

Chapter 94: Green Edge

Kordok brought Viv back to her cage, then he took her cover.

“Compliance leads to peace; resistance leads to pain. Please follow me.”

It would be more annoying to Viv if the man had any emotion in his voice. Instead, the tall asshole was sort of subdued. He proceeded to poke Viv to wake her up every two hours then limited the food and water she got. He was shily trying hard to be the world’s shittiest butler.

Although annoying, it wasn’t enough to ruin Viv’s day yet, which she made sure not to communicate. A quick session of introspection confirmed that yes, she would not break from this any time soon but no, she was not willing to poke the bear about it. It was known in the French army that torture got you very unreliable results, and that a skilled interrogator could achieve much more than a torch or a portable generator strapped to the balls. It didn’t mean that the same applied here, on Nyil. Maybe they had fucked up paths. Actually, she would be surprised if there weren’t any. Obviously she wouldn’t die to prove a point or willingly let herself be cooked over a grill just to spite Tarano. That was fine. She just had to delay and look for an opening. That wouldn’t be so hard considering how complex the healing sessions were and how she’d never had to regrow a pancreas or whatever the fuck the crown prince was missing at the moment.

Although, there would not be an opening any time soon.

The Enorian loyalists marched south from dawn to dusk, only stopping as the last rays of the sun disappeared behind the forest in the distance. Her cage was surrounded by a double ring of guards at all times, outside of normal talking range, not that it would matter with how terrified they all seemed to be. No one spoke to her and she spoke to no one. For now, it was acceptable.

Viv could also tell the mood was less than ideal. The soldiers showed signs of tension despite the apparent lack of injured men, or even enemies. They kept the conversations low even at night, and most of them looked around as if they expected an assault at any moment. A strange behavior for such a numerous group. And they were numerous indeed.

Viv had caught glimpses of the whole army on the march when they crossed a particularly wide section of farmland. There were more than ten thousand soldiers for sure. They extended as far as the eye could see in dense clumps of infantrymen, archers, and mounted warriors. Most wore either the blue or a variation of the blue of Enoria, with an eagle under a crown being the most common flag. She inspected a few randomly and found a wide variety of paths with most soldiers being between the second and fourth step. Solfis had not gone

into much detail but she was starting to believe that it might take some significant achievements or a measure of risk-taking to progress past the fourth, which of course the golem would fail to mention since he had no doubt Viv would achieve great things. Bless him.

There wasn't much more she could learn at a glance from the soldiers themselves. There were, however, things she could guess from the train. It was far too large for an army that size. In fact, there was so much grain and food being carried that she suspected it would be enough for months, with some of the wagons obviously looted along the way. Some of them were even pushed by sturdy men for lack of oxen. Or cornudons, she guessed, as there was a lack of proper cows in this place. The other interesting fact was the incredible speed with which they moved. Viv was sure that some sort of army-wide skills must have been involved because even special forces troops would have collapsed long ago. Instead, they swallowed distance with such speed that it felt to Viv as if distant fighters walked on treadmills. The third and last interesting fact was the lack of camp followers. The Enorians had a clear purpose and they were going there quickly. As for what it was, she was certain she would find out soon.

Viv's only social interaction came from the rare moments she was allowed to clean herself and walk a bit, as it was done under the surveillance of the two priestesses. The dark-skinned servant of Enttiku, Naden, respected her silence and merely gave an embarrassed grimace when their eyes met. She was clearly unhappy to be relegated to guard duties, or perhaps it was because a broken oath to the goddess of death had led Viv here. And indeed, while Ardek's demise had been cathartic, it sure didn't help with the silverite manacles. Lotae, on the contrary, was a bitch.

"The prisoner will get dressed promptly, unless she wishes to give women a bad name any more than she already has."

"The prisoner would do well to remember her place."

"The prisoner could find fulfillment in her life if only she would comply."

Viv had met people like that before. She remembered a nun back in her private school who was keen to impose more rules on girls, happy to sit at the top of an oppressed gender. Some people lifted, others brought down. Lotae was firmly in the second category. Once again, this did not particularly annoy Viv because it was what she expected, and also because when she escaped, there was a good chance she could show the uppity cunt her own liver.

Nothing happened much for four days except Viv being more or less certain they were approaching Koltis, meaning her past weeks of travel through the boonies had been for fucking nothing. Well, not exactly, they had saved a village and she rediscovered her love for seafood, forest-sourced this time. It was still a frustrating experience. During that time, her rationing had remained low so she now had a constant headache and felt she could eat an entire roast pig from eyeballs to sphincter. She would have mumbled 'my kingdom for a slice of bacon' but something might have taken it as an invitation.

The same sort of something that visited her in dreams that night.

Viv did not wake up so much as come to. She looked down and saw her body yet knew intimately that it was an illusion, a lie. Her body was still in that cage. She was in the in between where Neriad had once pulled her to stitch her tattered soul. She was whole now, and could perceive the phantasm for what it was, a convenient way for her fragile psyche to handle the strain of premature access to the realm of souls. She stood in an empty cavernous room with a basalt ground as level and smooth as undisturbed water. The glassy surface gave back a distorted reflection of her features, against all logic. The only furniture was a titanic throne of obsidian, and on it sat a colossus. He had to be at least four meters tall. Even as Viv took in his appearance, her immediate conclusion was that this man was a massive edgelord.

Greaves with cute silvery skulls on the knees complimented a black leather and silver mail chest. Ridiculous spiky pauldrons surrounded a darkly charismatic, pale face with sharp traits and wavy black hair. If Viv was still in her groupie stage, she would have fallen hard for his good looks, but she was no longer sixteen. More worryingly, the amount of sheer pressure that came off the pretentious figure fell on her in dizzying waves, and she still felt, somehow, that he was relatively far. Her mind came to the inevitable conclusion and fear filled her. The man felt it. He smirked. His eyes were pools of abyss without a single speck of color.

“Yes, you have guessed correctly. I would be easier to recognize if my effigy were paraded in the markets like that of my comrades-in-arms, but alas, we have grown distant over the past eons.”

Efestar, God of Scorn and Vengeance, pulled a serrated dagger from the void and inspected its blade. Viv saw that it was a sharp, curved weapon, and it bled so much malice that its mere sight made her nauseous. The blade disappeared as quickly as it had come. Efestar smirked disparagingly.

Viv tried to take a deep breath but failed. She was not actually breathing here. Regardless, her effort caused her to feel more focused, more herself. It didn't help much. The voice of Efestar wrecked her meager defenses to shake her to her core. He was not even trying to hurt her, he was just that strong. It really spoke of Neriad restraint that he conversed with her while they were so close to each other.

“No need to be alarmed, Viviane the Outlander. There is no deal I could offer that we would both agree on at the moment. I merely wished to meet you and give you a bit more context on what we could achieve together. After all, the new Pantheon can be so avaricious when it comes to information sharing, don't you think?”

Viv did not reply immediately. In fact, she didn't plan to reply at all. Her father had proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that a person could provide only truthful information and still

deceive. One merely had to cherry pick them. Efestar was old and cunning. She was no match for him in a game of intrigue.

The dark man's sneer only widened.

"You are wary, which I can respect, but also curious. The gods you mortals worship are not as infallible and kind as they appear. You already know of Maranor's penchant for tyranny, that dear old firebrand. But even your beloved Neriad has plenty of blood on his hands."

Viv thought Efestar took her for an idiot. The god's smile faded ever so slightly.

Of course Neriad had blood on his hand, Viv knew. Only someone who has regretted their actions would specifically give mortals a measure of leeway in the causes they chose to kill for. Only someone who had picked the wrong shade of gray one too many times would lose the belief that only they had the right of things. She didn't see the gods as some omnipotent entities because a divine asshole had sent her to Nyil. More damning, the gods had chosen an anthropomorphic appearance and humans were, at the core, flawed. Therefore, so were the gods. It made sense to her, at least.

Efestar sensed that his amazing, thought-provoking truth had left her unimpressed. He next spoke to her like she was a child.

"Some advice. A mere suggestion, if you will. Consider that the gods are hiding much from you including how they got their powers, then perhaps you will come to the conclusion that they do not deserve your support and that you may want to explore other avenues of worship."

"You know," Viv said before she could hold herself back, "my mommy told me about strange men with intriguing proposals. She said everyone in life would try to spoon-feed me their own patented brand of bullshit. She said I should look at how they act instead, what they do, how, and what sort of world they're trying to build. It doesn't take a fucking genius to realize that out of all the assholes of that forsaken, heartless jungle of the planet, you are the top cunt. Am I clear enough?"

Ah.

That... might have been a little vocal.

Efestar sat forward on his throne with the same smile as before, and that somehow chilled her more than the blade had.

"I see why the Traveler God likes you, darling. He always had a thing for hellions. We may meet again, or not. There is still much height for you to fall from. Bye now."

Something flicked Viv on the forehead. She was hurled back into her body and smashed into the back of her cage.

"Oh shit."

She lurched forward and retched.

Due to repeated, unexpected travels to the beyond and your meditation efforts, you have acquired the clergy path exclusive skill soul mastery at novice 3.

“Owwwwwww. That hurt.”

Kordok woke up from his cot by her side and rushed to her, inspecting through the bars. He wordlessly gave her half a cup of water.

“Thanks, I guess,” Viv said.

“Compliance leads to — “

“Yeah yeah I heard you before,” Viv retorted before realizing she had just talked to the dour man for the first time ever. He poked her ribs when she back talked, right on her slowly healing bruise. Viv gave him the death glare. He was unimpressed. Just wait. Viv ignored him as he lumbered back to his covers. There was the new thing to inspect.

Soul mastery: the ability to feel, control, and develop one's soul, an extremely important aspect of channeling divine mana. While this skill is granted to the clergy of gods early on their path, it can be acquired by exceptional or lucky individuals on their path to greatness. Soul mastery can also be used for more sinister purposes, including mental manipulation.

The mental manipulation aspect was obvious to Viv. The leadership and intimidation skills were all about that, and they worked through the soul so it stood to reason that better control would lead to that. She was not particularly interested at the moment because it was clear it was a long term thing. Right now, she could barely feel the thing. Fixing her soul allowed her to feel more grounded though, and it would be helpful in the following days. Sitting back, Viv closed her eyes and focused. The discomfort Efestar had caused in her actually helped in finding the path to enlightenment, so to speak. She meditated for some time and felt herself calm down again. It would have to do for now.

The next morning was bright and sunny, dispelling the fog of the night but not Viv's growing migraine. It was also at that time that the army sharply veered right towards the Deadshield woods. The soldiers followed a well-traveled path going up towards a more wooded and mountainous area. Viv felt a change in the air by focusing on the mana all day long. The concentration of brown and green dyes increased progressively. It was an interesting realization that brought its own benefit.

The column she was part of accelerated even more to the extent that she would have had to jog to keep up. It was frankly impressive, and the reason for such haste came into view around noon.

For an hour, the path had been going up and the terrain had grown more rocky. Finally, the road angled right to follow an escarpment a good kilometer away or so before going over it. Steep hills rose on either side of the path. Dense forest blocked much of the view except for a large strip of naked ground between Viv and the escarpment itself.

There was an army on top of it, waiting for them.

Viv saw lots of yellow colors and flags she could not recognize from here. The shimmering form of a shield rose above the formation to her right where the road topped the incline. It looked really defensible to her. The loyalists were already deploying along the field.

Viv had been in the armed forces. She knew in her head that the army had large numbers but they tended not to be in the same location. In fact, getting clumped was almost always a bad idea in the modern world. Here, things were different. Formations offered many advantages, especially when backed by skills. So the two armies had concentrated their forces and now there were twenty thousand magic-boosted supersoldiers ready to kill each other on the field. There was something fundamentally impressive in the way both groups came alive as sums greater than their parts, something that she had never witnessed before. They grew into single-minded titans bent on destruction. The battles for Kazar were mere skirmishes compared to what was happening now, footnotes in the trail of history. This here, this was the real fucking deal.

Ranks and columns moved in a smooth ensemble along a symphony of drums and horns. The infantry went first in scattered waves, but soon the other side answered. The yellow line shifted and a strange whistle covered the battlefield drowning every other sound. Blue shield lines glowed in the noon light, a sign of the shield wall skill being used. Colors clashed and men died in the hundreds when arrows as large as javelins skewered them. The loyalists replied with volleys of their own. The very air trembled at the exchange. Far in the distance, so far that each soldier turned into an unnamed pinhead, their enemies died and fell as well.

Despite the losses, the tip of the formation turned into an arrow and launched themselves up the slope leading up and right, but magic infused the battlefield and its wielders had decided to play.

The earth shook. A wave of soil upturned surged from the cliff looking like a mole tunnel if moles were the size of jetliners. A trumpet blared to Viv's right, but she could not see where from exactly because some damn wagons blocked her line of sight. Nevertheless, the effect was immediate.

"Break! Break!"

The cry echoed across the lines. The lead infantry element disintegrated and ran to dodge the coming mud tide. Many fell to arrows but more jumped out of the way. The farther lines dodged the spell entirely until it petered out, having redrawn the landscape for several hundred meters. Meanwhile, the loyalist mages retaliated. Plumes of red, blue, and gray shot across the battlefield across amazing distances. Viv wasn't sure but she thought they were much more complex than what she could manage. She also saw more than felt several layers in every projectile. They were simply too fast to know for sure.

