draw more blood that they can afford to shed.”

“It’s also about sending a message,” Viv continued. “They might still see us as lucky bastards saved by the deadshield woods. You are to prove them wrong.”

“We will be seen, Your Grace. They will know the Harrakan Heavy infantry has returned from the grave of history. We will be the tip of the spear.”

“Thank you Ban, but most importantly... get my people home.”

“Your will. After that, I shall cleanse our new territory of undead presence.”

“Please do so. I want us to take Shinur’s Gate upon my return. No more delays.”

“Understood.”

The old man saluted then left to direct people. Viv considered herself lucky to have dedicated people on her side. Her father had mentioned it several times. It was better to lead a team of competent people than be competent yourself. With this, she started to close her portal now that everyone had been through. To her surprise, someone else was waiting for her to be done.

It was the town’s apothecary. Viv did not interact much with him on account of his dull and dour personality. He was good at his job and so Viv let him be, a favor he had been returning so far.

“Yes?” Viv asked.

“I should have asked before. I have an idea. I think it can work, but I will need three gold talents.”

Viv blinked.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

“You have a population control problem.”

The dry delivery left Viv nonplussed. She had not expected this sort of insight from a medieval shopkeeper, which proved once again that she should check her arrogance.

“I... suppose we do?”

“You do. The refugees who just came here know they should wait before expanding the family, at least until their farms and businesses are up and running. The female soldiers must be able to decide not to be with child just before a major operation. People need to be able to plan. I saw you had a ring. Rings are expensive. Potions are not.”

“I’m listening.”

The man stepped closer.

“Do you know of the Golden Order?”

“Yeah, I studied them. They are a knightly order made of women dedicated to Enttiku, the goddess of death. Stationed on the Glastian wall right now.”

“Those women have sex and they regulate the births by using a combination of two potions, one that stops the moon cycle and another that makes them bleed. Now, the bleeding potion’s main ingredient is called the Heart Grass and it grows freely everywhere, but the cycle one is more important, because the bleeding potion only works for a little while after the pregnancy has started. Once the bun is in the oven, pardon my Baranese, it is too late for the ‘oops draught’. Now, I know the apothecaries in Reixa have seeds and sprouts of the Moon Disc flower. I need the money to purchase them.”

“You need gold talents for that?” Viv exclaimed.

The apothecary shook his head.

“I am not buying a sample, I am buying patches, which will have to be replaced. Half of the money is for bribes to get the flower to begin with. Have you forgotten Enorian customs, ‘goodmother’? Enorian women are tasked with populating the kingdom. The potions I intend to brew are not conducive to that. There is a chance they are even illegal.”

“Fine.”

Viv had to get her bag from her horse’s saddles and take out the coins. By then, the caravan was ready to head east to the large town of Reixa while they would be heading north through a camouflaged portal. Besides Viv and the necrarch raiding crew, there were also the twins.

The trip north consisted of Viv achieving a feat of magic the likes of which no one had ever succeeded at her level while the others leaned around, munching on snacks and sipping tea. She would then spend twenty minutes on the other side of the portal nursing a headache and then do it again. One star rating. At least it was fast. They were in view of Losserec-on-the-Lake on the morning of the next day.

They left Tarana and Rakan on a ship heading back to Helock, then bought their own bark since no fisherman was willing to rent to what was very clearly a hunting group. It got to show the trust of people in humans versus monsters contests. Viv didn’t blame them. She did, however, blame the man she bought the ship from for extorting her.

“This is a great little vessel! Do you know how many such vessels can fit both your standards and a crew that size? No? Only old Jekk can sell you such a gem. No one complains about Jekk’s product! I am fully supported by the shipwright guild!”

But Viv did complain. At least, she didn’t have to row. Solar grabbed the paddles and went to work, not even bothering with the tiny sails.

“Do we not use the second pair? We have two pairs,” she said.

“Only if you want to slow us down and get sore arms as well,” Solar patiently explained.

Viv grumbled that she had been performing the physical training Solfis had given her to help with meditative trance and she was fit and had finely toned biceps thank you very much. Alas, her protests fell on deaf ears. Only Sidjin sympathized. After a fashion.

“It is unseemly for mages to perform physical labor when warriors are present and better suited. Such is tradition.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“It is also tradition for women to let the men carry them.”

“Fine.”

*Mother must let the lower specimens serve her.*

*Must not upset the pecking order!*

*Unnatural.*

*Can only row if I am the passenger.*

Arthur huffed and took to the air.

Viv's attempt at equality being completely ignored, the vessel made its way very quickly along the shore. No one was familiar with the local place, but it was clear Solar had some experience steering a ship. He led them effortlessly between small islands. They met another fishing ship a little after noon as the last village had faded behind them.

"Be careful around those parts," a kind man warned them. "They found cannibals here earlier this year."

"We'll keep our weapons ready," Sidjin assured them.

The fisherman looked at Viv and shook his head in disapproval. Enoria was still really firm on women not going on adventures, Viv thought, even the ex-rebel countryside.

She wondered how the witches she had met here were faring.

The group made a few jokes about Viv keeping an eye out for cannibals until she threatened to cook them. The ship kept going for a while, following the distant shape of Arthur as she flew overhead. The dragonette started cycling not long after.

The shore was wild here, and covered in trees. The edge of the northern deadshield woods hugged the lake on its entire western flank. Viv could already feel a hint of saturated brown mana and that strange, quiet atmosphere she associated with the confusing forest. Arthur landed near a brook and Viv recognized the dark tunnel she had followed out of the lone mountain. The cave looked normal enough from outside, but she knew the passage inside would be smooth and artificial.

"It's here. I recognize it."

*Mother came out from here.*

*Wet! Cold! No fish.*

Arthur snorted with disdain.

"Alright. We go through, leave the mountain, set up a camp and go back in. Everyone still agrees?" Solar asked.

**//Yes.**

No one felt the need to speak after Solfis. The group carried the bark up the slope and into the tunnel. Viv got her socks wet and complained, but as soon as everyone was on board, Sidjin used a blue spell to dry clothes.

"I knew I was keeping you around for something," Viv confessed amorously.

"I feel valued," Sidjin deadpanned.

Solar chuckled, and some of the mounting tension was dispelled.

The tunnel proved too narrow to use the paddles so Sidjin resorted to ferrying them forward by pushing the ground away, using the paddle as a stick. It worked well enough.

Viv lost her time perception as the darkness descended. She cast her spell in silence, summoning a pale blue light to guide their way forward. The memory of her terror gripped her chest and clawed at her throat. She had felt her heart stopped, felt herself die. She shook her head.

Sidjin took her hand in his and massaged the knuckles. He was very warm and smelled of sunshine and soap.

"Thanks," she whispered.

Sidjin was about to reply, but his face turned into an expression of wonder. They had reached the mushroom cave. The dense lattice of stalagmites and stalactites covered in fluorescent growth let them pass in blissful silence.

Then the darkness returned, yet it did not feel as oppressive as before. Until Solfis spoke.

**//Black mana concentration is increasing slowly but noticeably.**

Viv had not realized. Black mana was present in every dark place, and at night. Now that Solfis mentioned it, however, she noticed as well. The mana here had a taste. It was not just the standard background of the absence of light.

"Are we already in its territory?"

**//Age of the necrarch revised to: ancient.**

**//Expect higher spell usage.**

**//Adjusting general strategy.**

**//Your Grace, we will have to depend on you for black mana countermeasures.**

**//You will have to fight with us.**

"I already knew I'd be around keeping Sidjin safe. It's fine."

**//Acknowledged.**

**//Everyone please change into insulated gear now.**

"Errrr."

"I will avert my eyes, Viviane," Solar assured her.

Viv had to keep the light on to see what she was doing while everyone changed into black-leather covered armor and helmet. Sidjin looked like the dark heir to an evil empire in



his, while Solar wore full plate and would have scared off a Nazgul. Viv's own armor was the same leather she had worn when attacking the assassin's guild, modified for insulation. Irao did not change outfit. As for Solfis, the golem stayed put since he was already bone naked.

Arthur stayed put because she was scale-naked, then spent the time complaining.

*Boat is moving too much.*

*Why do you need so many layers?*

*Grow scales already.*

*Stupid not gold metal skin things.*

"Wait, you're not supposed to be part of this operation," Viv said.

**//I did not plan for Arthur to join us.**

*What are you going to do, stop me?*

*This is a good hunt.*

*I will protect you.*

"But the necrarch can't even be eaten!" Viv told her.

*There is more than food in this world.*

Arthur turned her head haughtily.

*There is gold, also.*

*In the necrarch's den.*

"Maybe."

**//If she stays by your side, she might help with casting.**

**//However, the necrarch will kill her in close quarter combat.**

**//She must remain by your side.**

*I stay with mother.*

*No burning our friends.*

*Smart dragon.*

*Very strategic.*

*Deadlier than compound interests.*

“I should not have taught you that, dammit. Fine. No direct fighting. We stay under the shield and throw spells.”

Arthur nodded and the trip resumed. Solfis placed himself at the tip, his unblinking gaze watching the tunnel. Viv tried to remind herself she was protected by some of the deadliest fighters on the continent but it did little to dispel the cold chill clawing at her torso. The party remained silent until the time the skiff reached the underground pier where Viv had made her escape.

It was lighter here. The long-abandoned base of ancient humanity remained, dusty and bare. They moored the ship at the lone pier and filed out in silence. Solfis and Irao took position near the wide passage leading to the entrance while Solar covered a tunnel leading farther into the complex. Viv, Sidjin, and Arthur remained in a central position, vigilant. Viv heard words at the edge of her perception, hisses floating in the wind.

No, not the wind. Mana.

“It knows we’re here,” she whispered.

**///It has a domain.**

**//Let us go before it decides to attack us while we are not ready.**

The party walked to the main cave, the vast expanse where Viv had found the god statues. She noticed that the corpses of the lizards she had slain were gone, though she was not sure what to think of it. They moved in formation and quickly, with the melee combatants at the back. Outside the lone mountain, the sun was setting. The path down was covered in fallen, rotting leaves and broken branches. The air was heavy with the smell of nature and the dizzying effect of the unending forest’s domain. Viv did not stop until they were at an ancient campsite, the remains of old menhirs still clear after centuries of wind and rain. Viv and Sidjin did not wait. The mage cleared a perfect circle of stone in a breath and removed all detritus with a wave of his hand. Viv was carving runes and circles before the dust had even settled. Above them, dark clouds hung low, pushed north by a cold wind. The valley waited, silent.

Suddenly, Solar turned and drew his sword. Viv glanced at it. The blade was dull gray, yet strangely hard to look at. It was also huge. Solfis stood as well.

She redoubled her effort. Something was coming. There was a stampede rushing towards the mouth of the cavern.