Lighter and faster missiles surged from the shield just as the infantry moved forward again. The first spells exploded mid-air but it soon became obvious that it took several smaller ones to take a single larger one, and around half smashed into the shield. It cracked but did not break, which left Viv gawking in awe. The battle was far from over, however. A sound like a furiously boiling kettle surged once more. White clouds rolled down the slope. Once again, the order to break surged and once again, some of the soldiers failed to evade the threat. Viv heard their screams from here. The corpses left behind were red white and unmoving.

She had never seen anyone get boiled alive before.

The assault up the slope had been halted a second time, but the loyalists were undaunted, especially because the yellow archers finally stopped returning fire. Corpses and red trails decorated the top of the escarpment while the survivors retreated out of sight. With the approach cleared, the formation shifted until fresh troops charged again. This time, no spell stopped them. Instead, artillery spells were launched towards the loyalist mages who were apparently packed on the other side of the fucking wagons so Viv couldn't see what was happening. One of them actually landed.

The ground shook and Viv's teeth vibrated. Debris fell from the sky. A couple of stones clattered on the top of her cage. A flock of green birds took off behind her.

Okay, so those things packed a nasty punch. Viv tried to guess how they compared to modern shells but was distracted by a clamor. The loyalists had finally taken the slope and they were battling enemy footmen in close quarter combat. The din of metal and cries covered the field, but the enemy held a choke point and the assault stalled. Meanwhile, the exchange of spells was going strong, but even though the defending mages had dug in, it was clear that the loyalists surpassed them in every other regard. The shield was still cracked while more and more artillery spells landed. The situation was made worse when the loyalists deployed slower blue balls that turned to thick mist when intercepted. At first, Viv thought they might be like her blight spells but the loyalist foot soldiers walked through them without pause and without screams. Soon, they completely masked the escarpment.

It was then that the cavalry entered the fray from Viv's blind angle. Led by Tarano himself in the gaudiest, most bling armor Viv had ever seen in real life or on screen, a vast contingent trotted onward in preternatural silence, which Viv saw was caused by a few hooded figures mixing with the knights and nobles. The cavalry first angled left and then positioned themselves facing the incline. A signal was given and the loyalist infantry ran down the slope in feigned disarray.

Tanaro raised a banner bearing a blue horse on a field of grass. Viv blinked when the horse fucking moved because of course it would. The loyalist mages launched one last salvo that disappeared out of sight, but its efficacy was proven when the loudest noise of shattering glass Viv had ever heard rang through the plain. It was all Tanaro needed. He sounded a horn and the cavalry roared, a rousing cry that heralded a powerful charge.

It pissed off Viv that the charge was pretty damn cool, and that was just the start. A wave, a sort of line at the edge of the formation grew as the horses accelerated.... then they disappeared behind the cover of smoke.

Viv heard a crash like a major car accident, along with screams and yells of consternation.

The rest of the battle happened out of sight but Viv assumed it was rather one-sided, because it stopped very quickly. The whole affair had lasted an hour at most, with most of the decisive action occurring within twenty minutes. She was pretty sure it was short as battles went. In any case, the convoy started soon after, with the end of them recovering many wounded. Her cage wagon climbed the escarpment now free of corpses, though the air was still thick with the metallic tang of blood. A hill of bodies sat at the top of the slope to her right, while yellow-clad prisoners waited on their knees to her left. The convoy bypassed a devastated campsite. From the size, it was clear the loyalists had outnumbered the opposing force by a factor of at least five, which meant Viv had no idea why the fools would even try. If they had quality as well it would have made sense, except it was very clear Tarano had held every advantage except the terrain. The situation was growing even more confusing and her captors were not sharing. Viv would not ask.

By nightfall, they reached their destination.

Viv was pretty sure it was the destination because the road stopped there. The convoy spilled over meadows and prairies, sparing the few patches of crops growing in the secluded valley she found herself in. Mountains and forests covered the horizon beyond a large fortress that the tiny village in front of her did not justify. It was a massive rectangular keep with a drawbridge, at least four or five stories high that she could tell and cornered on all sides by massive round towers. It towered over one of two twin hills overlooking the valley. The other had been a forest not so long ago, but now it was just stumps and tents surrounded by a wooden wall.

Most of the soldiers collapsed where they were, so it was reassuring to see that the last few days' breakneck speed was not without consequences. Those who had recovered made their way up the fortifications to the camp, while nobles and the better equipped infantrymen made for the castle. Viv was dragged along under a fortified passage and onto a crowded, square inner courtyard. She was removed from her cage by a furious baron who told Kordok to 'get that fucking cage out of the way'. The jailor trio led her down several sets of stairs that dug deep into the mountain to actual oubliettes. They shoved her into a small cell and left. To her surprise, a tiny window let her see the last rays of sunlight disappearing behind a mountain. The cell was facing west, towards the Deadshield woods.

It was cold and wet here, but at least it didn't stink. Viv sniffed her clothes. She hoped they had spares.

“What’s this? I have a new neighbor? Are you one of mine, or did they bring in a stray?” a gravelly voice asked.

Viv almost jumped at the voice. It came from nearby, probably a bit farther down the corridor.

“I am not one of yours,” she replied. She doubted it was a trap. Tarano had been too rushed and, to be honest, he didn’t strike her as a person who would resort to complex schemes.

“A woman! Allow me to be, I believe, the first to welcome you to the ancient and respectable fortress of Green Edge. I apologize for the poor reception. We seem to have fallen upon hard times.”

“I cannot begrudge you for your lack of hospitality, seeing as we share the same accommodations,” She replied with a smile.

Damn, it felt good to have human interactions again with people who were not absolute twits.

“Hah! My wife would have liked you, Enttiku rest her soul. My name is Edwin Mildery. A pleasure to meet you, milady. May I ask who I have the pleasure of speaking to?”

Viv introduced herself and Baron Mildery went on a questioning binge, eager to learn what was going on outside. He swore when it turned out that Viv barely knew more than he did, although he willingly shared his side of the story without prompt afterward.

“They came a month ago by surprise. Those mages overwhelmed poor old Litok’s magical defenses in mere moments. The old fart could do nothing against them and neither could I. We barely had two dozen people in fighting form here. I challenged Constable Tarano in a duel and the rotten shithead lopped my arm off. At least he reattached it and let the soldiers go back to the village after they surrendered their blades. Poor lads. First fucking thing to happen to Green Edge in thirty years and I get my ass handed to me by a gilded moron. Just my fucking luck.”

He fell silent for a moment.

“Please pardon my language.”

“Given the circumstances, I think you’re allowed to curse.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean what can I do, throw you in jail?”

“Hah! Gallows humor is a mark of good breeding. So you said you were a rebel?”

Viv shared what she believed was common knowledge. She knew it was a mistake, yet Mildery’s eager voice and her own loneliness made short work of her previous resolve. It

was most likely fine. She would have been more circumspect if the loyalists had felt less rushed.

“You killed Lancer?” Mildery eventually exclaimed.

“Yes.”

“My dream...” the man whispered, voice full of wonder.

Their exchange was cut because Kordok appeared at the small window, glaring at Viv with his dark eyes. Viv jumped and swore but the annoying git merely checked every steel bar one by one before disappearing again.

“Friend of yours?”

“Royal jailor.”

Mildery whistled.

“You must be important and dangerous, an unfortunate combination when one is captured. I’m afraid that they might want to, ah, make an example out of you. I hope not but... well... a regicide.”

“Yeah.”

That soured the mood a bit. The two prisoners fell silent until dusk, then Kordok brought Viv some hot but tasteless gruel, then night fell. The temperature dropped while Viv’s mood rose. She crushed the happiness in her chest, forcing herself to meditate before Kordok could come and see what was wrong. She was almost in control when a shape darkened the sea of stars.

“Squee?”

“I am here.”

Finally!

Waited for too long.

Sneaky dragon!

“I am sorry,” Viv thought at Arthur, “I was careless.”

She-who-feasts-on-spiders-and-gets-much-gold careless too.

Bored.

Flew too far from mother.

Too late to defeat the army.

Found you now.

You

Provide

Scratches.

Viv jumped to the window and obliged. She had to breathe deeply to bring her soul under control. Too glad and Kordok would come to investigate.

“New name?”

Same name!

Just better.

“Sure.”

Go?

“I’m sorry, I cannot fly and that window is too narrow, even without the bars.”

Can melt hole.

“I’m afraid I would not survive the experience without my magic. There is one thing you can do, however. Do you remember Eteia, the fire mage?”

Spicy magic!

Hot.

I am hotter.

“Yes you are, but she could help me, I think. Can you find her and ask her? Sneakily?”

Viv reasoned that Solfis had directed her towards the woman during her short-lived escape attempt, and the golem was not random. He must have calculated that their meeting would be her best chance and she agreed with his assessment. Eteia was sworn not to hurt Viv, and while she was not sworn to help her, the hostile treatment she received made her ripe for recruitment. There was an opportunity there.

Sneaky dragon!

I think at her.

She says yes, win.

She says no, I eat her, win.

I am smart.

“Try not to be seen or we will lose the advantage of secrecy.”

I move.

Like spider in your hair.

They see nothing.

And she was gone, following which Viv spent two minutes of intense panic dancing around patting her head, which was mercifully spider-free. Maybe that had happened at the village?

The thought sent her into another bout of terror trying to recall when that could have been, leading to Kordok clambering down the stairs to check on her. Annoying. At least he was no longer hounding her every moment.

Arthur returned twenty minutes later, to Viv's surprise. The lithe dragon held a small golden orb the size of a chestnut. It was delicately engraved and looked like a sleigh bell.

Place in mouth between teeth and cheek.

No swallow.

“Huh.”

[Short-range communication bell.]

Neat. Viv checked for explosive runes anyway, just in case, but she found nothing. She followed the direction, then a pulse of colorless mana stretched towards her ears and throat. She allowed it to happen.

“Hm, hi?” she whispered.

“Oh, it works. Good, fairly good,” Eteia replied.

The mage's voice came strangely distorted to Viv's perception. She also felt the orb shake lightly against her gum, tickling her uncomfortably but that was fine. Eteia was talking. There was hope for her yet.

“Right.”

“You're lucky the juvenile dragon found me while I was alone.”

“Not like you are booked with social events here.”

“I hope you did not mean it as an insult.”

“Of course not, merely an observation that the loyalists do not seem to like you much.”

“You are not being subtle, and I have not agreed to help you yet. I admit that I am tempted to just leave.”

Viv knew when to press and when to wait. This was a waiting moment.

“Tempted, yes. Anyway, you will have to convince me that you have a solid plan,” Eteia continued.

“You were more than tempted. Don’t tell me you had the short range secret communication device just on hand.”

“... I was trying to approach Naden so she could get it to you. Very well, but we at least need a viable plan.”

“Okay first and foremost, what the fuck happened? I assume the entire loyalist army didn’t just run after me?”

“Actually, this is exactly what happened.”

Viv almost spat the ball.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am, but you’ll need a bit of context. First, the king is dead. He took his own life on the night of the seeding festival. And yes, that means that Prince Kule remains the last legitimate heir to the throne.”

“And he’s dying.”

“Has been dying for a while, yes, and while there are cousins and bastards, they are not as legitimate as the crown prince himself which leads me to my next point. The separatists have united under the banner of Sangor the Nigh-King over the past few months. He has the distinct advantages of being a royal bastard of Kule’s grandfather, and also a fairly competent diplomat and military leader. It means that —”

“Tarano’s position has become untenable.”

“If Kule dies or remains disabled, the Constable loses. It will be the end of the loyalists, even if they retain a significant portion of their military because Sangor has a better claim to the throne than anyone else alive. Tarano needs a miracle. He needs you to heal the incurable.”

“That doesn’t explain the army.”

“Two birds with one stone. Tarano needed Sangor busy rather than recruiting more lords to his banner, so he attacked. Sangor expected Tarano to strike at Regnos.”

“Again? Wasn’t it there that everyone died last time? In the first battle of the war?”

“Yes, and although the place was infested with undead and aberrations, it also held a veritable treasure trove of iron and magical objects. Tarano decided to lead his troops farther west so he could make sure he would capture you, which is why we’re here now. Sangor had to react because the loyalist army was ravaging his hinterland. Or that was the plan. But Sangor took his time.”

Huh.

“It’s funny because if you had stayed holed up for a week and a half more, we would have had to leave. You proved incredibly competent at avoiding bounty hunters. You were caught at the last moment.”

“Yeah. Hilarious.”

“In any case, with you captured and Sangor coming to engage, Tarano believes he is in an optimal situation. He selected Green Edge as a fall back position and intends to dig in and drag Sangor in an unfavorable engagement.”

Viv blinked at that. She was no strategist, but she had studied history and was familiar with a similar plan the French army had followed in Dien Bien Phu, in Vietnam. It had not gone well at all.

“He put himself in a place with no path of retreat?”

“He believes it was the best option. Maybe he is right to make a stand. If the army is defeated, it might be the end for the loyalists. Morale is at an all time low across the kingdom.”

“Does that mean that Sangor is coming?”

“Right on our heels. He was gathering a tide of troops and almost managed to box us in. Our move west must have surprised him.”

“I bet. He probably assumed Tarano had a brain.”