Viv looked up from her writing. Above her, the twisting path led up to the maw of the mountain, its stalactites like so many teeth ready to fall and mangle, and something was coming from it. A lot of something. A first dark shape flew out, the another, then an army. The sky was dark and the ground was squirming with undead bodies, a veritable tide of dry flesh and old, creaking bones. The sun shone on dry pelt, exposed, dry tendons. Shriveled

organs. Viv powered the outer circle to activate the first layer of the shield, but Sidjin rerouted the mana to deeper parts.

“Focus,” Sidjin ordered in a tense voice.

“But...”

Solar swung.

Viv felt him move though she was not looking and no mana surge warned her that it would come. She felt him swing in the same way one can feel heat, standing on a window overlooking a nuclear reactor. Solar struck and he split the sky in two.

There was a massive boom, and the setting sun returned through the gash, bloodying the severed cloud. Daylight returned, if briefly. The mountain shone red under its glare.

“Holy shit.”

“Focus, love.”

“Sorry.”

The stampede had stopped, shredded to bits, or so it seemed, but Viv felt the cave entrance vomit a tide of black mana, more mana than she had ever felt since the heart of the deadlands. The amount of power the necrarch could conjure was simply staggering. In an instant, the blasphemous horde reformed and resumed its assault. Viv heard a sybillant threat in the tide of power, then what sounded like a hissing laugh. She traced the glyphs faster, her hand assured.

**//We need a way to keep them down.**

“Squee.”

**//If you please.**

Then the undead were on them, around them, over them. Feathers and bits fell all around as the melee fighters took down the lesser threats faster than they would come, for now. Viv saw blue eyes, a sign of necromantic direct control, not on one being but on all of them. The fallen mocked her as they reformed to their original, rotten forms.

Heat came. Arthur vaporized an entire flank. The stench was horrible. Viv was still writing, inscribing every symbol with care. Not looking up. Something almost got to her but Irao stabbed it and when it fell, it did not step back up. What he slew stayed dead. The necrarch whispered through its puppets, uncaring. Viv knew why. This was not an assault. This was not even a probing force. The necrarch was keeping them busy until nightfall.

Then it would come.

But Viv would be ready. With a last flourish, the shield locked in position and the next corpse that tried to penetrate was pushed back. It was, Viv noted, a merl corpse, its prehensile feet turned into bone claws.

Viv was in business.

“I’ll challenge his control.”

**//Acknowledged.**

Sidjin turned the edge of the shield into a mincer, blending the beasts as they approached and tying them up. The mana the necrarch was expending boggled Viv’s mind, and she judged she could not win a contest of will with it. She would have a better chance swimming up a waterfall.

[Powered revenants: undead remains animated by a powerful necromancer, Very dangerous, instant regeneration, ignores damage.]

As expected, the necrarch puppeted them with its will. Just staring into those blue flames let her feel the touch of its malevolent mind. Viv picked a large bear Solfis was dismembering and cast.

“Yoink.”

Viv hit a wall, a solid mass of energy so dense it felt solid to her soul. Rather than mushing herself against it, she claimed a small part, and drained. As soon as the energy was hers, she absorbed it and grabbed some more. She felt full in a bare second and poured the excess energy into their shield, overcharging it.

Inside of the mountain, a creature shrieked in outrage.

Viv gasped. The scream carried such hatred that she lost control of the spell, and the necrarch seized it. The tendril remained and Viv felt its grasp climb up towards her.

She cut her spell and the bear gave her a lipless, putrefied smirk. So Viv cast again.

“Mass Yoink.”

Viv’s questing tendrils grabbed one creature after the other, plundering what she could before breaking the connection. The necrarch screamed again. This time, it was personal.

The powerful sound shook her. It spoke of so much time spent in the darkness, growing more vicious and more cunning. It told a tale of many hunts, always ending cruelly, always in blood and death, in cracked bones and pulled limbs because the necrarch, at the heart of it, was craving without satisfaction. It had been robbed of the peace of death and all that was left was vengeance and fury. Before that, Viv was nothing. A child. A speck of dust.

Except, that was not quite true.

The wave of intimidation smashed against the tiny mustard seed of Viv's soul, and found the trace of past deeds. Viv was still a small pebble in the grand scheme of things but she had achieved much with the tools at her disposal and the world, and her soul remembered. Leadership shielded her and reminded her that those around her had come to gravitate around her orbit. It was her hunt, her squad. Draconic intimidation rose and spoke of cold rage preceding fiery violence. The wave waxed. The wave waned. Viv's soul was left behind, a fluttering white orb, unscathed.

Soul Master: Beginner 3

Draconic Intimidation: Expert 2

“Ok, first of all, GO FUCK YOURSELF.”

Viv cast a sound spell to dull the screams around her and resumed casting. In front of her, a blur showed the various combatants at work. Solar moved in liquid lunges that pulverized creatures in their path, the trail of devastation continuing far beyond the reach of his blade. Solfis was a nightmare of claws that moved minimally and stayed by her side. Each of its movements was performed with lethal precision. As for Irao, he went after the more vicious and problematic specimens, leaving behind corpses with no signs of damage and yet, they would never rise again. Sidjin shredded the chaff and burned the remains together with an opportunistic, flame-spitting Arthur. Already, a pyre was lit at the back of the formation and it was growing taller with every new kill. The necrarch's forces were melting like snow under the sun.

And just as the attack had started, it stopped. All the revenants fell at the same time, their black mana reclaimed.

The battle stopped abruptly.

It had been the most intense and exhilarating fight in Viv's existence. She had never seen such a display of deadly prowess.

The fighters gathered in a circle, everyone making sure they were unharmed. No one had taken even a scratch.

“Damn that was cool. What now?” Viv asked.

**//We proceed as planned.**

**//We dispose of the bodies.**

**//Then we go after it.**

\*\*\*

The party destroyed the corpses to the last one with rigorous attention to detail. Nothing larger than a bird wing was left behind, the rest burnt with standard and dragon fire. Only when the fall back position was fully secured did they move in. Viv thought Solfis might call for a stop, but the golem did not want to give up the initiative.

**//Necrarchs are cunning, but mostly they are tireless.**

**//The longer this goes and the longer you meatbags will weaken.**

**//We will take small breaks after the necrarch retreats to regenerate.**

He seemed confident.

Viv followed her defenders into the main cavern. It was dark, empty, and foreboding. The old god statues stood a silent vigil as they had the last time she was here. Without prompt, Viv set up a charging station for Solfis while Sidjin made another, more basic fallback position. The cave continued deeper into the mountains, but Viv knew there must also be a path up. The lone mountain had a secondary opening much higher up, she remembered, far above the forest level.

**//There does not seem to be a chokepoint ahead.**

**//We will head right and await its first attack.**

The party moved, with Solar leading the way and Solfis closing the march. Viv could no longer see Irao but she suspected he would make himself seen when it mattered. They returned to the pier first, then up a short flight of stairs through the door she had previously ignored. It led into a large room with a stone counter. Powdery wood and pottery fragments littered the ground. Viv called some light again.

**//Looks like a storage space.**

More doors led into an enclosed room with stone beds and tables. Private quarters. They found a lobby of sorts, with a cold hearth over red stone. Viv stepped on it and realized it was not red stone. A muffled sound of pain carried through her soul, bypassing her ears entirely.

**//Careful, Your Grace.**

“The hell is that?”

[Grave of the faithful: a powerful curse was uttered here by a dying folk. Its strength has faded over the eons but the flaking blood remains.]

“Is that...”

The ground was covered in so many rust-colored spots that only a true massacre could have left such a mark. Viv wanted to believe it was a side-effect of the curse, but she did not

believe it. Now that her attention was drawn to violence, she noticed the damage more. Some of it had not been inflicted by time.

“Spear strikes,” Solar whispered, most of his attention remaining on a passage. “Powerful wielder to shear stone like that.”

The more the party explored, and the clearer it was that the lone mountain had not been abandoned peacefully. Unfortunately, there was little way for Viv to understand what had happened since most of the evidence had disintegrated. Solfis, however, took note of every piece of writing it could find. There were runes left, engraved in stone next to tunnels or above rooms.

The group found that the inside of the mountain had been hollowed out. The ground floor mostly hid warehouses and barracks with the occasional socializing or living quarters, even a bath. They ignored the passage leading deeper and decided to climb up first.

“Hold on,” Viv said, facing the stairs.

**//Detecting hostile construct.**

“I feel it as well. It’s... subtle.”

“Too subtle for me,” Sidjin said.

“It’s intuitive. Here.”

Viv set up a barrier including one for sound, then it was all about interfacing.

“Just need to trigger it remotely.”

A black veil hung around the passage, obscuring her perception. She sent a spear of mana but it did not seem to do anything. A thrown piece of rock did no better.

“It seeks life,” Irao eventually whispered. “Observe.”

The Hadal stepped forward before Viv could utter a warning. The cloud exploded, seeking life voraciously. Viv thought the assassin was done for this time, but he reappeared next to her as if he had never left. Perhaps he had not. Viv had bigger issues, because the flow of black mana crashed against her shield until it blotted the way, a thick wall of void, impenetrable. Impossibly, it started to eat at her own defenses. She charged the shield with the meaning of annihilation and still the trap ate at it.

It was her annihilation against the necrarch’s. It was winning.

“Aegis!”

The shield changed, turning into a hive structure of pentagons.

“It’s still pushing, I may need —”

Solar stepped forward and drew his blade. He thrust.

All air left Viv’s lungs. Reality was drawn forward, filling the void left by the strike.

The last rays of the sunset shone on the tunnel, dispersing dregs of darkness.

“Could have opened with that,” Viv mumbled.

“It’s actually quite tiring to pierce a hole through a mountain,” Solar drily said. “I am counting on you for the magical aspect of things. Such strikes would be better used against the necrarch.”

“Sorry,” Viv replied, chastised.

**//Your Grace, this was a good opportunity to understand what we are facing.  
//I am convinced that you can come up with good countermeasures.**

Is there a way to redirect the spell instead of stopping it?” Sidjin asked.

Viv knew he had probably come up with his own defense. She appreciated the small attention.

“Yes, I just have to make a half sphere and let the attack glance over it, and over us. It —”

Everyone but Sidjin turned around, suddenly alerted.

**//Mana saturation increasing.**

“In the tunnel, now,” Sidjin said.

The rest of the party followed him up the step. On a hunch, Viv added a sound barrier to the latticed defenses the two casters set in front of them.

A deep scream fell on them and bounced. This time, the casters’ adapted defenses fended off the most damaging effect. All that was left was an unsettling, muffled hiss.

This guy sure likes screaming, Viv thought.

“It’s behind us,” Irao said.

**//Yes.**

**//We know this.**

**//We need to lure it once into a chokehold for assessment and to wound it.**

Irao nodded. Viv got the impression he was merely informing them, not trying to give orders. In any case, they moved up the stairs and into a large room with actual windows and several



paths branching out. They also found the first trace of the invaders beyond the battle damage. Someone had scrawled runes under the various directions, translating them for its new occupants.

**//Those are ancient alphabets used during the first Harrakan era.**

**//Traces can still be found in royal tombs and the oldest temples.**

**//I can decipher it.**

**//With any chance, I will be able to translate the unknown glyphs.**

**//The ancient translations mean: study rooms, living quarters, armory, and garden of fertility.**

“Should we explore?”

**//Yes.**

**//But first, create a fallback position here.**

Sidjin and Viv moved with practiced ease, finishing the defensive structure in record time.

**//Let us move on.**

The complex turned out to be massive. The living quarters must have been able to host at least five hundred people and that was not even counting the barracks downstairs. Most rooms were small cells or packed dormitories with stone slabs jutting out of the wall to serve as bed. Only half of them still held strong. The arrangement seemed Spartan to Viv. The ancient humans probably had bigger concerns than comfort. They also found two more traps, which Viv managed to deflect without much issue this time. On the other hand, there were no artifacts to be found. The complex had been looted clean and whatever had been left was now merely more than dust and debris.

Solfis guided them towards the armory next, though Viv didn't expect it to have anything considering how thoroughly sacked the rest of the place was. A narrow tunnel led towards the interior of the mountain. There were two heavy doors made of giant slabs of black rock blocking their way.

**//Higher mana concentration detected.**

“There are things inside. Undead,” Irao said. “They are bound.”

The Hadal's words left the others confused.

“What do you mean, bound?” Sidjin asked.

“Chains.”

**//We must dispose of as many threats as we can.**

**//Deny resources to the necrarch.**

Solfis moved in, followed by the rest of the party. The golem then stood vigil by the door while Viv increased her light's intensity, focusing on the back. The armory was a large, rectangular room and it was completely empty save for the far wall where three deformed creatures awaited, their massive, white bodies covered in cruel metal links covered in spikes. Dull red sigils shone on their surface. Viv recognized the red glare of necrarchs, but the things were smaller. They did, however, have that slightly humanoid head with an elongated jaw riddled with sharp fangs. Irao had told the truth. Those were prisoners.

[Nascent necrarch: Extremely dangerous, a creature on the verge of becoming the most dangerous natural undead in existence. Close quarter expert. Ignores damage.]

The chains pulsed once, the dull red turning the color of lava. One of the necrarchs growled.

"It's draining them," Viv realized with horror. "It's taking their power."

Her attention turned to Sidjin who was frantically building a fallback shield array.

"Sidjin?"

"It won't let us get to its pantry."

**//Mana density increasing.**

"It's coming," Irao whispered.

*Mother, stay behind Arthur!*

With a clink that sounded like a death knell, the chains around the nascent necrarchs unlocked, and fell to the ground.

## Chapter 122: Remnants of a bygone age.

Viv's perception of time slowed before her brain even registered the lethally dangerous undeads barreling towards them.

The two nascent necrarchs on the side bumped into each other, slowing down ever so slightly. Sidjin caught them in a deadly trap of serrated blades of colorless mana. At the same time, Arthur spat fire and Viv used her oldest trick against the leftmost one.

"Yoink."

Immediately, her mind flooded with the power filling the creature just as her aura gulped their energy, but it hissed and rolled, breaking the connection. The two other nascent necrarchs backed up, flames covering their emaciated bodies. Black mana surged out to quench the flames. One of the creatures opened its maw. Viv and Sidjin reacted almost at the same time.

“Wall.”

“Eldritch walls.”

Stone sprung from the ground, only to change into a tentacle mass grasping for prey. Magical bile splattered harmlessly against the newly risen barrier. A clawed fist immediately punched through, but the rest of the wall held. Viv was getting much better at making walls that were more wall and less sand now.

Viv cast yoink on the exposed limb while Arthur showed she was truly a caster as well, peppering the nascent necrarchs with stones through their defenses opening, using them as murder holes. The beasts were strong though, and Sidjin worked double time to keep the living protected.

Behind them, Viv heard sounds of fighting and felt mana move but she could do little about that. With Sidjin on the defensive, offense fell to her. They had no need to talk to coordinate.

Viv used her improved mental stats to cast yoink on whatever target she could see, draining them so long as she could maintain the connections. Gods but did those fuckers have a lot of juice to play with. Her desperate game of whack-a-mole continued until Sidjin cast a massive grinder spell, piercing through a weakened wall to hit the beast behind. The mangled nascent was pushed back. Viv saw an arm fly off but knew it wasn't enough to kill it. Had to keep up the damage. Resilient bastards, resisting spells that would shred humans in an instant.

It was also the sign she'd been waiting for. With the two mostly intact nascents scrambling for the opening, she released the spell she'd been building up.

“Blight!”

The overcharged death cloud of disintegrating energy spread out.

Perhaps it occurred to the nascents that they were between a flow of destructive energy and a really solid wall because they started screeching.

One of them made a split decision. It jumped through the expanding wave of death, to Viv's disbelief. She felt before she saw the monster break through and huffed in anger. It looked like a flayed, mutated gorilla now but it was still very much alive. Then an earth spear caught it in the flank, another in the chest. Arthur and Sidjin coordinated to punch the beast back into the cloud, screeching and roaring. A last grinder spell lifted it off its feet to send it stumbling to Viv's death trap. Meanwhile, the second mostly intact nascent had followed the

first and seeing its predicament, jumped in zig-zags to avoid the same fate. Viv focused on keeping the cloud stationary and as deadly as possible but she could not bring it back towards her without risking annihilation. With the rest of her focus, she hit the charging nascent with her most powerful yoink. It was the most efficient way she could think of to cancel their incredible resistance. This one kept going, ignoring the rapid drain of its resources as well as Sidjin's barrage of fireballs. It just didn't stop. Viv used all the overflowing mana she'd been collecting and cast the largest purge net she had ever managed.

A dense lattice of finger-thin rays seemed to fracture space in front of her. The void tendrils lashed and whipped with such haste that her vision played tricks on her. The room didn't feel so real anymore. It was half normal stone and half space between the stars. So dense was the network that Sidjin was forced to adapt, sending his offensive spells to the side to arc back into the creatures' flanks.

The critically wounded beast jumped, in a last-ditch effort to get at Viv, but that was the moment Sidjin switched to the offensive. A massive, vertical blade appeared mid-air to bite in the creature's chest. The small construct whirred and sent bloody bits of undead flesh flying. The necrarch almost managed to escape the deadly spell, almost, then Arthur made another stone spear descend from the ceiling right on its neck. That was enough to seal the creature's fate. Meanwhile, Viv had engaged the necrarch they had successfully pushed back into the blight once. This one was now more bone than flesh, but it didn't seem to stop it.

Viv dropped the blight, now that it had done its job. The last necrarch appeared mostly dead on the floor beyond, but the witch was tiring. Could hardly focus. Too many powerful, overcharged spells in a short timeframe. She was already having trouble following the creature's movement. A yoink drained its lifeforce, but it wouldn't be enough.

Arthur jumped on it.

For a moment, Viv panicked. Arthur dodged graciously under a swipe, then clawed the monster's flesh. The nascent necrarch managed to grab one of her wings just on time for her to spit a thick gout of flame in its face. It punched her, and for a moment Viv feared the worst, but the dragonette blocked the blow with her clawed hand, going with the motion. The strength propelled her backward. She twisted mid-air. Her tail lashed at the creature's face, taking out its eyes.

Arthur's apparent distress galvanized Viv's efforts. She poured everything she had into the yoink spell, this time trying to overtake her foe's entire reserves rather than just stealing dregs. The nascent necrarch's mana presence dwarfed that of even the most powerful of mages. It felt like drinking a lake through a straw, but she persevered. The longer the connection lasted, the deeper she delved into the creature's maw. Arthur spat fire for the third time to buy her some time. The monster countered by vomiting black mana of its own but it wouldn't be enough. A trickle became a flow, then a torrent. Viv claimed all of that energy as her own. One moment, the creature was glaring at her with vicious red eyes, the next, it was bone and ash.

Sidjin had finished the first one. With a wave of his hand, he gathered all the fire in the room on the last mangled nascent necrarch.

Viv breathed. They had done it.

Now, for the main course.

The trio of casters turned to face the fierce battle behind them.

Tired as she was, it took Viv a second to understand the whirlwind of color and patterns in front of her. There was a dark canvas, which she recognized as a cloud of black mana not unlike the one she had used. Slashes of white were the necrarch and Solfis striking. Slashes of gray were Solar's lethal swipes. The black dots were her allies, wearing their isolating armor. The white blob was the necrarch.

Gods, they were fast.

Already, Sidjin and Arthur were helping, throwing spells and reinforcing the shield. She had to do... something. Ah yes, of course. Solfis had given her instructions.

With an effort of will, Viv yanked the cloud and pulled. There was some meaning there, annihilation with a different flavor than her own, but the necrarch was not in direct control of the cloud and the room progressively lightened. When it did, Viv had a better view of the battle. It was, in a word, breathtaking.

Solfis acted as a flanker, surging forward with flashes of blinding speed to inflict grievous wounds. He moved with absolute confidence, never wasting a moment, never moving a knuckle that did not have to be moved. Irao appeared and disappeared in flashes of darkness, striking deep at their foe's back. With each blow, he left a blade deeply embedded in a bone or an articulation where it would inflict the most damage and where, Viv thought, the necrarch could not reach to easily remove them, but it was Solar who carried the fight.

The blade master was the eye at the heart of the hurricane. He exuded an aura of calm even as his arms moved to repulse attacks that would devastate fortifications and ravage entire cavalry squadrons. He struck with exacting precision. Claws came close to his head, his heart, but they were never allowed to cross that last finger that would make the difference between a hit or miss. His counters dug grooves in the stone and slashes in the flesh of the horrible creature facing them. The trio was as inspiring as it was deadly, and yet, until Viv lifted the veil, they were not winning.

The necrarch stood in the midst of them and he occupied so much space in the room and in Viv's mind. It existed widely, shockingly. It could not be ignored. Humanoid, it stood over the height of three men, or would have if it were not so hunched. Long horns curved forward over a noseless, disturbingly humanoid face. A jaw layered with needle fangs split its head in two. From then down, the abomination was a gaunt and simian figure with hands and feet ending in long, wicked claws. It fought with an unsettling mix of dancer's grace and feral fury and each of its attacks left a noxious imprint of black mana behind. In fact, the creature oozed destructive mana from its pallid skin to saturate the air. Only Viv had the means to

counter that effectively. Irao and Solar's armor already showed signs of damage despite their inherent properties.

Now that the casters had entered the fray, the battle reached a turning point. Sidjin waited for Irao to appear to throw sharp, transparent edges while the assassin struck. Viv wasn't sure how he managed the timing. As for Arthur, she waited for an errant leg to pass by to spit fire on it.

The necrarch felt that the tide had turned as well. It crouched on itself. A veil of destructive mana surrounded it, pressure building immediately. The fighters stood aside. Solar sheathed his sword and stood still. Viv recognized the skill from outside, but he needed time. Time, and an opening.