“Do not be so sure of Tarano’s folly. Green Edge used to be a powerful stronghold back in the days of the unified kingdom. It was the starting point for expeditions in the shallow Deadshield. Mercenaries would harvest cores and rare alchemical ingredients to export them all over Param and beyond. If he holds it and the Crown Prince reappears to lead the defense, it could be all he needs for a decisive victory.”

“That would be unfortunate.”

“For us, yes. We need to figure out something fast now that Tarano can leave the fortification efforts to competent subordinates, because he will soon have a renewed interest in, shall we say, convincing you.”

“Can we make contact with Sangor?”

“I could try, but the best solution would be if the white dragon agrees. It appears to be competent at avoiding detection.”

“She is. She-who-feasts-on-spiders-and-gets-much-gold can sneak past an army.”

Not an army.

Sneaky dragon.

Can sneak past...

She counted on her claws.

Four armies!

“You forgot to count the thumb.”

Did not!

Five armies!

“Is her name really... that?” Eteia asked.

“She picked it herself. Anyway, how can we facilitate Tarano’s defeat?”

“I am not sure, but I did overhear a couple of war mages speak and they mentioned a secret entrance.”

“A secret entrance?” Viv asked despite herself. That was so exciting! Cloaks and daggers! Like in the movies.

In the distance, a door banged open.

“Shit, forgot to keep my emotions under control. Kordok is coming.”

“We can talk later. Just keep the bell in your mouth, don’t leave it outside because a royal jailor will search your cell and he will find it.”

“Alright.”

Viv heard the stomping footsteps of Kordok approaching. The small window in her door slid open and the dour man frowned at her.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Can’t I have a proper conversation without you assholes barging in?” Mildery suddenly screamed from his cell.

“Trapped here for a month without so much as a fucking book and I finally get a companion and you’re going to police every word I say? Didn’t you worthless rotten-cocked whoresons get enough out of me already? I swear to every light god you honorless curs are worth than the fucking pox...”

Mildery’s imprecations rose in volume until the bellow of his voice echoed through the empty corridors. Kordok banged on his door, but that only led to a shouting match, then Viv heard another set of footsteps and the same baron who had insulted Kordok before climbed down the stairs. The newcomer informed Kordok that Mildery was his guest, not Kordok’s, and that the royal jailor could fuck right off. The whole screaming match lasted a good half an hour until the two captors left. Raw-throated silence returned to the oubliettes.

“So,” Mildery said, “What’s that you said about my secret entrance?”

Aha!

Chapter 95: The Fate of Enoria.

“The passage is near the front wall at the base of a tower because the valley used to be the back, before everything went permonn-shaped. Fifty years ago, we were more scared about some of the weird shit the woods were throwing at us. Like walking trees. I saw one when I was three, you know? Killed my older brother, it did. Mages and archers eventually set it ablaze, but not before it had wrecked half the town. Anyway, rambling again, back then the village and its fields was the safe side. Enoria was strong and united, while mercenaries and hunters were stirring the deep green for the next cocklike mushrooms or whatever else the noble fancied. That’s why the passage opens towards the valley, not the woods. We got a problem though.”

“And what’s that?”

“Tarano expected it. He made me show him and sealed it. With stones. It’s condemned.”

“Ah. Unfortunate.”

Viv considered the issue for a moment. She could perhaps clear debris but it wouldn’t be subtle and it wouldn’t be quick. There was no way a caster on their fourth step would fail to

perceive the blight spell she would need and there were quite a few around. It would be even worse for Eteia, who was a red mana specialist. Viv could not immediately think of a way to solve this situation, but perhaps there was an angle to pursue?

Meanwhile, Mildery was only too happy to share more about Green Edge and Viv let him. He was passionate, likable, and she missed proper interaction.

“Green Edge declined during the reign of the wasteful king, Enttiku, let his soul rot where it belongs. That crowned wanker wouldn’t protect caravans and many trading houses just gave up on us since they couldn’t transport the precious stuff without bandits preying on them. By all the gods, I’m still mad about it. Do you know the king’s taxmen even came to my father to demand tithes be maintained at the same level? Almost skewered the fuckers where they stood, but anyway. I was young and brash then, had not met Gertha. Have I mentioned Gertha, my wife?”

“Only that she passed away.”

“And a damn shame it is. Great mind, great temper. Biggest tits in the valley...” he finished, dreamily.

“Ahem. Sorry for your loss.”

“Ah, ‘tis everyone’s loss, it is. The kingdom is less for her passing. Died covering children against a pack of snakehounds. I must have killed a hundred of the scaley twats in the following years.”

He sighed so deeply that Viv heard him through several doors. She decided that anger might be better than grief here.

“Did you participate in the previous civil war?”

“I did, yes. On the rebel side as you can imagine. Me and the lads charged the loyalist lines near Koltis with old Litok back when he was not so ancient. Litok was our local mage by the way. Tarano’s bootlickers did him in when they took the place. Wished he had spent more time practicing and less time drinking himself into oblivion. Ah, well.”

That was an interesting point. Viv hadn’t seen anyone yet with clear signs of PTSD. In fact, people’s mental health felt surprisingly strong despite or perhaps because of their bleak outlook on life. She suspected that willpower played a role, though how much of a role she didn’t know. She had much more than the average person and had still crashed down hard multiple times.

“The first few months of the first rebellion were... hard. Now the lines are clearly divided but at that time, your brother could turn you in... And most of the army was in the Wasteful King’s pocket as fattened and untrained as they were. Bah, I am rambling again. Suffice to say, Green Edge never recovered and... and neither did I, I think.”

“What do you know about Sangor?”

“Yes, let’s change the topic. Royal bastard, technically the current king’s little half-brother.”

Viv took a moment to bring him up to speed.

“Dead ey? Can’t say I’m surprised with all the misery. Anyway, Sangor is not well-known to me. I only heard he was a ward of Duke Shelid, one of the leaders of the separatists. It is said he challenged and defeated his adoptive father in single combat despite being one step lower! Canny lad.”

“He cheated?”

“Of course. Some sordid story of swapped ‘performance enhancer’. Instead of deadened pain, his foe had to fight with a raging stiffy, sorry about that.”

“I imagine it can be rather uncomfortable.”

“Especially with a steel codpiece, yes. Anyway, they say he is a powerful, charismatic, and smart man. We’ll see. If he leads, something might happen.”

“Right. I’ll keep thinking then.”

Viv stopped and then smashed her knuckles on her forehead.

“Eteia, still there?”

Nobody answered for a while and Viv gave up, only for an answer to come half a minute later.

“I was getting changed. Hmm, I’ll have to hide this or someone who walks into my tent might just find it.”

“You’re not in the castle?”

“I wasn’t invited. Anyway, what is it?”

“Are Solfis and Marruk fine?”

“Oh! Well, they should be. The scouts knew they were climbing the cliff and stopped in some sort of cave midway, but we left too fast to pick them up. I understand that the head scout wanted the cliffside bombarded because no one was eager to get within claw range, but the mages had all already left. Tarano was rather annoyed when he found out, especially because he wanted to use your Kark’s wellbeing as a bargaining chip.”

“This feels sloppy.”

“The whole capture was. Tarano was, and is, under a lot of pressure. He will make mistakes, but not too many, so be careful.”

“Sure.”

Viv went to sleep after talking a bit more with Mildery. The older man was a veritable chatterbox but he had great insight on the different lords and mages, something books and reports could never tell her. He didn't seem entirely confident about his side which Viv could understand. Later, Viv fell asleep clutching her empty stomach.

The next day began at dawn with no food and only a little water. Viv was starving, thirsty, cold, and miserable as she was dragged up the stairs by a dour Kordok. They only climbed one level but she caught a brief glimpse of the valley through a murderhole while her guard opened a door with his keys. The sight brought back hope.

The valley itself was empty for a kilometer or so, its fields ripening slowly under the late spring sun. Beyond that, people were cutting the forest. The largest encampment she had ever seen in her life, army included, spread in a harmonious mess as far as she could see. Tents of all sizes and colors had popped like mushrooms sometimes during the night, arranged sometimes in neat rows, other times in defensive circles. The smoke trails of cooking fires climbed up the windless air like so many ethereal snakes. People were already felling trees and building static defenses, while veritable bunkers squatted at the edge of the valley, ready to fend off a prompt sortie. Standards of every color stood proudly across the thinning forest before disappearing in the morning fog. It was a sea of humanity the likes of which Viv had never seen and they were here for a single purpose: to stop Tarano forever.

Viv smiled.

She could not help but think that the constable must be regretting his decision now. Even with the obvious quality of his troops, he had to be outnumbered three to one and he doubted Sangor had only brought militia. Some of those tents looked really expensive.

Reality came crashing down when Kordok gripped her shoulder painfully. He didn't say a word but the reminder was clear. The separatists were outside but Viv was inside, and there were thousands of soldiers between herself and freedom.

Green Edge's corridors were naked stone. Soldiers and aides rushed along at great speed. Everyone studiously ignored her until they arrived at another fortified door and Viv was let inside. Tarano was waiting for her along with a grumpy mage with gray hair. It was quite obviously a torture room with spiky machines, a brasero, and tables filled with a variety of tools. Viv eyed them disinterestedly, then waited. Tarano sighed while the mage bristled. Viv inspected him out of curiosity.

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

More descriptions followed but Viv turned them off since they mostly told her he was fifth step and had killed many people before. The skill failed to say that he hated her guts but it was plain on his face anyway. Tarano took a step forward and licked his lips, pain and regret obvious on his face. Viv was not even a little convinced.

“I would normally not resort to such means, however, desperate times and the burden of commandment carry a powerful...”

“Yeah yeah let’s skip the bullshit,” Viv replied, ignoring fingers digging into her neck. Tarano raised a hand to stop whatever Kordok was about to do to her.

“You want healing, I want out. Let’s deal.”

“I will state it clearly. Your freedom is not on the table.”

“Why are we wasting time with this scum?” The mage spat. “One hour of suffering and she will fold. Women are all guile but cut a finger and they change their tune. Besides, this one is a morally bankrupt mercenary. She cares only for herself.”

Viv raised a sardonic brow.

“Do I explain, or do you?”

“You are not in a position to negotiate,” Tarano reproached.

Viv sighed. She was hungry and barely awake and she would murder someone for a coffee if she could.

“People who have the advantage don’t place a permonn knife and a nutcracker on a torture table. And that shear is used to prune precious flowers without damaging the stem, it is too delicate to be used on fingers.”

Tarano exhaled loudly, though he didn’t deny it. The mage looked like he was ready to explode.

“You cannot sway me through speeches or calls to loyalty because I do not answer to you and have leadership myself. I know there are magical ways to ‘convince’ people but I have a very high willpower and I know it helps guard against such attempts. The only ways you have to convince me to help is through torture or a deal, and torture presents a risk. Too little and I’ll refuse, too much and I might decide to kill Prince Kune instead of regrowing his liver. Or blow myself up. Break me, and you break the method.”

“We will not remove your manacles. Do not even think about it.”

“Then I suppose you have a third step black mana specialist I could train?”

Silence.

“Because otherwise that will not work. Oh, and better bring him fast because I think your time is running out. You have visitors.”

“Green Edge has withstood more than you could possibly imagine,” the mage stupidly said to a woman who had seen Solfis’ original frame and possessed a wild imagination. “Your insolence is simply breathtaking.”

“Yet you still speak.”

“We could also torture you then extract an oath,” Tarano reminded her.

“You seem to take me for a naive village girl. That is a mistake. Oaths made under duress are worthless.”

Silence spread across the room while the men considered their options. Viv could hear the mage grind his teeth from here. She wondered what his fucking problem was. Even Tarano kept a cool head and she had killed the prince he had helped raise.

“I say we burn off her feet and see if she changes her mind,” the mage said “She doesn’t need them.”

Viv inhaled deeply. She had hoped she could finesse the fuckers for nothing but if it took a bit of blood, she’d give it a try. Her pain tolerance was significantly higher than what they thought, courtesy of the Harrakan weather. Tarano gauged her, then he made a split decision.

“Let’s see what you ask for first, since you took my previous offer as an insult. Just be aware that I cannot and will not let go of someone who committed regicide. It will not happen. I would rather try my luck with torture, and I would have done it if the circumstances were not so... delicate.”

“For as long as I am your captive, I want proper clothes, a book changed every week that relates to magic, baths every day and half an hour under the sun to walk around under supervision. If I successfully heal the prince, those conditions are maintained indefinitely. No passing me on to someone else to be executed or anything of the sort. You will also return my skinsuit because it’s chilly at night.”

“What’s a witch want to do with books?” the mage spat.

Viv looked at him with more hatred than she wanted to show, but that asshole was really getting on her nerves.

Just then, there was a boom. The building shook. Dust fell on them.

“Could you kindly see if our defenses are up, my lord Tamar?” Tarano diplomatically requested.

The prickly mage left without a word, but not without giving Viv one last death glare. He might have been stubborn, but he was not an idiot. Someone who followed a court path would know a dismissal when he heard it. It was smoothly done, too.

“I can give you anything but the skin suit, if that is what you call it. I will not return a magical item of unknown origin.”

“Then how about my shield? It has a sentimental value.”

“That lump? With all the sigils?”

“Yes,” Viv replied testily.

Tarano looked at her. She crossed her arms.

“Very well. I consent. When can you start?”

“I’ll need to have a look at Kune—”

“Prince Kune.”