The necrarch's attack protected it just as it increased in power, but it was inherently a pressure bomb, and the best way to counter it was to create an outlet.

"Bolt."

Her attack connected with the envelope, barely disturbing its surface before new energy replaced the loss but that was enough to understand how the outer shell was structured. She sent three yoinks in three specific points and drained.

It was strange to drain a spell instead of an undead. The mana was just as thick, and yet it felt easier, less personal. The mana in the spell begged to be released. She was merely providing an opportunity.

Pillars of destructive mana hissed out, darkening the room once more yet at the same time the windup to the attack stopped.

The necrarch was not pleased. It roared an ear-shattering screech of outrage and Viv was once again happy to have included a sonic barrier to her shield. However, that was just the beginning.

The necrarch's evil, crimson gaze locked on her.

Suddenly, it was much larger.

Suddenly, it was in front of her, punching.

Its claws were right in front of her face. Viv saw her entire life flash in front of her, but a detail stuck. Solar had completed his attack.

The necrarch put its entire weight in the jab. Its claws hit the shield and stayed there while the monster itself finished turning. Viv realized why. The blademaster had cut its arm clean off, mid-lunge.

She still fell on her ass.

It was too much for the necrarch. With a last woosh of displaced air and a few parting attacks from her allies, it was gone through the tunnel.

Viv finished collapsing, her gloved hands sliding on the wet stone below. She breathed deeply, amazed to be still alive.

"I'm alive! I'm alive."

**//This did not look like a normal wound.**

**//Does your skill create lingering wounds?**

"Give me a moment, machine, while I contemplate one of the most difficult fights of my long life," Solar replied. He sat on his knees and meditated.

Sidjin approached Viv and patted her shoulder.

"You did well," he whispered.

"I am... processing."

"I believe I understand. I will be here if you need to speak."

"Squee!"

*We won!*

*Yay!*

*Just as expected.*

"You were amazing during the fight!" Viv said, happy for the distraction. "I was so worried but you did so well! You fought the nascent necrarch on equal footing!"

Arthur was left unimpressed by her observations. She aimed her thought with the frayed patience reserved for slow children.

*Mother.*

*Of course.*

*Am dragon.*

Arthur stood to her full height. On her hind legs, her head was now slightly higher than Viv's. Teenager growth spurt, probably.

Those were not tears in Viv's eyes. Just dust and also condensation. The caves were humid, is all.

“My little baby grew up so fast...”

*Mother.*

*No crying in front of your lessers.*

“Sowwy.”

Viv sniffed away her pride, but still gave the deserved pats. The others were busy recovering and inspecting the battlefield so they had most likely not used their superior senses to eavesdrop. They were gentlemen, after all.

**//Your Grace.**

**//Good news.**

“What is it?”

**//We have loot.**

Viv watched Irao recover a large orb from the remains of one of the fallen. He wordlessly passed it on to Viv.

Monster cores were strange. She felt resistance when clutching the perfect spheres, yet her fingers felt nothing. No temperature, no texture, just an absence of physical feeling. This was offset by the incredible power coursing through the metaphysical construct. The core fixed to her dagger only had a fraction of the reserves in there, and it was not even full.

“Wow.”

“You’ll need a staff to carry that thing around,” Sidjin observed.

“This is a group effort,” Viv replied with some regret. “We share the reward.”

“Only one of us is a pure black mana caster, and you are also our employer. Normally, the treasure should be yours. Treasures.”

Irao brought back an early Christmas present. Two more cores of a similar size to the other. She wasn’t sure, but she thought the price of those would be enough to retire a rich woman in any large city. At least a hundred gold talent per piece, easy. Of course, those would not be sold. She had a nice project in mind that would make her heavies protected in battle. Those would be the batteries.

She was juggling them with joy when Solfis spoke.

**//Your Grace.**

**//There is another prize.**



Now that the nascent necrarchs were dead, their absence revealed the back of the armory. Little was left of the original weapons save for faded trails of rust along the sheer walls. The chains binding the monsters had disintegrated as well, leaving behind shards of striated black iron. It made the surviving object that much more threatening. Viv approached, watching the grisly weapon with concern.

[Skull mace, artifact. Once used for ritual sacrifice and as a badge of office for the high priest, this potent weapon has been twisted by the death of its creator. Cursed. It is not suitable for use by any naturally-occurring creature of Nyil.]

Before Viv could even think about tricks, a new window opened.

That means you as well for the purpose of defining 'naturally occurring.'

Don't touch it. Even you won't break it easily.

Viv needed that instruction the same way she needed to be told not jump ass first into a volcano. If an aberrant could be an object, it would be the abominable assembly of spikes, twisted bone, and cancerous obsidian this apparatus seemed to be made of. Only a B-movie power-hungry antagonist would touch that horror and hope for anything but to be turned into an ulcer. 'Cursed' was an understatement.

"What the fuck are we supposed to do with that?" she asked no one in particular.

Solfis stepped to the thing, grabbed it, then shoved it into a bag.

**//We shall sell it to Elunath, of course.**

"Errrrr," Viv replied, a little unsure.

"The good decision would be to bring it to a temple of Neriad to be destroyed," Solar said reproachfully.

**//Then let us hope...**

**//That Elunath will take a good decision.**

"You think he'll buy that thing?"

**//Undoubtedly.**

**//If not out of interest, then out of concern.**

**//He will never trust you with such a dangerous tool.**

"I don't know, giving a cursed artifact to a powerful, overconfident mage sounds like a recipe for disaster."

**//I estimate he will analyze the mace then destroy it himself.**

**//In the unlikely event where he is corrupted.**

**//Note this is below 4%.**

**//Then his fall will lead to the destruction of Helock.**

The room fell silent while Solfis stood there, unfazed.

**//Tragic.**

**//A terrible loss.**

“I can notify the temple,” Sidjin said. “If he doesn’t destroy it, they will.”

Solar shrugged.

“As long as it is destroyed, I care little. Sidjin is correct. Elunath would be a fool to keep it, and one has not reached his level of power by being a fool. Let him have it, if it will help Bob survive.”

“Right,” Viv said, “Let’s have a break, then we’re off.”

After taking a minute to recover, the party was ready. Once again, magically reinforced bodies and minds came in clutch. Being surrounded by people on the fourth step or above really drove home how much Nyil turned its more determined denizens into super soldiers. The survivors, in any case. It was not just the ability to cut rock with a sword. Even their mental resilience improved, allowing them to brush off near-death experiences. She wondered how a society with supermen would look in a world like earth. It probably wouldn’t be too great.

“I think we should finish exploring this floor,” Solar said, “I don’t want things to come at our back again.”

**//The black mana density here is lower.**

**//Should the necrarch return while we are here, it would not fight at its maximum potential.**

**//I believe the decision is sound.**

“Right.”

Staying in formation again, they explored the study rooms next. It was a large, open space with pillars set at regular intervals and some alcoves dug into the sheer rock with tables and seats. Viv believed the empty space might have housed a storage space for scrolls or books. Unfortunately, nothing was left of it. Regular openings on one side showed the night sky, partially cloudy. Whoever had dug them had also woven the consumed stone into an overhang, protecting it from most rains. It was cleverly designed for comfort despite the Spartan appearance of stone furniture. Perhaps, a long time ago, this place of study might have been covered in pelts and colorful cloth. She would never know. In any case, only Solfis found something valuable.

**//Those inscriptions on the wall show the totality of the ancient glyphs used in their alphabet.**

**//With a sample that size and by cross-referencing ancient Enorian dialects, I will be able to decipher those texts.**

**//Eventually.**

“This is all fascinating but we have more pressing issues than archeology,” Viv said.

**//I do not need time.**

**//I have saved all the texts to my database.**

**//We can move on to the last part of the upper floor complex.**

**//The garden of fertility.**

Viv wondered what would be left of the garden, if anything was left at all. The path leading there wound up to what Viv was the secondary, open-air entrance she had spotted from afar. It was bound to have a nice view, at least. She just hoped there wouldn't be any traps.

The party followed the winding stairs leading there. The higher they got, the more certain Viv grew that there was something left.

The first thing that hit them was the smell. A pungent and acid wind hit her nose full on, more chemical and unpleasant than truly revolting. Its cloying intensity pushed Viv to place a tissue in front of her nose.

“Hmm, are we being poisoned or something?”

**//No airborne toxins detected.**

**//No mana signature detected.**

“So this is a normal smell?”

“Nothing normal about that,” Solar said, “but it won't kill us.”

“I have experienced many fragrances from courtesan-made perfumes to charnel pits, but nothing quite like that,” Sidjin added in a subdued voice.

*Stinky.*

“Right. If we're going to do it, let's do it.”

They climbed more, staying close to the walls. Their silent ascent finished on a landing lit by the light of Nyil's moon. Solfis went first but he stopped and tilted his head a way Viv did not quite understand. Solar followed and gasped, then Sidjin. Viv hurried to see what was the big deal. She regretted her enthusiasm instantly.

The sacred place around them spread to the edge of the cavern where the roof dropped suddenly into the abyss below. The weather had cleared a bit and with silvery light shining freely over the 'garden of fertility', its blasphemous nature was revealed in all its gruesome

horror. The garden was a forest linked by patches of vegetation, except, it was all meat. Quivering planes of pinkish flesh like flayed muscle, still oozing blood with every palpitation linked together trunks of bones, leaves of sinew, fleshy fruits of purple tissue that pulsed lymph over the cartilage bark. The field of gore did not stand idle. It beat from a hundred hearts in a quiet cacophony that sent this gigantic mass of meat shivering and moaning, the exposed tibias and humerus creaking under the strain of their nerve-wracked dance, and in the midst of it all, at the base of the tallest tree, there was a single, perfect eye.

As large as a plate, the organ could have made a painter weep. The curve of its lid, the length of its lashes, the perfect, radiant color of its iris spoke of a stupendous beauty made that much more gruesome by the surrounding, grisly display. Viv watched the pupil enlarge but she could not tell if it was surprise, relief, panic, or anger. There was not enough humanity around it to determine anything more than the fact it reacted. The ungodly glare settled on Viv.

An instant later, the iris turned green.

“Oh FUCK no.”

Before Viv could react, Solar screamed and cut. The tree split in two. Phlegm-drenched ichor hit Viv’s boots on its way down. Ropes like intestines, or intestines like rope, shot from the gutted trunk to reunify both parts in a concerto of tortured bones. The eye started to regrow while the shed humor slid from the wound in a viscous mass. Sidjin screamed as well. Fire licked the fetid garden, forcing hisses and spasms, each new wound spitting more liquid until the blaze was smothered. The two men kept attacking the regenerating mass.

**//Your Grace.**

**//Their minds are under attack.**

Viv finally perceived it, an insidious strike on her soul. Something crawled and tried to revolt and attract her at the same time. Her soul was strong, however, and her own leadership and mental skills shored up the defenses. She cast a quick analysis on the pulsating mass of flesh.

[Corrupted garden of the jovial pudge. Fallen, living artifact, twisted by the fall of its maker. Extremely dangerous...]

“Wait...” Viv said, “that thing has combat abilities. Guys! Snap out of it!”

“Squeeeee!”

Arthur was less affected, trying to pull back a struggling Sidjin.

“Ok. Enough. Eldritch wall.”

Viv aimed at the edge of the cavern and cast, tentacles closed all around them. A quick spell blocked the organic dirge of the dying and reborn garden. This left the men sagging against the walls, out of breath.

Viv stood between them and the horror garden, now blocked from sight. She could feel the black and life mana behind settling down.

“Alright, everyone, calm down.”

**//They are going to need a moment.  
//Their vitals are returning to normal.  
//Well done.**

“You could have pulled them back,” Viv reproached.

**//I apologize, Your Grace.  
//I am not equipped to react adequately to unique events.  
//I calculated that it was best to leave you the decision on how to proceed.**

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

The two poor lads were breathing hard, their eyes staring in empty space with a thousand yards stare. Or nine hundred and fourteen point four meter. Same thing, Viv thought. It seemed that they were recovering. She hoped they were, because eldritch body-horror-induced madness aside, they were still on the necrarch’s territory.

**//In any case, well done for resisting the mental attack.**

She had, yes. Viv frowned. That didn’t make sense. Sidjin had better mental stats than her, for sure, and she strongly felt that Solar had soul sense. Both of them had seen some shit in their days. Hell, Sidjin had lived through them. There was little reason why she would resist better than the others.

“Why did it not work on me?” she asked.

**//I suspect it may be due to your outlander mindset.**

“Should it not be the contrary?”

**//Your Grace, you do not see the gods as gods.  
//Superior and unattainable.  
//You once employed the term ‘Immature overgrown manchildren on a power trip’.**

\*\*\*

Back in the city of the gods, in the Palace of a Thousand doors, a man flipped a page from a book without end.

“Now that’s just rude,” he said.

Then after a moment.

“Although not entirely inaccurate.”

\*\*\*

**//Your lack of faith in the divine nature of the gods means that the dark ones' horror has a lesser impact on your psyche.**

“You guys going to be alright?” Viv asked.

Solar nodded his head slowly while Sidjin shook his.

“I need a little time. Such abomination. How can you not see it and witness a reflection of your own fallible flesh?”

“Because I don't need a big monster to remember old age is a thing? Besides, it won't happen to me. I either die or become immortal, remember?”

Viv wiggled her eyebrows under the scowl of her lover, but Sidjin chuckled a moment later and his shoulders grew just a little less hunched.

“Thank you for grounding me.”

He grabbed her hand, then kissed her lightly.

“I wish Wamiri was here,” Solar grumbled.

“Sorry, I don't do friends with benefits,” Viv deadpanned.

“That's not —” Solar sputtered. “Wait. You are trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

“Please do not mention offering sexual favor to colleagues in front of me, dear,” Sidjin pleaded.

“Alright that is quite enough of this. You are all lucky the necrarch didn't pick this moment to attack.”

*Won't!*

*I am standing guard.*

*Vigilant dragon!*

“How come you were not afraid?” Viv asked.

*Lots of meat.*

*Not fresh, not tasty.*

*Blegh.*

*What is scary?*

“Nevermind.”

**//I suspect our target may not like this place, Your Grace.**

Viv wasn't sure. Why would the embodiment of undead body horror not like body horror? Speaking of, was that a living artifact? How could that happen?

“It said ‘corrupted garden of the jovial pudge’. Does that mean anything to you?” she asked.

**//I have formulated a hypothesis.**

**//This was an altar to Gomogog.**

“Aaaaah. Yeah. Clearly,” Viv said, remembering the specific mix of black and life mana Kazar tower's cook had displayed, an eternity ago. It was the same blend as what the horrid artifact had shown.

**//I suspect Gomogog may not have always been a dark god.**

This shocked Solar and Sidjin, sending the two in a new episode of stupor.

“Please stop distracting them,” Irao asked.

“Ngah!” Viv screamed. “I forgot you were here, sorry.”

“I was hiding.”

“Ugh I'll never get used to this. Anyway, Gomogog, not a dark god from the start. Wait, so the statues below...”

**//The huntress with spider traits represents Octas, the Spider Queen.**

**//The fat man is Gomogog.**

**//The destroyed statue is of unknown nature, perhaps Efestar, the God of Scorn.**

**//The bloated one, I would not know.**

**//And you already recognized Enttiku.**

“Wait, so Enttiku did not fall but the others did?”

**//Perhaps.**

**//Those are all conjectures at this point.**

“Anything we can use against the necrarch?”

**//My algorithm returns no viable tool.  
//But perhaps you can think of something.**

Viv considered the question for a moment.

“Do necrarchs retain memories from their time alive?”

**//It would be better to say that they regain some.  
//Natural necrarchs can speak the language they had while they were alive.  
//Although they do not seem capable of discussion, only soliloquy.  
//It is difficult to assess the intelligence level of a necrarch, due to a small sample size.  
//And the fact that they are deadly and irredeemably evil.**

“What, if the necrarch was originally a human who lived here?” Viv asked. “I mean, one of the original dwellers, not an invader. That would explain why it did not move to the deadlands.”

“It could also be due to its territoriality,” Sidjin said.

“Well, no matter what, I got an idea.”

“How about we talk about it downstairs? I don’t want to stay next to that thing,” Solar replied.

It was agreed that the proximity of what Viv judged to be a David Cronenberg wet dream wasn’t exactly conducive to a good discussion. The party reconvened near the armory.

“So, the original goal was to slowly corner it, but I think we can bypass that with a proper lure. If it’s one of the original dwellers, then it might take offense if we desecrate its territory like the invaders did.”

The rest of the party didn’t seem impressed.

“What makes you think it’s not an invader?” Solar asked.

“Because they won. The place was sacked and abandoned. They even defaced the directional signs. And winners bury their dead, especially here, on Nyil. Whatever corpse turned into this necrarch did not receive a proper funeral.”

That seemed to sway them a bit.

“Assuming it was indeed an original dweller and not, say, a scavenger killed by a trap or simply an adult necrarch migrating to a suitable den, if we do come up with something it hates, how can we use it to our advantage?”

“We draw it in a place that only has one way out, then seal the exit. That way, it can’t retreat to heal.”



“It also means that we back it into a corner and then fight to the death,” Solar observed.  
“That will make it even more deadly.”

**//I surmise it is preferable to attrition against a necrarch.**

**//That is where most of its advantages lay.**

“Let’s explore downstairs a bit more. Ideally, we want a long corridor with an exit at the end in case we need to flee.”

“We can use the armory again,” Sidjin said.

Viv considered that option. It was a dead end, however. It meant they would be trapped in the dark with the necrarch. She shared her concerns, but Sidjin had a solution ready.

“I’ll set a spell to collapse the floor in case we need to evacuate. I will prepare it in a way that any of the casters can activate it, should I perish in the fight.”

“But there is nothing to desecrate in the armory,” Irao observed.

Viv frowned. He was right. The necrarch would be offended if she started to go after the statues or some other significant landmark, but the statues were in a wide cavern. She didn’t think it would be a good idea to go after the garden again, since that thing could kill them. Perhaps there was another way?

“I have another idea. Instead of desecrating, we could consecrate.”

“Uh?”

“That means, let me pray for a while.”

\*\*\*

The in-between.

Soul mastery had not led her to that strange space. Instead, it had placed her in a state of calm that had brought her to the edge. From there, gentle hands had plucked her consciousness from this reality to drag her into the infinite expanse of non-existence, where time and space were not laws but tricks her mortal mind used to interpret what she perceived. Once more, she stood small and bubbling next to the planet-size existence that was Neriad, the soft glow of its presence twisting the fabric around it. Another planet approached. While Neriad was gold like a dawn sun, this one was blue and deep, deeper than an ocean, a little cold as well. The darkness was a presence and a mask, not the absence of the void. While Neriad protected, this one hid and taught. There was a drop, and she was sitting at a table in a small glasshouse, flowers blooming all around.

Viv inspected her surroundings. This was reality, but she was not present here. Not really. Viv felt no need to move to take the steaming cup of tea waiting in the white, round table in front of her. Exquisite glass windows led to the outside, showing only blue sky and distant

clouds. It was broad daylight here though night had fallen on most of Param. Strange architecture grew to her right where the place she was in — was it a city? — continued.

There were two men sitting with her.

The first was Neriad, easily recognizable from his aura. He was a tall man clad in golden chain and plate armor with a beard and long flowing hair. His face was handsome in an old playboy sort of way, with small crow feet and a hint of gray at the temple that lent him an air of respectability. His posture inspired calm and power. Viv looked briefly into the golden orb of molten fire of his eyes before averting her gaze. He smiled at her with gentle warmth.

The other was a man with dark hair, exotic traits, in a long blue robe that screamed 'war mage'. He was taller than Neriad yet slimmer, and just as focused. His eyes were shifting nebulae of the deepest indigo. Viv did not manage to focus on them for more than an instant. Viv knew who it was, again from the aura. This was Maradox, the God of Secrets, one of her protectors.

"This place brings back memories," Neriad finally said in a soft basso.

"We should have excavated them. I did warn Emeric."

Neriad shrugged.

"Just like you to say 'I told you so' millennia after the fact. You know who to aim your recriminations at."

"How convenient for him to disappear to avoid this fate."

"Yes. Lucky, is it not?"

Neriad chuckled but Maradoc scowled. Eventually, the God of Secrets turned his attention to Viv.

"We are inclined to assent to your request, although you do not deserve this service from us, having not dedicated your existence to our worship."

"Saying unkind words!" Neriad added.

"Stop eavesdropping," Viv thought very hard at them.

She did not have a voice and her thoughts were hard to express and aim in a clear way. Nevertheless, she perceived the humor in the expressions of the god and expected she would get away with the tiny jab. She was proven correct.

"We are gods. It comes with certain perks," Neriad admitted. "What my pompous friend is saying is that we messed up and you'll have to clean for us, so we'll do you a solid and assist as we can."

“But bear in mind that this is a one off. There is a price to dealing with us. One we will mostly wave, except for one small detail. You will keep what you learn secret.”

“The others though...”

“You are not the only one who will learn or has learned the truth. What I demand is that you do not share this with your adopted people. Your voice is loud on Nyil, louder than many mortals. You will keep this knowledge out of your teachings.”

“The knowledge that you were the ones who razed that temple?”

The two gods smirked.

“Yes, and the rest as well.”

“You were humans then,” Viv said.

“We were. All of us were.”

The realization struck Viv as... incredible. If they had done it, then...