“The patient. And if he is indeed missing internal organs, it will take a while because I do not know how to regrow those. The arm should not take long, same with the leg except the feet, which might be problematic because he lost both and I usually use one as a template to regrow the other. I can work with that, though. No matter what, I will always need a few things. First, a priest, preferably of Neriad.”

“Naden will assist you. She claims Enttiku will agree to help.”

“I will also need fresh monster flesh ground down to a fine paste.”

Tarano froze, then looked up to Kordok, still holding Viv’s shoulder in a death grip.

“She believes it,” the taciturn man grumbled.

Tarano did not swear but Viv practically saw him bite back a curse. He started to pace around the room. Viv kept her emotion under control. This would work.

“Why do you even need that?”

“Black mana does not create, it transforms. I need a base material to regrow flesh.”

“Would preserved rations work?”

Viv shook her head.

“First, the fresher the better, and second, I use the material in the paste. We are not only regrowing muscle here. We need bones and organs. Honestly, I doubt it would work with old meat.”

“Dammit.”

Tarano resumed his pacing. Another boom came from above. This time, the building didn't shake.

The constable frowned and turned his head.

“How about human corpses?”

“Look,” Viv said, “we want fresh monster meat because they have mana and this helps both the transformation and the later drawing of pathways. Pick humans and you don't just forfeit that, you go from rebuilding flesh with predigested food to healing someone with dead humans. This would attract the attention of... you know who.”

Tarano froze.

“Up to you but I wouldn't tempt it,” Viv added helpfully.

The man glared at her and she felt his presence smash into her own. Her leadership rose to the challenge. It wasn't enough to push him back, but it was enough not to flinch.

“You seem very interested in doing things well, suddenly,” Tarano remarked in a deceptively calm manner.

“What happens if I fuck up the healing?” Viv asked, certain of the answer.

“You die. Similarly, if for any reason the prince perishes, you die. I left strict orders. Do you understand?”

“I understand; I expected it, and that's why I'm interested in doing things properly. You leave me mostly alone and I will fix your damn heir.”

“You are still hoping for something else,” Tarano said.

Viv thought she had perhaps been too adversarial the last time. On the other hand, she was feeling rather adversarial right the fuck now.

“Look, what I'm hoping is that the army out there wins and shoves your pretentious mug on a spike to be pecked at by mangy birds so I don't have to see you and your bastard friend ever again.”

“She means it,” Kordok added helpfully.

Tarano glared at the jailer.

“Thank you for enlightening me. You will lead the prisoner back to her cell and provide proper lodging conditions. That is all.”

Kordok grabbed Viv and pushed her back. Viv’s strength was around that of a very young adult in this bullshit world and any soldier here outclassed her completely, which was a little frustrating. As she walked back, she scolded herself for her reaction. Only her quick thinking had prevented her from blurting out Sangor was going to get him, thus strongly hinting she had access to outside information. Negotiations were fine because they were better than torture, but outbursts were prohibited. The hunger and exhaustion were messing with her head. She was also out of practice watching her mouth. Six months being the queen bitch and she couldn’t stay quiet to save her own damn life. Ah well. At least, she had achieved her purpose.

Viv returned to her cell and waited until Kordok had left to contact Eteia.

“Hey.”

“I’m here,” the answer returned promptly, “have you found anything?”

“There is a secret entrance under the north east tower, angled towards the forest. At the base. Its entrance is obscured by a small tree bearing red leaves. It is obstructed for now but I’d wager it will be cleared soon to let out a small hunting expedition. Or one could come in from the other camp.”

“That is great news, I’ll make sure it reaches the other side.”

It was a bit of a gamble on Viv’s side. The keep only had one main gate facing the valley. Hundreds of men defended the fortress while the main group of loyalist soldiers occupied a large hill south of it across a small depression, forming twin elevated grounds. Tarano had limited options to get the fresh monster meat Viv requested into the keep. Technically, scouts could roam towards the Deadshield Woods to find something then attach it to ropes which would then be dragged over the wall from the other side, but Viv wagered they wouldn’t want to be too visible. She hoped Tarano would think the same.

Shortly after that, Kordok returned with water, a large bowl filled with fresh congee, and crisp bread.

“Compliance brings peace.”

Viv rolled her eyes. The food was one of the best meals Viv had ever tasted which got to show how hungry she’d been. A bath was provided as well as a conservative plain dress. She felt human again.

The rest of the day was spent mostly idly between conversations and trying to read the book that asshole Archmage Tamar had found her, which was a dry, long-winded treaty on how magecraft was superior to witchery in every aspect. It did contain some interesting takes on several spell duels. Interestingly, several of those ended in the witch’s victory but they were

described as flukes and unfair fights, proof that witches were without honor. Viv found the pettiness more amusing than anything else now that she had a full belly and the prospect of showing Tamar his own bloody pancreas.

The next day, she was requested to demonstrate the viability of the spell, which led her to an ethical question.

Did she care about her intellectual property?

The regrowth spell was hers and only hers, the first original contribution she had made for spellcraft that could actually be used, unlike yoink which would kill the caster. It was a significant improvement to Nyil which, she thought, didn't deserve it after all it had done to her. The spell had helped her by attracting crippled veterans to her banner. The freshly healed warriors had returned the favor with a vengeance, tearing into Prince Lancer's troops with cathartic fury. If the spell spread, she would lose the advantage that came with monopoly.

At the same time, Nyil was morally bankrupt up to and including some of the light gods and it would be hypocritical for her to bitch about it while being part of the problem. Nyil was garbage. She had an opportunity to make it less garbage. Maybe that was fine. Maybe leaving her mark in history as someone who had killed a slaver prince, revitalized a fragment of the deadlands, and invented a way to regrow limbs was... not too bad, actually.

Yeah, Nyil could have the spell. As she had mentioned, it would take a black mana specialist or an archmage to perform it anyway so she would still retain an advantage in the short term, but now more people would use it. Rich people, given the cost at first, but at least that was a start. Maybe someone would refine the process until it eventually became the norm.

Yeah, she was fine with that. She was fine with that choice and that legacy, if it came to it.

Viv made no effort to hamper the session, for once. She requested an empty room which was provided and demonstrated the three steps of her reconstruction spells, making sure to list the requirements. Tamar followed the entire session with a sneer, but the two other powerful mages present asked pertinent questions and seemed genuinely interested. Viv tried to meet them halfway but the old buggers kept talking about Aldus' paradigm and the Plinex constant and other such abstract nonsense, which made communication difficult. She resorted to explaining meaning and glyph usage, which in turn made the mages blink in confusion. They would be unable to cast any time soon but they were able to mark down every glyph and the construct of the ritual despite not fully understanding it, so there was that. After a few hours of efforts, the two other mages saluted Viv with a hand to their forehead which Viv's instinct said was a sign of respect from one practitioner to another. It made Tamar even more annoyed.

The first batch of meat arrived the same evening. Viv discarded them on account of being from animals, not monsters, and that they would be more complex to work with. The only worthy specimen was a bird with bright green feathers, all two kilograms of it.

Nevertheless, Viv set up in the prince room to regrow his right shoulder as a proof of concept under the supervision of Tamar and another mage. Tarano was there as well, and Kordok stood by her side. It felt great to flex her mana again even if it was heavily controlled. Better yet, Tarano allowed her to wield her dagger which had been left intact for now, on account of being useless to anyone but a black mana specialist. Her shield was also returned. Other items were left in the room as encouragement, she thought.

The operation went well despite two swords and a plethora of spells hanging over her head, ready to turn her to ash at a moment's notice. It only took a couple of minutes, and when she was done, there was genuine emotion on Tarano's face. He grabbed Prince Kune's face with a fatherly hand and whispered.

"I will save you, then you can save Enoria."

Viv was so eager to crush his dreams. That would have to wait, however, but probably not too long.

In the corridor, Viv had another good look at the outside. The encampment was fully fortified and the separatist army was building something she never expected to see in a world of sorcery, and yet it was there. At the tip of their formation stood a massive siege tower. It was as tall as some earth buildings and would definitely reach the top of the keep if it were allowed to move there. Made of wood, the surface was covered in strange paintings, animal skulls, and decorated pelts to the extent that it looked more like a horror movie prop than an actual war machine. Spikes adorned its sides. As she watched, an artillery spell launched from the keep's battlement only to be intercepted by a bird made of fire. A dull explosion reached her ears from across half a kilometer away.

More explosions sounded while she walked across the busy courtyard under the disapproving glare of the local soldiers. Squads of archers crossed it at a brisk pace. Viv could not help but admire their massive bows, all ornamented and well-made. Once more, the walls shook from various impacts. She didn't protest when Kordok shortened her break.

After that, the jailer brought her back to her cell which now sported covers and even a pillow. She placed her shield against the wall. As she had said, it had a sentimental value with all the crests present. She was barely seated when Naden came to visit with Lotae in tow. The follower of Enttiku knocked before going in while Lotae glared disapprovingly at her creature comforts. Viv pulled a power move by offering the only spare seat to Naden before the rancid bitch could react, which left her standing. Small victories.

"If you don't mind, could you tell me about the ritual and what would be expected of me?"

"Certainly. I will use a diagnostic spell to identify and map the missing matter, then black mana will turn sludge into the desired shape. The problem is that the soul does not recognize the foreign matter as its own. It takes a healing spell to complete the process, one I cannot cast."

"Would it work with life mana?"

“Yes, but I suspect the spell might be incredibly complex while divine mana will do most of the work naturally. The divine spell truly completes the fusion, then it takes a while for the mana channels to regrow. The process is extremely uncomfortable.”

“Would it be more uncomfortable for people who have developed them, like mages and spell blades?”

“We would need to conduct a study to know for sure. So far, it has not been a priority.”

The discussion continued for a while. Outside, the bombardment was intensifying so the two priestesses eventually took their leave to attend to the wounded. The shaking walls led Viv to believe that the separatists had their own magical heavyweights and they had come in force.

“You know what would be awful?” Mildery asked later.

“I can think of a couple of things. What did you have in mind?”

“If I died buried in stones instead of burying my warhammer in someone’s chest. In my own castle no less! The humanity.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m knocking on wood.”

“Eh?”

“It’s a saying from where I come from. Err. Means warding off bad luck.”

There was a knock nearby.

“If it doesn’t work, my revenant will bite your ass.”

“Oh it can certainly try.”

They bantered a bit more, but Viv felt a sort of tension in the air, something at the edge of her perception that distracted her.

In the evening, the bombardment redoubled in intensity. Horns rang in the distance.

The door unlocked. Lotae came in. Viv felt all sorts of alarms ring in her head. The cold woman’s smirk only reinforced her idea that something was wrong.

“You are too docile,” the woman said in a light tone. “Far too calm. I know your kind, always reaching up. You will never learn your place and you will never contribute. You only take. If you are giving, it is to better take later. Tarano may be fooled and distracted, but I am not. You are planning something. You will tell me now.”

“I’m planning to break your neck.”

“Hilarious. You are such a great witch, witty and exotic. Bantering with the men and tempting them with your honeyed words. It’s all fun and games to you.”

“I assure you I take life quite seriously.”

Lotae lifted a hand. Her presence smashed against Viv’s, a red wave of compliance. It was edges and power designed to subdue, but behind there was a lure, one that Viv understood. It was the serenity of a well-ordered life. It was peace and routines and a code that would guide, answer the difficult questions, but beyond that it was also a community. If Viv surrendered herself, she would be dependent yet protected by a tight-knit group. Within those constraints, she would still have freedom, and happiness could still be found.

But not by her. And certainly not by a faith she would not pick herself.

Viv’s intimidation, long dormant, woke up. She had led an army to victory. She had given people a purpose. Her works had pushed back the deadlands and now, trees and crops grew where earth had laid dead for centuries. More importantly, she had impressed a dragon. Only a worthy cause would sway here and this wasn’t it.

Lotae grit her teeth in frustration but the sheer power of Viv’s existence broke her spell and called its lies. Lotae did not wish for Viv’s happiness, only for her obedience. Hers was advice meant to change Viv for other people’s benefit and not for her own. The priestess fought harder but she didn’t have a grip. There were no chinks in the witch’s armor, reinforced as it was by her trust in herself, her defiance of others, and a healthy serving of ego.

Then the door unlocked once again.

Lotae gave up her attempt on the spot, clearly not expecting an interruption. She twisted on herself to face the newcomer, someone Viv had never met before. He wore the garb of a scout, but over enchanted mail that shone silver under the green coat. He was one of the ugliest people Viv had ever met, with an asymmetrical face, a nose like a potato, scarred cheeks, large eyes and a chin you could break rocks on, yet for all of it he was striking. His charisma radiated all the more for his unfortunate features, and the gaze on Viv shone with a keen intellect.

“Scout Kert, here to take the prisoner ma’am.”

Right, if this guy was a scout, Viv was the Queen of England.

“I sincerely doubt it,” Lotae retorted, placing herself squarely between Viv and the man.

Which was a big mistake.

Viv slowed down her perception of time and grabbed Lotae’s head from behind. A red shield enveloped the priestess just as a scream of alarm escaped her lips. Viv felt a resistance, she could not touch the priestess’ skin, but the shield moved with her body and that’s all Viv

needed. Using her momentary burst of strength, she pulled her foe backwards and towards her knee. Lotae's vertebrae snapped with a grisly crack.

Viv wasn't sure if it would be enough, so she grabbed her shield and smashed it down on the gasping priestess. The woman stopped moving.

When Viv looked up, the fake scout had been joined by a woman wearing armor that seemed to be made of bark and a man in dried leather completely covered in colorful feathers. Other rough men waited behind the door, including one who was quite obviously a mage with a staff disguised as a spear. It could fool people who didn't have her mana mastery skill, probably.

They were all scarred and angry.

"Oh, I like her already," the bark woman said.

Viv inspected her. The skill gave back [hunter] for a moment, but then something broke as the woman waved her hand.

[Archwitch of the Thorns: one who follows the path of forest-based magic. Extremely dangerous. Brown and life mana specialist. Expert battle caster. Slayer of men...]

She was in the late fourth step. The man on the right returned [Wing of the Pale Dawn] and the dude in the middle, the one who lied badly, returned [Nigh King].

"I didn't expect to meet Sangor in the flesh," Viv said.

"We objected," the mage said from the door.

"I had a good feeling," Sangor replied calmly.

He really did have a presence, and his voice was soft and warm. Viv found herself relaxed just from him being around and even more so when he removed the manacles. Viv breathed out. Black tendrils swam from her shoulders and moved around languidly. God, but it felt good to be free. Liberating, as it were.

"The black likes you, sister," the archwitch remarked. She was smiling broadly.

"Sorry, but we don't have the time for discussions," Sangor interrupted. "Do you know where Prince Kune is?"

"Yes."

"Then lead the way, we have to put an end to this war."

"Before that," Viv said, "there is another man here, Lord Mildery. Do you have the key?"

It turned out that they didn't. Kordok had surrendered Viv's key as well as his life when Sangor had found him, but Mildery wasn't his prisoner. This obstacle didn't stop the group's mage who simply destroyed the lock. Mildery appeared much younger than Viv expected with an extremely muscular build and a pretty good handlebar mustache on a viril, handsome face. He grinned when he saw Viv.

[Monster Slayer: one who focuses on taking down large creatures with massive weapons.]

"Seems I owe you for more than just a conversation."

The band of powerful, heavily armored fake scouts moved through the mostly empty corridors. This side of the keep faced the forest and most of the defenders were facing the valley where the separatist army was even now conducting a large-scale assault. The distraction served until they reached the prince's room which was defended by a pair of guards. They were killed after a short scuffle with the feather dude casting a gray mana silence spell. Viv didn't have to do anything. It was clear that Sangor had brought people who knew their stuff.

Viv entered the room. Naden was here but she immediately surrendered and no one touched her. Viv rushed to her corner of the room to gear up. Her helmet was there, as well as the dagger and, strangely, her backpack with some of her personal effects. No skinsuit. The food was gone as well as her poison-detecting ring and all of her cash but they had left the bank chit. She finished putting everything on, then turned.

Sangor was cleaning blood from his sword. It was immediately obvious where it came from.

"You... you killed him?" Viv moaned.

"Yes?"

"He was disarmed. I expected you to take him hostage or something?"

"Spoken like a follower of Neriad. I only care for a prompt and definitive end to the war, and I will go to any length to make sure it happens. Even if it means killing a defenseless man."

Viv watched the expanding pool of blood dripping down the wood frame. The prince's face had been covered, his bed sheets turned into an improvised shroud. Just like that, the last heir of Enoria had fallen. Barring a miracle, the loyalist side was done for.

And Viv had guided the man who had finished it all. He, the most legitimate heir to the throne, now sheathed his sword.

"Bibiane, I understand that he was your patient, but I need you to focus right now. We have to take down or disable the mages at the top of the tower or there is still a chance to lose this attack. Too many Enorians already lost their lives fighting this pointless war. We need to go, now. Can you lead the way?"

"No, but Edwin Mildery can."

The procession didn't stop on its way up. They avoided most soldiers. Those they didn't were absolutely no match for them. Besides Viv, all the persons present were on the fourth step. The archwitch stopped by Viv's side, perhaps to distract her. She was a mature woman with ruddy skin tanned by the sun. Mana danced around her in vibrant flares.

"So, which tradition are you from?" she asked with a smile that showed her canines.

Viv realized she had almost no idea about instinctive casters. Solfis had known little about the subject and the little she read was written by mages who seemed to have strong opinions on the subject.

"Hm, nothing special. I mostly use it to kill things."

The other woman's smile only widened.

"Oh, that's a tradition! The Way of the Sun."

"Huh."

The conversation did little to distract Viv, especially with the sounds of battle closing in on them. There were no windows on the murderholes, so the screams of the dying and the whistles of arrows came to her in full definition stereo. Sangor led them up and up to the roof. To Viv's surprise, he just opened the last door and walked in. The rest of them followed.

Tarano stood on top with mages gathered in a half circle around him, including Tamar who looked on the verge of apoplexy when he spotted Viv. The constable looked tired and his armor was damaged on the left side from a near hit. Craters and traces of impact decorated the ground, with parts of the battlement entirely gone. The siege tower Viv had seen was making its merry way up to them at a snail pace, looking mostly intact besides some singed planks. Archers shot out from its interior.

Back on the roof, both sides stood quietly in what appeared to Viv as a veritable storm of mana and soul pressure. She had made sure to be at the extreme right of the formation in case this turned into a slaughter, but even there, the sheer power of the men and women around made her head hurt. Meanwhile, the enemies of a fratricidal war of thirty years eyed each other with frozen faces. Thirty elite casters and knights of the fourth step and above, practically demigods. Tarano was the first to speak.

"Where is Kune?"

"It's over, Tarano," Sangor replied. "There is nothing more you can achieve."

Viv thought it was a shit idea to say that, just as it had been a shit idea to kill the prince instead of using him as a hostage, but Tarano wavered to her surprise. It appeared that the Nigh King had a better grasp of his enemies than she had.

"He was your nephew," Tarano sobbed.

“And I will bury him myself, but Enoria comes first. Surrender. Spare the lives of your men.”

For one sublime moment, Viv believed Tarano would collapse, that the setting sun of his presence would finally crash down like his dream and dynasty had, but then his eyes swiveled and landed squarely on her.

“You. It is you. I know it.”

Tarano walked in the tense atmosphere and stopped directly in front of Viv. He was beyond fury.

“I do not know how you managed it but I swear on every god that you will pay for this treachery. I do not care how long it will take or where I will find the men but I will come to your idyllic little shithole, and I will destroy everything you ever built, mark my words.”

Viv stood her ground. She opened her mouth and uttered a single word.

“Excalibur.”

The ray of concentrated annihilation smashed through the weakened side of Tarano’s armored torso, rending his heart and most of his chest.

Lost Heiress (3/10)

All hell broke loose.

Viv raised the most concentrated shield right in front of her and felt her mana drop precipitously. It broke long enough for her to see Tamar’s furious face. She cast a quick net spell but it broke against a transparent shield. She jumped to the side and blocked something that pushed her back. The roof shook and collapsed under her feet. She slipped, grabbed a ledge. It exploded under her fingers. Viv fell into the abyss below.

Chapter 96: Isekai, day zero.

Maradoc, God of Secrets and Travelers, laughed his ass off. He picked the memory and weaved a tiny construct around it, sending the precious moment on its way to an old friend.

Farther in the city of the gods, a temple of august appearance stood on a secluded square at the edge of the cloudy abyss. Columns supported its roof, but no walls masked its interior for righteousness had no need to hide during peacetime. Hundreds of swords decorated its sandy interior, all of them engraved with the name of their owners, all of them plunged deep in the earth to keep vigil until the world ended. A lone figure in golden scale armor trod its ground. He repeated a series of sword strikes with unerring precision. His foot landed exactly where it had landed yesterday, and most days for the past thousand years. The God of Righteous War breathed deeply with every movement in his effort to ignore the incessant pinging of Maradoc's message spell.

Only after he was done did he open it. A note on the surface dissipated into his friend's dry voice.

"I was wondering if this counts as righteous?" the message asked.

Neriad watched the memory. His divine sense spoke of an interrupted truce talk.

"Ay, what the fuck?"

Time slowed down once more in that characteristic way adrenaline has of fooling people into believing they had a chance. Viv's path improved her casting ability when she was in danger and such was the case now. Coating immediately covered her body in a black, protective layer, even as she twisted on herself to see the ground below. Even as she knew that it wouldn't do shit.

Oh gravity, if only Newton hadn't invented you, Viv thought bitterly as the ground grew closer and she flailed her arms ineffectively. A little twist let her make sure she would land feet first. With a little luck, her femur would smash right through her brain and spare her a long agony.

And then she wasn't falling so fast anymore. Her course changed, leading her away from the rock at the base of the keep and towards considerably flatter ground.

"I'm... I'm flying?"

"Squee!"

"Oh. Thank you!"

Mother needs to get wings soon.

Eat more spider.

Grow strong and scaly!

“I don’t think it’s possible, Arthur.”

Mother must believe in herself.

Viv’s answer was interrupted by a series of explosions above. A quick glance showed the Wing of Dawn instinctive caster fly around a group of levitating loyalist mages, pelting them with spells while dodging others. Circles appeared in mid-air along sword blows that seemed to extend impossibly long distances. The fighters were mere flickers, passing each other with thunderous clashes. The deployed mana bloated space around the roof in a colorful conflagration that Viv had no way of following. It was like watching Dragon Ball or something. But soon, reality reasserted itself including the realization that a full half of those men would kill Viv given the chance. As a cue, a large patrol of archers ran up from the edge of the nearby forest on an intercept course. At least, they hadn’t tried to kill her yet. It was time to bluff.

“Let’s scare them!”

Fear She Who Feasts On Spiders And Gets Much Gold!

Viv channeled raw black mana through her shoulder blades conduits, allowing them to escape harmlessly in an imitation of tattered, hellish wings. Twin void blades emerged from her hands. At the same time, she pushed as much effort as she could in her intimidation.

Arthur roared.

Viv’s threats died on her lips. Probably for the best since it would have been along the lines of ‘behold your death’ or another equally cheesy villain one-liner. The Enorian officers screamed ‘Break!’ and the archers scattered, which let Viv land more elegantly than she expected and take off at a dead run, and not a second too soon. Her perception spoke of a powerful spell at her back. She dodged to the side and her coating took care of the debris.

“Get her!” Tamar screamed, “She murdered Tarano... and the prince!”

“Lies!” Viv sputtered as she sprinted, “slander! Calumnies! Defamation!”

It felt unwise to stay and argue Tamar’s claim was factually incorrect. Viv reached the edge of the forest and dove under a powerful sniper shot. Another arrow clanged against the shield on her back, pushing her down and letting her dodge more arrows. Screams of ‘Get her!’ echoed behind. The woods here were half-tame with clear paths leading deeper in. She followed them.

A cold part of her mind assessed her chances. The loyalists were fighting a battle of extermination. Without leadership, they would fall before the night did, but Viv was at that

moment behind their lines and they were really disappointed in her life choices. The best option was to rejoin the separatist lines and hope Sangor didn't hold grudges.

Viv moved as fast she could, infusing her armor with destruction when her instincts told her to. One of the archers behind her was incredibly good, able to shoot her calf through two trunks by sound alone, even if she took care to change direction randomly to avoid straight lines. The archers were following and they were faster than her, the jerks. Arthur hung overhead.

Pesky!

The dragonette blew a flame and Viv heard swears but no screams of pain. She raised a few eldritch walls on her side to provide cover and threw a few mid-range nets herself. That gave her a little breathing room, which she used to complain aloud.

"I swear it's one fucking thing after the other. Did I want to be involved in Enorian politics? Fuck no. I even saved a damn village. But what will people remember? The ravaged countryside? My fault. The battles? My fault. The execution of the defenseless crown prince? That's right. Who gets blamed for all the shit? *Exactement, c'est bibi.Oi!*"

Viv turned on herself and drew a shield at the same time. The massive arrow disintegrated with a hiss while the movement destabilized her, sending her crashing on the loam. She was up in moments. A series of nets brought no reply but no more arrows came for now.

"I just wanted to get to fucking Helock!" she screamed into the woods. "Is that too much to ask for? Huh? MERDE!"

French was a bad sign. She always reverted to her mother tongue when she was under pressure. Another arrow coming from the other side did not help, but this time she got a lucky hit and someone died a screaming death.

"Fuck off!"

Mother angry.

I regret.

Should have burned more humans!

"Errrr it's fine."

But too many colors.

I am confused.

All humans look the same!

So I did not attack.

“It was the best choice, and I am very proud.”

“Squeeee!”

Athur left and the woods started to burn behind Viv. The witch kept moving, trying to angle herself to the left where the path would loop back to the separatist lines. Arrows still came on occasion but only from the left side and far away, far enough away that she could anticipate and block them easily. At some point, an artillery spell landed close enough to shake the ground under her feet, but it was difficult to say if this was aimed at her general direction or just an unlucky deflection. Nevertheless, she kept going until she was sure, very sure, that she was behind the separatist lines. The din of battle faded. Arrows had already stopped falling. It was time to rejoin the lines and hopefully find Marruk and Solfis again. She turned resolutely left and walked.

And walked.

And walked.

Late afternoon turned to dusk. Viv used the bright spot of the setting sun piercing through the dense canopy to make sure she was actually going east. The reddish light cast the empty woods in a bloody light, one that contrasted strangely with the vibrant green of the thriving trees and the mana they emitted. Still, there was no sign of the road she had to come across going east.