“You already see us as... anthropomorphized beings, prone to mortal flaws. A consequence of your upbringing, I suppose. What you have learned now is that we were humans long ago. This and the rest, you must keep quiet. The order we promote becomes more brittle with every person who thinks they, too, can become us. That we are no better than them. We are. We achieved the impossible on many levels. I also assure you that our revolt was necessary and that we were the first successes in a long, long line of failures. Civilization rose with us. It is not as stable as one may think.”

“Before we struck the old pantheon, humans lived in caves and hid in trees. We were the scavengers of this world, fighting the beastlings for leftovers. Our struggle took centuries. Do not belittle our efforts, outlander.”

“Did not mean to insult,” Viv thought.

Out of all the gods, those two were alright. She thought that very hard and let them see her true feelings.

“Thank you, child,” Neriad said. “Now return and pray to us.”

“And remember that your prayer is a binding agreement that you will not share what you learn. If you break that oath, I will shatter your soul.”

“Understood,” Viv said. “That’s fine by me. I’m not trying to cause a godly revolution.”

Her vision faded, but not before hearing a last amused comment from Maradoc.

“I used to say that as well.”

\*\*\*

“You just... fell asleep?” Sidjin asked in disbelief when Viv opened her eyes again.

“I got the green light. Meaning I got approval to start, but first we must set up the trap. How long until the next attack?”

**//Ten minutes at most before full arm regrowth.**

Viv turned to Sidjin.

“I’ll make it work,” he said.

The party returned to the armory. Viv set a semi-permanent light enchantment since it was dark and she didn’t want to have to focus on anything else but the fight. Sidjin prepared a hole in the ground spell to allow people to jump down to the level below, should all else fail, which took him only moments. Viv wondered how he knew the spell so well, but his haunted expression hinted that it would be a sad memory.

After that, Sidjin set a two-level trap. The first would collapse the tunnel behind the necrarch while the second would set up a grinder spell to stop it from digging.

“The spell denies area to several weak monsters, not a single strong one,” the mage lamented. “I made a few modifications on the fly but it will only slow it down. The necrarch’s resistance to magic has already been proven.”

“That’s fine. Even if the trap fails, so long as we do significant damage, the investment will have been worth it.”

**//We need to set the trap now, Your Grace.**

**//Or the creature will have the time to come up with new tricks to harass us.**

“Understood. I’ll start right away.”

Viv sat in a lotus position in the middle of the armory, on the cold ground. She took an instant to engrave the shield of Neriad and the symbol of Maradoc, which was a vault gate, on the stone floor. It only seemed proper.

“Right. Maradoc, Neriad, you have watched over us for thousands of years. I ask for your support once more. Please shine your light on this forsaken place and place a beacon for all that is good, so we may finish what you started.”

Viv hesitated, her catholic-trained mind naturally going for ‘amen’. It just didn’t feel right.

Besides, it was unnecessary. Her prayer had been heard.

Blue and golden light surged from the symbols, bathing the naked stone in an otherworldly light. Viv sighed in contentment, realizing that the cloud of anxiety-inducing black mana had dispersed in this place for the first time in eons. The light grew and made her spell redundant, but she didn’t mind. It was beautiful.

The humans present relaxed. Even Irao briefly reappeared to shake his shoulders. Arthur huffed, then put her snout next to the golden halo, thoughtful.

The most horrible screech Viv had ever heard shook the very mountain. A blast of malevolent black mana joined the sound attack but were dispersed by the mages’ protection backed by divine favor. This time, it was different. The necrarch’s yell did not convey the same malice and hatred as before. This time, it spoke of the maddest rage, the most insane fury. It told Viv that the hole Sidjin had prepared would be of no use, no use at all.

Either they killed it, or it would kill them. Right now.

“Guys, I think it worked!”

## Chapter 123: The pit of hatred

It started like pressure in Viv’s ears, the same feeling as sitting in a plane taking off. She yawned by reflex but it didn’t do anything. Air was not the issue there, mana was. She didn’t need Solfis’ measurement to tell the black mana concentration was increasing.

It occurred to her that keeping a way out would have been preferable, at least so there was a direction black mana could escape to. Now they were trapped in the equivalent of an oven.

Viv poured every last bit of what she had into the shield, priming them. Sidjin backed her up with his might but all of this felt so futile, so small compared to the wave coming to them, like building a sand castle to stop the tide.

The passage turned darker, then black, and still the necrarch had not come. It was merely the manifestation of its hatred, forfeiting his games to throw everything it had at them. The screams were close now and they were disturbingly human. Viv stopped herself from

listening to the insane warbles through sheer willpower, though her mind would catch on syllables, trying to make sense of them. That way led to madness. She only had a couple of seconds left.

The necrarch came, heralded by a cloud of sheer destruction. Only its horns could be seen from the cloud of destructive black mana rushing at them. One instant it was at the edge of the tunnel. The next, it was on them.

Viv could maybe stop the cloud. She could not stop the necrarch. To step outside the shield was to die, she thought.

Solfis did it anyway. The golem stepped through the shield with a calm Viv could not conjure.

### **//OVERDRIVE MODE ENGAGED.**

Solfis disappeared but Viv could hear it. Solar and Irao stayed. They would be eaten alive in the miasma, Viv knew. Sidjin was maintaining the shield. It was up to her.

When Solfis fell, so would the shield, and then they would die without a chance to fight back. She had to remove some of that black mana. Siphon it away, somehow. Viv placed her hands against the shields. Her reserves were immediately full. There was so much energy in there, hers for the taking, but she didn't have an outlet.

That was fine.

Could make one instead. She placed her right hand through the shield and bit her lips from the pain. Even through the gloves, even with her natural resistance, the annihilation cloud gnawed at her skin, setting her nerves on fire. The acid of the necrarch's wrath was eating her alive.

"Excalibur."

Viv intentionally botched the spell. A normal Excalibur kept the mana on a close, tight loop to prevent loss. She cut that loop open to let the expanded energy out. This created a very narrow and very powerful version of her werfer spell. Immediately, she aimed it at the monster's shape she could perceive through the noxious veil.

At first, nothing happened, then she was looking into a pair of crimson orbs filled with so much rage that any trace of cunning had been lost. The animalistic focus landed on her, squeezing her mind under its tremendous weight. Its arm had regrown.

Viv's fist was on fire. Blood was pooling at the bottom of the lacerated glove.

Solfis used the creature's distraction to jump on its back, landing two claws at the base of its neck. The necrarch jumped back to squash Solfis against the wall. She heard a dreadful crack, but soon the sounds of battle resumed.

She grit her teeth and increased the power of the spell to its maximum, keeping her tired mind on this task and just this task. Nothing mattered except draining the necrarch's cloud.

Slowly, it weakened. Viv realized three things.

First, some of the cloud escaped back into the corridor, which meant Sidjin had not sealed it yet. It was a good call.

Second, more of the cloud drifted up from the holes Solar had pierced with his aura. The sword master had pierced all through the entire damn mountain flank.

Third, the cloud was helping Solfis.

To Viv's surprise, Solfis' glyphs were drinking the magic with gluttonous greed, soaking up all that energy to sustain the golem's maximum power mode. The alien magic empowered him. They were almost there, almost —

A shock, no air in her lungs. A broad, white face close to hers. her heart skipped a bit before she realized it was Irao. He had pushed her out of the way.

The assassin disappeared while she scrambled to her feet. She didn't know what had happened. The shield was broken. Sidjin was against the wall, bleeding from his nose and eyes yet casting spells anyway. The necrarch was in the room. The battle was on. Sidjin activated the tunnel spell and collapsed.

Viv made sure she had her helmet and shield on, then she moved to her lover in the brief moment the fight had moved to the other side of the room. She placed a wall over him, a thick one, then it was on. Just like last time, the battle was a whirlwind of death and deadly grace while she and Arthur next to her did their best to provide support. Arthur seemed to be working on making the ground more even around Solar who loved the least of all, while Viv drained the cloud around the necrarch to ensure her side would not have to fight against the very air around them. Once again, Solfis jumped on the creature's back before jumping out when it attempted to smash it against the wall. Viv heard another telltale crack of something breaking, then the necrarch howled. She understood.

Because of its simian form, the necrarch could not reach its own spine so Irao had stabbed it several times, leaving his deathly instruments biting deep into its flesh. By forcing it to crash against a wall, Solfis made the monster use its own strength to make the blades bite even deeper. Its spine was getting crushed progressively. It was still far from over, however.

The creature grabbed Solfis, accepting to lose the hand on its recently regrown arm to do so. Viv heard a crack, saw two of Solfis' claw fly off in pieces, but the golem was trapped until Irao landed on the wrist, almost severing it. The golem used this briefest of windows to twist on itself and impossibly escape the necrarch's grasp. The sight of a wounded Solfis almost made her want to intervene more, to attach spells to that monstrosity and drain it of its resources, but it would be a foolish move. Right now, she was a speck in a battle of giants. The last thing she wanted was to be promoted from annoyance to diversion.

Slowly, Viv continued to drain while Arthur kept the arena mostly stable. Their foe's reckless abandon landed a few glancing blows on Solfis and Irao, but the golem always managed to block mid air while Irao was simply... not there anymore when the attack landed. As for Solar, he matched every blow with one of their own, something the necrarch seemed to have difficulties understanding. Viv was constantly at full capacity yet dared not use her power. She crept along the walls, sweat dripping down her neck despite the chill in the air. It was the most deadly game of 'the floor is lava', with the lava occupying three quarters of the room in the form of a blender of steel and bone.

Viv didn't know how long that lasted, but slowly, the necrarch became more ripped flesh and exposed bone than pallid skin. It slowed down, then slowed down more with every crippled articulation. She was starting to believe.

Something changed in the air.

Viv felt it. She didn't know if it was battle experience, finally, or some soul fuckery at play. The necrarch stood to its full height with its horns scraping the ceiling. It knew. Sanity, such as it was, had returned. It was losing badly.

Two deeply evil eyes searched the room and found Viv. Her danger sense screamed. She did not even hesitate.

"Excalibur!"

The mangled spell vomited a cone of destruction in front of her, licking the beast as it was jumping forward. It screamed in agony. Viv saw more bones than ever before. She had hurt it. It was weakened. Irao and Solfis hounded it and a ball of fire from Arthur caught it in the leg. It made to the exit, the very same exit Sidjin hadn't had the time to close before he collapsed. It was going to escape, except when Viv watched, Solar was there.

With two feet firmly planted on the ground, the tired warrior felt solid as a mountain and just as irremovable. The mess of cuts and shattered bones the monster had become rushed him and for the first time, Irao and Sidjin ran away. Viv felt it too, that strange feeling of pressure. The only similar experience she could compare it to would be to stand in front of a starting turbine a few seconds before startup. She crouched and made herself very, very small.

The necrarch spat acid but Solar stepped aside and lifted his blade. Then, he *cut*.

Even though Viv wasn't in the trajectory, she could not breathe. The world became a tunnel with some random fragment at the end, pieces of the opposite wall. Nothing mattered except that. If she looked away, she would die. If she closed her eyes, she would die. A gasp brought some much needed air to her tired lungs. Another. It was so hard to just breathe.