Night fell.

Viv quickly found shelter in a recess between two roots. She made sure the place was insect and snake free before settling down. She had a blanket but no wood to build a fire. More critically, her water flask was empty. It should be fine, probably. There had to be wells around Green Edge.

Arthur did not return, but a part of her soul knew the dragonling was fine and so she didn't worry. After setting a few alarm spells, Viv fell asleep free for the first time in over a week. The ground was not exactly comfortable, but she found she didn't care.

Viv woke up with the dawn. A strange, multicolored bird sang a dirge, then disappeared into thin air before she could inspect it.

Arthur had not returned yet.

The air was crisp, loaded with the heady scents of dew and fresh sap. Mana here was powerful and vibrant, mostly brown and life but to levels she had not seen since... since...

Oh shit.

The witch packed up and decided to walk east because it would always be a good idea. A strange instinct guided her step, one she recognized later as the survival skill. She didn't find

water, but she did find black berries on a bush after ten minutes of an active stroll. They were sweet and delicious.

A bear-like creature with a dotted brown pelt took a look at her mid foraging and sat on its haunches, waiting for her to finish. She ate her fill and left, making sure to keep her distance. A few moments later, growls of contentment echoed from behind. She didn't stop. Her athletic and survival skills were in the intermediate range and helped her know how to walk and where to place her feet for maximum efficiency. Her ears guided her to the chime of water around noon until she found a small pond, its water slightly murky. A tiny spring fed it from a sheer cliff above it. She filled her flask and killed an eel-like creature that thought attacking her back was a good idea.

[Farvale snake. Quite dead. An ambush creature that both poisons and strangles its prey. Sneaky.]

"Not sneaky enough for me!" Viv declared as she cut its head.

Snake was, well, it would probably be okay if she found a way to start fire. An insane dude from Guyane had offered to teach her how to do it with just wood two years and an eternity ago, but she had declined on account of the skill feeling useless. Joke was on her now if the Enorians had confiscated her fire stone which would be at the bottom of her backpack if she were lucky. Gods she hoped it wouldn't get to trying to ignite branches.

"Maybe if I turn the stick super fast with the finesse thing?"

Meh.

There was always flint if she could find some.

The witch kept going east until the ground slowly started to climb, refusing to face reality. Brown mana increased, but it was lined with black mana above what would be normal for even marshes. Wary, she observed her surroundings. The sky was mostly obscured by leaves, but what she could see was blue and cottony white. The trees felt healthy enough, though they grew malformed the farther she went. Eventually, she reached a clearing.

The scent of rot assaulted her nostrils. It was pungent and acrid, though thankfully not as disgusting as rotten flesh. A large tree occupied the center of the meadow, towering above its surroundings like a wounded titan. A long, black, oozing crevice marred its ancient bark. The tree felt incredibly old to Viv, its trunk squat and bottom-heavy as it sat at the top of the incline like a portly grandma. The heavy boughs surged in every direction, heavy with thick green and golden leaves. Above, the sun popped out from behind a fluffy cloud and bathed the clearing, then Viv was looking at a buried colossus with an incredibly wizened face and terminal bed hair.

The light shifted, and the impression was gone, but she was sure the thing was alive, somehow. She inspected it.

[Nascent brown elemental. Not dangerous. Ancient. Dying. Mana font.]

Viv's eyes widened. This was an elemental? A freaking elemental? She wouldn't have to turn into something like that, right? What were black mana elementals anyway? Giant skulls? She had no idea. She was led to believe elementals were rare, so this was surprising. On closer inspection, the healthy part of its bark rippled with pure mana. The lattice was so dense and harmonious that it appeared to be solid.

It put the damage in perspective. Most of the rot was concentrated along the crevice where a pulsated black mass was lodged, a presence Viv found revolting without even getting closer. It appeared to patiently dig into the elemental with slow inevitability.

It also felt like an idiot trap.

Inevitably, Viv would want to help. Annihilation felt amazingly well-suited to the task of clearing that nasty thing from the tree's beautiful surface, but there had to be a catch. Magical pus would drip from the wound and cover her in a slimy coat, or maybe the corrupted mana would spontaneously explode? Whatever. The best choice was obviously, obviously to walk away. She had no need to save the elemental. She didn't know if she could help at all. She was a medic, not a gardener. In fact, she was no longer a medic at all. Besides, doctors would be the ones to take care of that stuff, her job was to stabilize and make comfortable.

Dammit, it didn't work. Just looking at this majestic plant and then at the gangrenous gash marring its surface bothered her to her core. If she walked away now, the sight would hound her until the day she died. She had to do it. Had to. It would most likely be fine. Maybe it was fate.

Now resolved, Viv decided that she would still be as cautious as possible. She dropped her bag and snake on the ground, manifested the sneaky cloaky (would have to try and rename it at some point), placed her shield in front of her, put her helmet on, and walked forward with her dagger out.

The effect was immediate: she felt intensely silly.

"Hello?" she asked, just in case. "Anyone?"

No reaction, not that she expected much. The inspection skill had returned 'not dangerous' so it felt unlikely the elemental would spontaneously sprout legs and walk on her. Nevertheless, she progressed slowly and made sure to look everywhere including up and down. The sky was clear of flying menaces. Earth under her feet was gorged with mana but otherwise inert — that she could tell. No anomalies.

And then the tree cracked. A new gash opened in its midst, making Viv jump. It opened so slowly that she had all the time in the world to take a few step backs and hunker down.

Viv realized it was a mouth when the thing spoke.

The void blade cut through the entire body, more an impalement than a slice because the grub was too fast for her meager, barely inhuman reflexes. A spasming mess of jagged spikes grabbed her shield. She pushed it away, but not before something traced a fiery line on her left arm. The beast shrieked and retreated, then it whipped its body and Viv suddenly got a faceful of bleeding flesh. She could not breathe. She was flying. There was blue sky and obsidian spines, still writhing in their death throes. She pushed it away and made to stand. Hard to breathe, jaw hurt, probably smashed by her own weapon. She was bleeding a bit. Something tried to worm its way into her conduits but she subsumed most of it as well.

A third of the grub laid twitching on the ground, severed at the damaged link.

The rest of it was still there, now missing a few sections. It spat black projectiles at Viv in quick succession but her instincts told her those were spells and her sneaky cloaky took care of those even without infusing it with meaning. More spells followed with Viv sending nets in return. The creature impossibly dodged many of them, but those that hit still carved lines through its carapace. It seemed it was leery of another attack, a mistake. Mid-range fast stuff was where Viv excelled.

Another spray of ichor and the grub screeched. A normal animal would have fled, but this one was a greedy jerk. It dove underground once more and Viv flooded the ground under her feet with black mana, but this time it didn't touch anything. The grub hadn't gone for her. She looked around, wary.

The black mana returned to her, pushed back by the surging brown except in one direction. Suddenly, more brown mana concentrated on a spot somewhere to her left but still in the clearing, moving sideways. That was... of course, the roots. The roots were still the elemental, and it was helping her by marking the insect. Probably.

The spot kept moving slowly, circling her. Viv decided to bet that it was indeed the elemental showing her the enemy and prepared a little something. So far, she had been unable to hit the creature's bloated underbelly because of its great mobility, but catching it off guard would grant her one chance. She concentrated and created a large bolt spell, then added a rune for direction change. She was ready.

Viv flooded the ground again, this time towards the spot. Earth seemingly drew her in, accelerating the overload like a ditch swallowed a wave. She hit something sinuous and vile. It surfaced. Viv threw the bolt.

The powerful annihilation projectile arced down and through the manaless ground, losing some power but catching the creature under its chitinous armor. The beast twitched at the last moment and Viv almost missed, but a supreme effort of will angled the spell into its soft target. It damaged an entire side of the creature. A deafening screech forced Viv back. Putrid innards spilled on the green meadow. It stank like hell.

Viv prepared another spell but failed to cast when her instincts screamed something was wrong. The creature was yelling far too much, wracked by revolting contraction. More of its insides joined the glistening pile of offal with every move while the stench grew unbearable.

Viv kneeled and hid behind her shield and squinted, not sure what was going on or if it was wise to intervene at all.

Then the grub exploded.

Viv screamed like a child, then screamed again when slimy rain pelted her shield. The rest was thankfully absorbed by the sneaky cloak.

When she opened her eyes, she was met with a scene of devastation. There was yellow, disgusting stuff and what looked like an eye on her shield, the vile layer hiding many of the sigils. The clearing looked like the aftermath of a slug migration. Tree looked fine though.

Viv swallowed her disgust and hopefully nothing else, then took a few steps forward. There shouldn't be enough grub left to feed a sparrow. She would still err on the side of caution.

Nothing moved.

After a minute, the elemental groaned again, but with a distinct tone that evoked relief. A powerful wave of mana washed over Viv who let it. The scum on her shield disappeared, and when the wave faded, the clearing was pristine.

Acuity reflex: Intermediate 2

Danger sense: Intermediate 2

Focus: 39

The alerts didn't surprise her. She had spent hours of captivity meditating and reflecting on her spellcraft and this was merely an application of her progress. Her toolbox remained sadly uninspired, but she could take pride in the fact that she was really good at what she did. It was just unfortunate that what she did was murder. Oh well. It could have been her smeared on the ground instead.

With the crisis over for now, she took a moment to inspect herself. The simple dress she had worn on her escape was comfortable and easy to move in, but it was starting to be a little dirty and there were gashes on her left shoulder and, now that she was checking herself, her back as well. Probably one of the claws. It was weird how her coat ignored her clothes but disintegrated everything else, though she suspected intent was key. It was good too or she would have been in the nude now. Her walking boots were fine, at least. As for her cuts, they were all closed. Her jaw felt fine as well. Viv suspected the tree had something to do with that. She checked her status anyway, something she hadn't had a need to do in a long while.

Current status:

- Dehydration (very mild)
- Poison removal aftershock

She used the inspection skill on poison removal and got a vague fever and nausea feeling, nothing too daunting. She had a few gulps from her canteen and lamented not drinking more from the spring, but the snake had spooked her.

A quick glance at her shield showed that it was completely intact. She was okay. Time to check on the tree.

The wound was still here, but now it looked like old damage instead of a pus-filled necrotic sore. The bottom of the crevice shone a vibrant green as well. She inspected it just in case.

[Nascent brown elemental. Not dangerous. Ancient. Recovering. Grateful. Mana font.]

All good, or at least as good as she was able and willing to make it. And now for the reason why she had come here to begin with.

“Right. Sorry. I want to climb you.”

It was most likely fine since the tree was grateful. She jumped and used its crevices as handholds. Viv had never been much of a climber but this was easy, and would have been even without stats.

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooh?” the elemental, well, groaned. A few boughs moved, facilitating her way up until she climbed the last, highest branch. She sat between two extensions and looked around. It was exactly what she had expected: the depths of the Deadshield Woods to the horizon.

Well, too late to lie to herself now. The Deadshield Woods had faerie-whisked her into its heart.

She knew it, of course. The powerful mana concentration and general feel of the place had warned her. It was technically possible to get lost over vast distances if one stepped away from the road, or if one went too deep too quickly. Looked like it had happened to her.

She had tried to get to Helock. Only tried to go to college. Seriously. And her grandpa had complained about walking a kilometer in sub-zero temperatures to get to school, the delicate old baggage. A hundred years from now, she would gather her descendents and tell the little twerps they had it easy. “In my days, you couldn’t become a freshman without ending a civil war by killing off one side’s royal family to the last man!” she would tell them. They would probably roll their eyes and say “Moooooooooom grandma Viv is rambling again,” or some such. But she would not be joking, it would have been that hard. Because she was going to succeed.

when they drove north for the weekend. She mentioned that time her brother Damien rode a horse for the first time, babbling with excitement during and for three days after the outing. She mentioned playing games online with Gevaudan and Framboise, and how the taciturn boy would always work out the optimal way to play but still mess around with the two girls. She talked about her school and kissing her first boyfriend.

At some point, the fruit ran out. It was now early afternoon on that slow planet. The air was still pure. Birds tweeted in the distance. It was wonderful.

But Viv had to go. She slowly stood up and realized she felt better than ever before.

Power: 18 to 21

Finesse: 21 to 23

Endurance 26 to 27

Oh wow.

You have reached a milestone! You can now wear armor for extended periods of time without tiring. You can carry more weight.

Nice. Not super useful to her right now, but nice. Her power was now slightly below that of an experienced laborer, which was good for a path that didn't rely on it at all. Her nature of outlander really helped, and she had only been here for a bit over one year. That fruit was amazing, though she suspected she wouldn't get such an opportunity again. It wasn't every day one got the blessing of an elemental. Something else drew her attention and she obtained her general status.

Current status:

- Mana channels (mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck
- Draconic Surrogate Mother
- Flexible constitution

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 28.9%

The flexible constitution was new. A quick inspection informed her that it would help her function better as her attunement improved, helping her organs keep working. She would still die, though. But that was nice as well. Now, she had more time to act, and she would feel better while she did so.

Viv wasn't sure what to say. It was a princely gift. A life for a life, to some extent. She faced the old tree and bowed.

"Thank you for the gift. I have to leave, but I will always remember this moment. You have my gratitude. And goodbye."

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh," the creature replied with benevolent finality.

Viv found her backpack, her dead snake which she would have to dress very soon, and set out.

Chapter 97: Merls

There was something about walking downhill on a full stomach with a slight wind and the scent of sap in the air. Viv was backed by enough stats to give her an olympic shape. It felt like being alive, especially after that last few weeks. Viv decided to push her vague annoyance at getting sidetracked by luck and her worry for the others aside for now and enjoy the moment. The weather was nice; the birds tweeted; all was well. She did have to kill a strange burrowing insect thing that tried to bite her foot off when she passed by, but honestly it made a funny noise when it died and gave her a tiny brown core so that was okay. She walked for hours, comfortably making her way over large roots and through thickets. If something snagged at her dress or when the underbrush grew too thick, it was only a matter of using her machete equivalent which was, in this occasion, disintegration-charged black mana. She even found bushes thick with tasty red berries for an afternoon snack.

A swarm of wasp-like things also found her because their nest was right above the bush, but a coating and a werfer took care of that. Sadly, there was no honey to be found and the queen might have dripped with mana but Viv wasn't eating that raw. Still, all in all, five stars.

"Where were you all my life?" she whispered to the tendrils coiling around her body.

It had become very easy to manifest and control mana outside of her body so long as it wasn't too far. Honestly, she would be fine just leaving manifestations trailing behind her but she had enough problems without also being taken for a tentacle monster. Also it felt a bit

obscene, like hanging around with one's tits out. Mana was supposed to be kept inside until used.

She had a slight fever when night fell and checked her health, but she only had the poison removal aftershock thingie and assumed it was normal. She set up in a small recess near a rock and used her knife focus to dress the snake. Dinner was snake skewers with grilled wild onions and some more berries for dessert. By some miracle, she still had some salt tucked in one of her bag's pockets. An alarm spell, an insect repellent, and she was set for the night.

The stars were nice. Viv wished she had a book to read and could make some light. Shaping exercises occupied her for a while, then her mind wandered to Solfis, Arthur, and Marruk. Come to think of it, it was the first time she was alone, truly alone, since she had left Harrak. Solfis had become her companion the day after she arrived and then they had stuck together for a year, never apart for more than the time it took to murder an annoying bishop. She didn't find her new isolation restful. For someone like her who had trouble getting along with others, her recent companions had been a true blessing. It didn't really take her mental energy to hang out with them. They could all spend an hour with each other in silence, just doing their thing.

She missed them.

Her bond to the dragonling showed the little rascal was alive and well. As for Marruk and Solfis, she was marginally confident they were okay. Marruk had money in the bank as well, not to mention the dependable Kark had already crossed half of the human lands before. She had been weaker then, so there was hope. Honestly, they were probably better off without Viv and her stupid tendency to attract problems.

The outlander fell asleep, woke up in the middle of the night for no discernible reason and had a snake snack, then woke up again at the crack of dawn feeling refreshed. She used her water to wash her hand and face, finished most of the snake and walked for fifty meters before finding a feathered skull hanging from a branch.

It had belonged to some boar-like thing if the tusks were any indication. The empty sockets glared at her as the grisly ornament swang lazily in the morning breeze, multicolored feathers fluttering. It didn't look super fresh.

Viv froze in the middle of the path, and reflected that it was indeed a path that looked kind of traveled since the brambles had been cleared. Her mind raced to quick and perhaps a little premature conclusions.

This was an artifact.

Artifacts meant tool users.

Tool users always lived in tribal units of several individuals, or at least they did on earth.

Those tool users were territorial because this was a territorial marker.

Therefore, they were a bunch of dark gods-worshiping cannibals. It had to be, with the way things had been going so far.

The witch took a step back, turned around, and decided here and there that she was giving the place a wide berth. The path she had followed so far ran straight east through two small elevations into a rocky patch of land filled with steep inclines and narrow passages. It took her part of the morning to go around from the north, and when she did, she found another clean passage that also went east and also bore a marker. That one consisted of a bird skull with a branch running horizontally through it, and from which hung transparent stone beads. Viv swore under her breath and kept going north until noon when it became pretty clear she was being followed.

She had been careful but had not tried to hide her tracks. She had absolutely no doubt that a hunting path would let someone follow her, even if she took pain to erase the tracks she left behind. Her knowledge of forestry didn't extend to stealth and running through tree branches was for ninjas and powerful Hadals. The curious thing was that her pursuers made no effort to disguise their presence. Branches cracked loudly under their limbs, and sometimes she believed they were moving bushes on purpose. She even heard squawks.

Maybe they were trying to flush her out, push her forward into a trap.

Viv decided to stop in another clearing with a sheer rock cliff at her back and make a stand. It was probably better to face foes while she was well-fed and rested because she sure as hell wouldn't outrun people who were familiar with the forest. There was also the remote possibility that these were not hostile. She had to try. She also didn't have to be stupid about it, so Viv traced a large defensive circle and inscribed a few runes on the loam, mostly defensive ones in case they would try to shoot her. A few risen eldritch walls would cover her flanks if she decided to run farther north or west, back towards the elemental. Placing herself in the middle, Viv sat down and settled to wait. It didn't take long.

First came excited whispers and croaks, then someone made a very loud noise that sounded like a lecturer clearing his throat, if the lecturer were thirteen. A tree at the edge of the forest shook violently enough that Viv thought the newcomers were trying to uproot it, then a long, gangly figure emerged from the shadows.

As far as Viv could tell, it was humanoid and also probably male if the lack of breasts was any indication. He was rather short and very thin but not in a way that felt unhealthy, more like the species was naturally less muscular than humans. His skin was gray-brown and covered in white paint dots, with long arms ending with three digits each. The strangest thing was its head, which was definitely avian with an actual beak. As she watched, the strange being tasted the air with a flicker of a pink tongue. Two large blue eyes settled on Viv with what she felt might be fear, or trepidation. The colorful feathers covering his skull shivered. The creature stopped when he saw Viv had noticed him and took a few steps forward with his hand well in evidence.

Besides ritual paint, the creature also wore a sort of skirt held together by a leather belt wrapping several times around his narrow hips. A knife sheath hung from it, though it was currently empty. There was also a bag at his back.

The being looked back, holding his hand together. He must have received some sort of encouragement because he made an exaggerated, extremely nervous yawn gesture that would not have convinced a group of toddlers. With one hand held in front of him, he slowly reached for his back and brought out two small, round things that looked like dumplings.

He picked one and bit into it, slurping its contents loudly then throwing the rest in his beak. He chewed a few times while maintaining eye contact, let out an equally convincing 'HMMMMMM' then promptly left the second dumpling on the ground, gesturing grandly and taking a few steps back.

"Are you trying to tame me?" Viv muttered with disbelief.

She felt like a member of an ancient civilization being offered a chocolate bar by a single-planet monkey species.

Oh yes, she could inspect.

[Merl pathfinder apprentice: not very dangerous, one who guides hunting parties to their prey and then back safely, navigating the dangers of the forest. Fast learner.]

His species was merl, okay, good to know. He was on the first step, which meant that she had met a juvenile. He did look quite young and rather naive, because he was within fuck-you range of a war caster.

She stood up and grabbed the dumpling, to which the juvenile hooted something back towards the treeline. She bit into it and moaned in pleasant surprise. The dumpling contained meaty, delicious stew with what felt like roots and fresh vegetables. She slurped it and, following the example of her strange companions, bit the rest. It was dough of something earthy with juicy bits. Pretty nice. As repayment, she left a few strands of snake meat and her last berries on the ground. This led to much excitement from the young pathfinder.

Viv was flabbergasted. If she'd been naked, okay, sure, but she was clearly wearing knit stuff, a steel helmet and she had her round shield on hand. Nevertheless, the strange reaction was encouraging and she suspected that the merl didn't mean anything by it. He was probably just an idiot.

Said idiot squawked words (she assumed) of encouragement back, and finally coaxed his companion from cover. It was also a merl, a female if the crossed bands on her chest were any indication. While the boy was boisterous and daring, she was clearly circumspect, her posture hunched forward and her orange eyes focused on Viv. The witch decided that scaring teenagers wasn't her idea of fun and waved at the girl. This sent the boy into a state of great excitement, and he soon stood to walk around the clearing, gathering twigs. The girl

raced back to the forest and returned immediately after, carrying weapons in her thin arms. She hesitated but Viv just shrugged and she soon sat nearby, still spooked.

Viv used the break to study her while the boy squawked excitedly.

[Merl harrier apprentice, not very dangerous, one who harasses large prey during hunts and otherwise catches food with traps. Detail-oriented. Vigilant.]

She was also first step. Before Viv could draw a conclusion, the boy returned with enough wood to start a small fire. He tried to speak to Viv who made obvious signs she had no idea what he was saying. This didn't deter him in the slightest.

Viv considered leaving. She had an inkling they wouldn't stop her, but they seemed friendly enough and she doubted teenage woodsmen were well-versed in the subtle art of deception. She had a relatively good feeling, for now. She would keep her eyes open on the off chance they considered human sacrifice the height of hospitality.

The boy dressed and cooked a small bird, accepting Viv's offer of salt with hoots of delight. Meanwhile, his companion checked the weapons. There were knives made of bones, spears, and strange, green flexible bows decorated with stones. The girl picked her own and held it in her feet.

And then Viv blinked.

And she realized that the boy was picking more twigs without bending. They had prehensile toes? It seemed like they did! She watched with interest as the girl drew her bow with her arms, then by holding the bow in a foot and pulling the string with both hands, which caused the wood to groan. Viv could see the muscles tense under the girl's naked skin. It was quite interesting.

Eventually though, the girl admonished the boy for something, probably speaking non stop, and the boy considered her words. Then, he looked like he was having a brilliant idea which put Viv on guard. The boy showed her his thumb, which ended in a small claw, and focused. A few drops of transparent liquid dripped down from the tip.

Ok so he had resorted to cool tricks. She had been promoted to toddler.

That also really felt wrong, somehow. The girl agreed and pinched him with her own claw which made the boy squeal in alarm, before realizing he was fine. Viv knew what it meant. The merls had poisonous thumbs. A chilling, horrifying realization sent a wave of fresh terror down her spine.

Humans were closely associated with great apes.

Merls had poison, avian characteristics, and apparently produced milk since the girl had breasts.

Ergo, the merls were a species closely related to the platypus.

If there were still any doubt Nyil was a gods-forsaken joke of a planet, this confirmed it.

Heedless of her great distress, the two bickered amicably, then eventually presented her with a tender and delicious wing which she ate with patience since it was quite hot. They were mid-meal when Viv felt an aura approach, and the sounds of more squawks echoed through the branches. The aura flared, signaling its approach to Viv's senses and she flared hers once in return. A patrol of merls stopped at the edge of a clearing, led by a much taller one wearing an elaborate, well-knit blue garment, decorated with glyphs. He had graying feathers on his scalp and stood with dignity, hand clasped over a mage staff. Viv tasted gray and brown mana on him, mostly. He bowed to Viv, who returned the gesture. The two kids used the opportunity to scamper.

[Merl Prophet of War. Proficient battle caster, slayer of men, beastling nightmare, unbreakable, leader of merls...]

Ooooh shit, she hoped he was friendly. Fourth step, and not a peaceful one either. He would probably pulp her against the cliffside if she engaged.

The man spoke a few words in a language Viv recognized as that of the northern cities, but she didn't understand it. At least she remembered enough words to tell him she was not fluent. He nodded and switched to Enorian.

"Good afternoon. Before we begin, I would like to know if you are in any way associated with the city of Glastia."

His voice was barely more than a croak. He enunciated every word with care in a way that reminded her of the Yries

"Glastia?" Viv asked, "In the north, right?"

"Yes."

"Not to my knowledge? I've never been there."

"Are you a lost traveler then?"

"Yes, I'm trying to return to Enoria."

To her surprise, the old one sighed in relief, his shoulder drooping a bit under the slightly ratty cloth. He approached, his escort milling around hesitantly. Viv noticed that they all carried flexible bows, spears, and some sort of uniform made of wood and feathers. Bird feathers, not their own.

"My name is Tweek. I would like to offer you the hospitality for the night, and tomorrow a pathfinder will show you the way out of our domain and to the Hidden River. It will lead you out of the woods."

Sounded better than trudging around looking for a path.

“My name is Viviane and I’d be delighted,” she replied, and the use of proper etiquette seemed to make the old man happy.

“Then let’s go, there isn’t any tea here. Speaking of, I need to teach the future of our tribe about following a war caster and then offering her unseasoned bushwing as a gesture of friendship.”

Tweek stood up, called the two kids who came sheepishly, then he whacked them on the head. The whole group departed after a tirade delivered in a calm, low voice. It reminded the outlander of her mom promising small Viv a shiny red ass once they’d returned home after a morning of misbehaving. The threats always carried the weight of what the fiery woman would do behind closed doors, far from the eyes and ears of a judgemental public. Viv shivered.

“They noticed your tracks after leaving our lands. Two followed and one returned to warn me. All three of them should have returned, of course. They are first step. If you had been unfriendly or easily scared, things could have gone poorly,” Tweek explained.

“No harm done on my end, at least. I assume you have very few humans here?”

“You are the first in a long time, and the first since we came here.”

“Wow, then how is your Enorian so good if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I will tell you the story tonight,” he replied with a smile, “it’s a bit long. Why did you assume there were few humans?”

“Your pathfinder tamed me with dumplings.”