And then it was done.

Viv looked up to see the necrarch frozen in its tracks. Nobody moved. With exquisite detail, she saw a gash open from shoulder to groin and widen. She had the time to feel the blood



dripping from a cut on her lips. It wasn't from biting them, merely from being on the wrong side of the room.

Elation filled Viv's heart. It didn't last long.

The necrarch hissed with its last breath. It swung the arm with the missing hand, which detached itself cleanly.

The improvised projectile flew to Solar as he winded down and pierced his chest. It stayed there, planted like a defiant flag before falling, as its owner fell as well, defeated for good. Blood gushed from Solar's wound. It dripped down the pitted armor, crimson on black.

"Fuck," Viv cried.

Acuity +1

Lost Heiress (9/10)

Your acuity has reached a milestone!

Viv brushed the notification aside. Now was not the time! She immediately rushed to Solar's side as he kneeled, bleeding on the ground.

"On your back," she ordered. "Now. Solfis, expose his chest."

"Bibiane. My heart has stopped. I know what this means. I have been expecting my death for \_\_\_"

**//Do as she says.**

"I would rather die on my... oh, very well," Solar said as he was pushed back.

Solfis expertly unfastened his heavy chest piece, tossing the metal cover aside and working buttons and buckles faster than any EMT. In short order, Viv had a full view of Solar's chest. He had a deep laceration between the third and fourth at the edge of the sternum. Striating lines of black expanded from the wound, growing as Viv watched. She placed her hand on the gash to hold the blood in and used her last dregs of focus to pull the black mana out.

It felt immeasurably easier that when she'd done it for Jor, back in the Baranese fort. Before he'd died.

"This was a good fight, a fitting end to my existence. My only regret is that I will not live to see the birth of my child," Solar lamented in the most melodramatic way.

"Ok, black mana purged."

She poured a high-quality flesh mending potion on the wound. Thankfully, the bone was intact.

“Bibiane, my high endurance and willpower are keeping me conscious, but it will not last. I would prefer if you could accept the situation and receive my last words.”

“Get someone else, I’m busy. Drink this.”

The blade master searched for alternatives. His gaze landed on Solfis’ skeletal face, Irao’s blank expression, then Arthur’s snout.

“Drink. This,” Viv insisted. The man agreed and the wound closed, mostly. The flesh was pink and Viv knew she could peel it off with a finger. It would take an hour or so to solidify to match the rest of Solar’s herculean body. If he had an hour. It was time for CPR. She interlocked her fingers and pressed on the sternum. Five centimeters deep was easily achieved but Solar could no longer speak. Still, he let her work, watching her sadly. She sure could use an automatic defib unit now. Ah well.

Viv kept pumping, two per seconds. It could work. It had worked for her, and—

Solar took an immense breath, the chest arcing so much Viv was pushed aside. The man moved on his side then coughed his lung out. Not literally. Viv sat back on her ass.

After ten seconds so of a hacking cough, Solar sat back and placed a hand on his chest, looking a bit lost. Viv took his pulse from the carotid.

“Aaaaaand we have return of spontaneous circulation. You are welcome.”

She stood up, peeled off her gloves and looked at her right hand. It looked like she’d been caught in razor wire, with long gashes oozing blood, but nothing critical. It was painful though. An errant line of energy had sliced into her pinkie’s nail and that was the worst. She took a second potion and emptied it. Unfortunately, the wounds scarred on the spot.

**//The black mana was too concentrated.**

“Between the dragon scar on my arm and now this, Nyil isn’t good for my skin.”

**//Perhaps you can get a toe frozen by blue mana next time.**

**//For variety’s sake.**

“Har har. Speaking of, how is the hand?”

**//I will have a minor functionality loss.**

**//Unfortunately, the damage is too extreme to be self-repaired.**

**//I will find a way to do so, or a way to obtain a better frame.**

**//Do not be concerned.**

"I'm alive!" Solar suddenly exclaimed. It seemed he had finally realized his heart had restarted for good. "I'm alive. I'm really alive. I can feel my heartbeat."

"Yes. Congratulations."

"I can't believe it!"

"Pinch yourself?"

Solar blinked.

"Why?"

"So you will know you are not dreaming?"

"I already know that!"

"Ugh! Whatever! Next time, remember to keep your remarks to yourself! You don't get to tell me who I can save and who I can't, alright?"

Viv realized she was a little emotional. Solar too. Despite his experience, he was on the verge of tears.

"I thought I was going to leave Wamiri alone. Miss my child..."

**//This is all a fascinating display of organic, hormone-based decision making.**

**//A majestic sight.**

**//However, we should secure the place first.**

"You secure the place," Viv retorted, "I want to make Sidjin comfortable."

Having a shield break would not be lethal to a mage of Sidjin's caliber but it would still hurt like hell. Viv walked to her lover, then made a bed of softened eldritch walls and spare clothes. She took the time to wipe the drying blood on his face and placed a wet, cold towel on his forehead. As expected, he woke up while the others were patrolling.

"Wha— ow!"

He winced in pain but his expression softened almost immediately. Viv remembered he had pain tolerance at a higher tier than most humans alive. Nevertheless, he proved to be wise enough not to force it.

"Since I'm alive, I assume we killed it?"

"Yes, though Solar almost got done in. I think we can recover here for a little while, move on later."

"I didn't get to close the tunnel. Sorry."

“It didn’t matter in the end. Besides, having a path for the black mana to leave proved useful. We have a say where I come from. No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy. That means, you need to have a plan and then adapt as soon as the action begins.”

“It sounds smart.”

“Hey, my country has the most military victories in recorded history,” said the citizen of the country that had possibly lost the most wars in recorded history.

“Fascinating. Now, since we are not at risk of immediate death, my dear, I’m going back to sleep. Goodbye.”

And just as he had warned, Sidjin was out cold in seconds. Viv chased off ideas of internal bleeding and strokes. He had been hit by a mana break, not a rock to the head. It would be fine.

Now that she had a moment, it was time to have a look at her gains.

Your acuity has reached a milestone!  
You may now keep your perception of time slowed for entire battles at a lesser cost of mental stamina. You may cast up to three spells at once. Your mental speed has vastly improved. Your fine control has vastly improved. You will find it easier to notice small details and anomalies.

Perception was typically tied to finesse, so it was nice to see hers was finally picking up. It could only work well with her danger sense.

Viv noticed that her Lost Heiress path had progressed by one step, but it was tied with the mental stats milestone. She felt that both achievements and abilities were required to progress. She was confident achievements were not an issue here, therefore she didn’t match the minimal requirements to progress. That was fine. Having a more unique profile affected the number of unique paths. It was just an investment.

There were more gains as well.

Leadership: Intermediate 2 -> 4

That was probably due to the success of her initiative. She suspected her skill might also have a passive effect in battle, allowing combatants on her side to cooperate more effectively. Officers and general paths had more specialized skills that worked only in a military setting. Those skills were probably more effective, being more specialized, but she’d take what she could. It was fine not to be the best at everything.

Acuity Reflex: Intermediate 2 -> 4

That skill governed instinctive casting as a response to a threat. She had used it several times against the necrarch, yet the jump in level still surprised her. It proved that success against tall odds mattered in the eyes of magic.

Your expedition has killed the unkillable!  
Because of your repeated murder (and subsequent cooking) of large-sized or just dangerous wildlife, inspection will now return the detail 'huntress' when used on you. Congratulations. Please kill more wiggly things and leave my stuff alone, thank you.

Oi! Also, she wouldn't be cooking undead any time soon. Just... ew. And it seemed Nous still hadn't forgiven her for her accidental and really limited, not to mention quickly repaired damage to his property.

How long could an immortal, petty god keep grudges, she wondered?

Yeah, probably a long time. Damn! In any case, her profil was shaping up to be powerful if eclectic.

Current status:

- Mana channels (mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck
- Draconic Surrogate Mother
- VANDAL

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 35.7%

Physical		Mental	
Power	21	Focus	39
Finesse	23	Acuity	40
Endurance	26	Willpower	40

General skills

Polymath	Beginner 4	Athletics	Intermediate 5
Survival	Intermediate 2	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Beginner 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7	Soul mastery	Beginner 4

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Intermediate 1
Arcane Constructs	Intermediate 3	Danger sense	Intermediate 4
Leadership	Intermediate 4	Draconic Intimidation	Expert 2
Acuity reflex	Intermediate 4		

Not bad.

**//Your Grace.**

“Loot!” Viv said, excitedly.

Solfis handed her the prize and she shivered in pleasure.

If the nascent necrarch’s shields were the size of pomelos and already had more mana than she could reasonably use in a single battle, the true necrarch’s core was enormous, easily as long as her forearm. It was also inexplicably shaped like a lozenge. She had always assumed that cores maintained their circular shape no matter what. All the cores she had seen so far were round without exception and she had seen quite a few of them in her enchantment class. Perhaps this peculiarity only extended to exceptional specimens. The Academy hadn’t let them work with their finest products. Anyway, it was weird. After manipulating the object for a while and being weirded out by its weightlessness, Viv entrusted it back to Solfis. It was done. They had fulfilled their main objective. Between this and the cursed mace, she might have decreased her indentured period by more than a half with seven or eight months left on the timer, if she was being cautious. Things were looking up.

Maybe she would still serve that asshole for a couple of years, but it wouldn’t be the decades of labor she had envisioned at the beginning, if everything went well.

After a little while, the group decided to go to sleep since Solfis assured them he would hold guard. Solar’s improvised ventilation system now allowed both fresh air and the Deadshield Wood’s thick brown mana into the room. Between this and the remnant of the gods’ blessing, the place felt fine, though not homey.

Sidjin woke up in the middle of the night leading to Arthur leaving in a huff because her pillow wiggled. The couple used the opportunity granted by their relative intimacy to engage in a little celebration. Everyone left the cave at dawn.

The team deliberated over breakfast.

"I say we should check the lair. It would be a shame to leave something behind now that the main threat is eliminated," Sidjin said.

"I'm also concerned about the presence of nascent necrarchs. If there were three, there could be more and if they manage to escape, then they could arrive at the nearby Merl city in a single night. I don't want that to happen."

"We have some time before we are due to return, anyway. I have no objection," Solar said.

**//I agree that this is the proper course.**

*Gold!*

Irao reappeared just long enough to shrug.

**//We have unanimity minus one abstention.**

**//Stay on your guard.**

The squad made sure to wear their armor, now significantly rattier than before. This time, they moved straight down the main tunnel instead of going back to the upper floor. They found a small series of rooms on their left, most of them dark and used as secondary barracks for soldiers apparently. The black mana concentration had already decreased enormously over the last few hours. Viv suspected that the Deadshield Woods were now pushing to reclaim their lost grounds and that, if she returned later, the caves would be filled with mushroom and wildlife. Now was the best time to check things out.

Past the statues, the cavern widened until the mountain felt fully hollowed out. A great cathedral of natural stone pillars and tall vaults swallowed them, their surfaces carved with faded engravings depicting scenes of hunts, ceremonies of a religious nature including sacrifices, celebrations, burials. The list was long but incomplete. Just like the statues, some of them had turned into twisted versions of themselves while others had disappeared entirely. Claw marks from the necrarch criss-crossed the surface, grooves dug deep where it had made regular trails. She just imagined facing the monster in that maze of stone and shivered.

"Good call not fighting it here," she commented.

Her voice echoed eerily in the unusual silence. The air of general malevolence was gone, yet the void that had replaced it filled her with unease. It was too quiet. And her companions were too damned silent!

**//The terrain would have provided the creature with an overwhelming advantage.  
//Lesser hunters might have disarmed the traps and thought it was enough.**

“Yeah...” Viv replied half-heartedly.

The golem was right. The elite of the elite of mankind plus her and Arthur had banded together and they had still almost lost a man. Necrarchs were scary. In any case, it was done now.

The group now made free use of light enchantments, which let Viv appreciate the natural formations around her. They found an altar at the bottom of the cave, or what was left of it. It looked like it had been split by a falling cruise ship. The blow had even broken the ground.

“Someone was angry,” she said.

“It’s safe to say a lot of people were. You may not be familiar with the spell but a lot of the damage you see on the lower portion of the structures are spell-based. Brown bolts and quite a few cracks made by a rapid temperature change indicate a spellcaster battle of great proportion.”

Now that he mentioned it, Viv realized that much of the wear and tear was not due to time. If there were any explanation left behind, it had disappeared over the centuries. They went on.

A pair of arches led to the deepest sanctum, where Viv surmised artifacts and objects of the cults had been kept. A few beds showed that those were probably the dwellings of high priests or important people. The place had been thoroughly wrecked. Nothing had survived except fragments of shattered bas-reliefs piled in corners like detritus. The invaders had smashed every statue, every carving. Viv considered how much effort it had taken and thought she was missing something. Neriad and Maradoc had felt relaxed in her presence, joking merrily in their little tea glasshouse, but this level of systematic destruction spoke of a hatred so deep, it had endured past victory. The invaders had not just won, they had slaughtered the vanquished, then they had erased every last trace of their existence, toppled all their monuments, defaced all of their idols. Only the statues at the entrance remained, possibly as a warning. Viv couldn’t imagine what could push a man like Neriad to such a pit of hatred, but the human sacrifice carvings could be a hint.

Silently, the squad kept going, patiently exploring the private quarters and finding nothing of value. The complex ran deeper still, until they found themselves at the very heart of the mountain, in a large square room split in two by a wall. Five demolished altars formed a half circle around a gap partially filled with large stones. An inscription, carved with a sword, covered the middle wall across its length.

Solfis stopped and looked. Viv imagined he was deciphering the text. It took him a while to do so, then some more time to come to a decision.

**//Your Grace.  
//The implication of what I am reading is... disturbing.**



“Oh yes, the gods warned me that I should keep what I learn quiet. Hmm. You should probably do the same, guys.”

“The gods spoke to you?” Solar asked, surprised.

“Yes, when I prayed to them earlier. Anyway, translate away, Solfis. I want to know what that secret is that I’m not supposed to share.”

**//Very well.**

**//Old gods, tyrants, we consign you to oblivion.**

**//We curse you with our breath and hate you in our hearts.**

**//We break you with our hands.**

**//We leave you behind.**

**//Octas, the limb grafter, the hater of tools, we dismember you with weapons.**

**//Gomogog, the flesh eater, the glutton, we starve you.**

**//Enttiku, the child taker, the death dealer, we deny you our blood.**

“Enttiku was cursed as well?” Irao asked.

He seemed very surprised.

“I think the new gods may have cut a deal with her. Him. Whatever you believe,” Viv said.

**//May I go on?**

“Yes, sorry.”

**//Khaton, of the many diseases, the poisoner, we burn you away.**

**//Gorok the butcher, the tyrant, we split your head asunder.**

Silence and shock spread across the small assembly. Viv had never heard about those dark gods. What’s more, there was one missing.

**//Signed.**

**//Emeric the Fated.**

**//Maranor the Slayer.**

**//Maradoc the Knower.**

**//Sardanal the Bountiful.**

**//And Efestar the Wayfarer.**

“Oh,” Viv said, “Ooooooooooh, alright, yeah, that is... yeah.”

“Efestar was on the side of the light gods?” Solar whispered. “What, in the name of... them, happened? How?”

**//It does not say.**

“Damn.”

Viv was shocked at this new development. The effect on the others, however, was much more dire, except for Arthur who didn't care. Even Solfis felt more subdued, possibly calculating how this knowledge would affect its own theories. Solar and Sidjin stood transfixed by the characters, staring at them as if they would surrender their secrets. To Viv's knowledge, the inhabitants of Param had little interest in history but they loved stories and myth, and everyone liked stories on the light gods' exploits. They had found and pitied humanity, teaching them elaborate tools, walls, laws, numbers. Civilization. The light gods had lifted mankind and outwitted the dark ones at every turn. After their work was done, they retired to the City of the Gods alongside their champions and other powerful entities to watch over their ever-growing flock. There were never any mention of the before. In fact, Viv had not been aware of a before until she had found the lone mountain.

The Paramese relied a lot on the gods, even in their everyday life. As a modern Earth person, Viv already relied on them as defenders of good. Mostly. For the others, the light gods were an eternal fixture of their lives. They blessed every major milestone of their lives. Temples could be found in every city, the priests within demonstrating true power. It was a shock to realize that they were ascended humans who had cast down the previous pantheon. The meek would wail and fear the possibility of their demise while the rich and powerful would wonder: what if? What if I could be like them? No, she had no objection keeping this little piece of trivia to herself.

She wondered about Efestar, though.

How could one of the light ones become a god of scorn?

No, this was the wrong way to think about it. They were human before, and a human will ally with the devil himself if they consider it a lesser evil. Perhaps Efestar picked scorn and favors the despicable beastlings because he believed himself betrayed, backstabbed by his fellow ascendants. Maybe she'd ask him if they ever met again.

While it was clear the revelation had left the three men shaken, they recovered promptly thanks to their magically-boosted mental resilience. Viv still thought it was weird but this world was filled with horrors, there was no therapist path, and it was healthier than substance abuse. The squad approached the hole in the wall and realized the path had been blocked by fallen masonry, then explosively opened from the inside. The broken stones were still the size of an average desk, at the smallest. It must have taken a stupid amount of strength to split them. This deep, the black mana was at the same strength as deep in the deadlands, though Viv didn't find it too unpleasant. What proved unpleasant were the marks.

Close to the opening, it became clear that the stones had been locked together tight from the numerous scratches left on their flanks. One side was smooth, the other a patchwork of so many claw marks made on top of each other, it was hard to determine how thick the stone had been to start with.

**//No presence detected.**

With the coast clear, the squad moved on, or in. Viv almost bumped into Irao's broad back. The man was frozen in place. Viv looked up and found out why.

They were now standing in the twin of the previous room in terms of size. It was absolutely impossible to guess what it had been used for. The ground was covered in so much dust it made a small mound upon which a throne of bone and rock waited, but the true spectacle was above. Viv suspected the room might have been square once, but now it was almost round. Every square millimeter of naked rock was covered in layers upon layers of claw marks. They marked each other, the recent above the old. The implication was clear.

The necrarch had first risen as a revenant in this trapped room. Even as it regained cunning as a nascent one, it was still trapped here. It took centuries of wait in a black-mana saturated den for undead to turn into a necrarch, and she doubted even the brutes they had defeated earlier could have burst out of this well-locked tomb. So the nascent necrarch had tried to find a way out. And it had scratched, and scratched, and scratched. The room had been a rectangle, but now it was close to being a sphere. How many night spent scraping the rock, she wondered. How many thousands of hours of claws against rock, again, and again, and again.

Yeah, no wonder it was mad.

"I would not wish this upon my worst enemies," Sidjin whispered.

Then Arthur broke the spell.

*Gold.*

*Gold!*

*GOLD!*

The tiny dragon pranced in the dust, surrounding the makeshift throne. She was right. The necrarch had used the possessions of its victims over the ages to adorn its seat of power in a way that seemed childish to Viv. The awkward arrangements jutted out from tilted stone slabs like teeth from a crone's jaw, each more bizarre and grisly than the other. The necrarch had mounted thirteen rings on each finger of a giant, severed hand. Gold ingots of large sized were planetd in the eye sockets of the skulls of monstrous apes, the chitin of massive insects. They glittered eerily in the many-colored lights the intruders had brought with them. Arthur found a circlet and shook it, dislodging encrusted knuckles from its many thorns. If there was one treasure on this god-forsaken shithole of a planet that screamed 'cursed', that was it.

"Maybe we shouldn't touch any of those before a priest has had a look," Viv suggested.

**//I shall collect the goods and store them until they are cleansed.**

**//They can be later sold, and the profits shared among the members of the expedition.**

"That'd be grand. And, hm, won't you be cursed?"

Viv was suddenly looking into a pair of baleful yellow eyes.

**//If any entity wishes to enforce the curse upon me.**

**//They are welcome to try.**

A memory of Octas' herald oozing blood on the ground while Solfis walked towards Viv, holding its freshly decapitated head in a clawed hand, popped into Viv's mind.

Solfis would be fine.

All in all, they recovered two full bags of goods, mostly precious metal. The few magical weapons were too corroded to be of use, their enchantments stripped by the deleterious effect of black mana. It was still a good haul and Arthur asked for her share immediately. Viv flatly refused, draconic constitution or not. Everyone would wait. It would be safe in the hands of Solfis.

After this was done, they burnt the throne down. Viv tried to pray but no one answered, and they quickly left the noxious smog of black mana as soon as she gave up.

Outside, it was still day.

Viv had a week before she had to be at school and the trip back would not last very long, now that there were teleporters in place. In fact, Sidjin was confident he could get her there in two days, even through the Deadshield Woods. He had a request instead.

"I want to meet the Merl. I want to see them thrive with my own two eyes. I have sacrificed everything to let them escape. I want to see. No, I want to know that it was worth it. Beyond a doubt."

"Of course," Viv whispered.

"And I wouldn't mind a break, but I want it to be with my fellow humans. May I leave and get an advance on the expedition's payment?" Solar asked.

In the end, Irao and Solar elected to live through the tunnel, taking the ship with them. Sidjin had no need for it. He would set up a permanent platform near the Merl city, if they agreed, then teleport to Losserec-on-the-Lake and, from then on, to Helock. Solfis stayed, of course, and Arthur took to the skies to hunt. She was frustrated by the delay in getting her rightfully plundered trophies. Viv watched her leave trailing longing thoughts of her gold. The group split apart, their mission completed.