Viv snitched on the poor lad but kept her tale humorous. Tweek was obviously embarrassed, but Viv’s good mood soon led to a sort of hissing sound Viv assumed were chuckles.

“The younger generation have never met humans. Please forgive them. And thank you for not reacting too strongly. Some others would have taken liberties with us.”

“No problems.”

Viv was tempted to say she had worked with Hadals and Yries before, but one of the lessons her dad had taught her was that you can’t say anything wrong if you shut the fuck up. No need to volunteer information that could land her in hot waters since things were going well so far.

The trip back was uneventful. Tweek inquired how Viv was managing, and the witch explained she had found berries and ambitious snakes. The old merl promised her food and they arrived at the edge of his species’ land.

This part of the wood was craggier and more vertical, with many canyons and corridors separating elevated rock formations. At first, it seemed empty, but the group soon came across the first dwellings.

The merls lived in wood houses built on stilts across chasms or by the cliff, with bridges allowing them to cross the gap. Garland-like vegetation formed natural roofs. They sagged with fruits and vegetables ripening under the early summer sun like colorful ornaments. Meat and pelts hung from driers while Merl women moved adroitly across the place, babies strapped to their backs. They used their prehensile feet to travel with as much grace as if they were on flat land.

The people she came across looked at her with wide eyes and some measure of alarm, but they relaxed when they saw her companion. Strangely, it was the older folks who glared with suspicion.

They came across several more such farming villages on their way deeper into the territory. Viv saw a lot of bone tools but no iron. It also seemed like the merls liked their colors a lot. They didn't have anything like cornudons but they did keep birds as cattle, possibly for eggs. The tallest of the men were around Viv's size, and they were lithe and graceful. They were, however, a bit slow on the ground. Viv had to take smaller steps to match the others' speed.

The path led higher soon.

It was late afternoon when Viv arrived at the merl city.

"Sikoua. It means peace at last," Tweek commented.

Hidden in a recess of the mountains, Sikoua occupied an inverted cone plunging deep in the mountain flank like an ancient caldera. Hanging gardens criss-crossed its width, loaded with flowers and the occasional platform. Workshops and dwellings dug into the cliff displayed wares and drying laundry. The squawks of conversations were loud, until Viv was spotted that is, then they were replaced by worried whispers. Tweek gave Viv a comforting smile.

"Please do not take their reaction to heart. Humans are why we survived but also why we almost perished in the first place. One of them is also why we are free."

He pointed at the center of the city, far below, where a simple stone statue stood surrounded by tall trees. It was a man, clearly a human. He had a hand raised in casting or as if holding something back.

"Who is that?" Viv asked.

"Our savior, Sidjin. He was a powerful mage who sacrificed his life to guide us to safety against the wishes of his city. We are in his debt. We will tell you his story tonight! It is a good story."

"Sure."

Viv was led to a communal room near the bottom of the city. This deep, the sunlight was low but colorful mushrooms provided a varied illumination. Cooks grilled or boiled dumplings on nearby fires.

Several important tribe members came to visit, mostly to have a look at Viv and be reassured that humans were not on the verge of invading the place. When night fell, Viv settled on a comfortable couch filled with feathers while a group of juveniles brought a light orb and flat dolls made of carved wood. Food was served, and Viv sat next to Tweek. The old merl gave a signal with clear excitement, checking Viv's reaction all the time. It felt strange but seemed harmless enough, so she indulged him when he served her macerated fruits. It was... not very good, but Viv sipped it anyway.

The light orb was placed in a recess of the wall and activated, so that a circular beam illuminated the far wall, casting shadows of plants held in the foreground by the excited younglings. Viv smiled. She hadn't seen a shadow puppetry show in fifteen years! She leaned forward while the far wall was made into a screen showing a dense jungle covered in liana... and then a hint of mana infused them with color. A light wind caressed Viv's nose, bringing heat and the rich smell of wet earth. Drums and whistles spoke of bird calls and the passage of unknown creatures. A girl sang in merl while Tweek whispered translations into Viv's ear.

"Thick forests, so wet and warm, with lianas making bridges without our help! This was where we used to live. The jungle fed us and protected us."

The trees move apart to show several landmarks in turn.

"Angry old mount Kwehk spat stones to cut and stab."

A mountain appeared with a warm, dry wind.

"Mother Ril gave us fish every day, delicious and white."

The sound of flowing water replaced the roars of falling rocks. Viv got some water in her face and had to cover her drink.

"Our tribe lived in cities across the land, from the southern plain to the bitter waters of the north. Lo! So many ancestors made a name for themselves!"

Several minutes passed with small stories of merls accomplishing great things, mostly through cunning and determination. Those were nicely educational, Viv thought.

"But the jungle did not feed only us..." the narrator continued, and her voice turned gloomy and foreboding.

"The beastlings were here, our hated enemies. A thousand times they assaulted the firebear patriarch to eat his fruits. Their bones covered his orchards, but one day... they won."

The drums formed a low drone, then a slow crescendo as the shapes of clawed limbs built up on one side.

“The beastlings did what they always do: make more of themselves, spread like tree rot across a fruit grove. They fell upon the jungle in numberless hordes and slew its guardians, eating them and growing. Tens of thousands fell from our arrows, but they were as innumerable as ants. One by one, our heroes perished and then it was the turn of our families. The jungle was lost, and we were lost with it. Tweek, the last of our great shamans, drove us south to the plains, to seek shelter.”

Viv’s eyes widened in genuine surprise and considered her companion with renewed interest. Tweek was obviously quite pleased with himself, and for a moment Viv wondered if he was trying to bullshit her, but the respect the other merls had for him said a different story. There was also the ‘beastling nightmare’ title. Only Solfis had a nightmare title. Or rather, he had all of them. The old caster must have massacred thousands of individuals to reach that point.

“And there we found the human city of Glastia.”

The jungle faded, replaced by towering white walls and the call of trumpets. Silhouettes of armored warriors formed tight ranks, pushing the drone away, but it did not die out.

“The humans of Glastia agreed to let us in if we fought. They built a second wall around their city and had us stand on it. The merls fought bravely! We kept the beastlings at bay. We bled and we died on those walls, day after day.”

Sad music replaced the din of battle as the merl shapes on the wall disappeared one after the other. There were more accounts of battle, but Tweek’s voice choked in his throat and Viv didn’t get the translation. It didn’t take a genius to guess the merls had been used as a meat shield.

“But there was one who disagreed with our fate. Prince Sidjin!”

Blaring horns announce the coming of a robed man standing heroically next to the remaining merls. The roar of artillery covered the drone of the beastlings and the earth shook enough to force a ripple across Viv’s liquor glass.

“Sidjin fought on the first wall with us, but he saw how his countrymen treated us and defended us however he could. Sidjin brought food and medicine. He brought armor made of cloth and steel-tipped arrows. He was a great man! Until one day, he had enough.”

The drone of battle faded, replaced by a moon-lit night vista. Sidjin stood alone in an empty street, and behind him, a white disk appeared. It soon turned into a doorway to a forest until all Viv could do was whisper.

“Teleportation magic.”

“Yes,” Tweek replied, “he opened us a passage to the forest. We escaped.”

Viv's mind worked feverishly while the play finished. She knew teleportation magic was a thing, of course. Her first camp back in Harrak had been next to an expended teleportation circle, so it was definitely a thing, but she was under the impression it was excessively rare, the stuff of legend. That someone would be able to open one... It would be nice if she could talk to Sidjin, but she was under the impression he was dead from the way Tweek talked. Who would kill a mage capable of opening teleportation gates and pass an entire fucking people though it? Crazy.

And yes, that was a crazy story, and put her own into perspective. Her revolution might have felt like the whole world to her, but to others, the civil war or the beastling tide were the one deciding event of their lives. She was only one among many, floating on the whims of fate, even with her strange luck. The thought was sobering.

Viv clapped when the show ended, something that scared the young ones but caused tweek to laugh, asking his bashful guest if it was a mark of appreciation. Viv's confirmation led him to comfort the young ones while they made their way out, pleased with the show of appreciation from the first human visitor. Viv turned excitedly to her host and gifted him the compliments he was obviously looking for.

"Alright, that was amazing, especially using spells to improve immersion."

"We got the idea from Glastia, but decided to apply it to our traditional shadow puppetry rather than using actors. I quite like it."

"It was breathtaking. I loved it."

And she had. Her genuine smile appeased Tweek who gestured for dessert.

"Did you learn much from the humans during your stay? As unfortunate as it was," Viv quickly amended, feeling callous at the tremendous loss of life.

"Yes. We had met and traded with humans before, of course. Many expeditions traveled to the foot of Mount Kwehk looking for precious stones. Those were just that though, contacts. Living in Glastia, we observed much. For example, the merls only had hunting parties but now we can fight in groups. We also studied agriculture and husbandry to fit it to our needs. A pity we couldn't learn to use iron, not that we have found any around so far."

"And Sidjin? The play said he died?"

"I assume he did, though I cannot be sure. The real story is that one of his brothers bombarded our lines to kill a powerful shaman. Sidjin's merl friend died in the friendly fire. Before that, he had encouraged us to earn our place in human society so that incident... broke him. He felt he had betrayed us with his words. He became obsessed with that colorless magic of his. In any case, we all escaped through the portal he opened during the span of one night, leaving the outer walls completely defenseless. Execution is the most likely outcome."

“Hmmm.”

Viv wouldn't be so sure. A mage capable of opening a portal? She would kill a town to harness his secrets. As she considered Tweek's words, a nagging feeling finally turned into a memory.

“Wait, you are talking about the northern wall, the most recent one. When did this all happen?”

“Five years ago.”

Viv's cheeks inflated from ballooning outrage. They had made it sound like it was a founding myth or something! Tweek gave a squawking laugh.

“Don't be mad at me. Of course I would teach the younglings what I know before old age and braggarts twist it into a farce. We have just been through a... difficult time. Half of those around are too young to remember what we have lost. If Sidjin hadn't taken pity on us...”

He froze, gaze lost.

“You led your people through an extinction event and they emerged on the other side in one piece. That's more than most would have achieved,” Viv replied. She felt it was the right thing to say.

“Extinction event?”

“It's a rapid decrease in, errr, the number of species in a place.”

“An accurate description. Beastlings eat everything that can be eaten, then they peel the bark, dig out the roots, and pull the leaves then eat those as well. The jungle will take a century to regrow after the last of the horde dies.”

He looked a bit sad.

“I suppose this is our home now. In any case, it pleases me that you enjoyed our show. Sidjin was not close to me as he was to the friend he lost, but I miss our conversations. I have had no occasion to practice human languages in a while.”

“And the reason why you asked me if I was from Glastia was in case they would seek revenge for the loss of their outer wall?”

“And the lives that must have come with its fall. I would do it again in a heartbeat, but I can imagine what the First Prince must have said, something about biting the hand that fed. They never saw us as people. If they learn where we are, there is a possibility they would seek revenge. I wouldn't put it past them.”

“I'm sorry. It seems to be a common thing among some of the northern cities.”

“Sidjin mentioned it, yes, but let’s not dwell on that. You have a long day ahead of you tomorrow so I will explain what you need to do. A guide will lead you to the eastern edge of our territory, then it’s only a short walk to the hollow mountain that hides the Hidden River, a subterranean waterway that ends in northern Enoria, or at least this is what scouts reported. They saw humans and left. It will take a little over two days to reach the river and another one to follow it. Perhaps less. You humans are so fast on flat ground. And now, you should rest. I can tell you have been through much recently.”

“Is it that obvious?” Viv asked bitterly.

Tweek silently pointed at the multiple gashes in her dress, their edges still stained brown despite her attempt to wash it off.

“Oh, right.”

“Unfortunately we have nothing your size, but if you wish, we could have it cleaned and darned for tomorrow.”

“Thanks Tweek, I really appreciate it. I have received a warmer welcome from you than from most of the people I have met so far,” Viv remarked, subtly fishing for confirmation that there wasn’t a catch. She could not help but be a little suspicious.

“You are welcome, Viviane, and thank you for indulging an old man. Hospitality used to be a sacred practice among the tribes. I am happy I had the chance to show it again. And I would have a request in return.”

“I will not share the knowledge of your existence with your enemies.”

“Good. I will have one of my sons show you to your room. Sleep well, ‘Lost Heiress’. I hope you find your way.”

He made to leave, the Viv stopped him.

“Wait!”

“Yes?” Tweek asked with a little concern.

Viv bit her lip. Hospitality was, well, he was right. It was sacred. And she had shown up empty-handed. The thing was that she had nothing she could really spare to show her appreciation, but this was it, was it not? The true test of character. Sacred rights mattered the most when they actually cost something.

Viv removed her helmet from her pack and handed it to Tweek.

“This is too much, I cannot accept—”

“You may have just saved my life. I don’t know much about the Deadshield Woods but I know they’re dangerous and it’s not because I’ve met nothing too dangerous so far that it

won't change. It would make me happy to give you this gift in return for your help, and also as a symbol of friendship from the first human you've met in five years. To new beginnings, so to speak."

Tweek's tongue flicked out. It was clear he was tempted.

"Will you not miss it? Is it not a set with your shield?"

"Oh no, the shield is different. The enchantment is for durability only, the sigils you see have been added by people I've helped."

Tweek smiled and Viv knew the unwieldy thing was going to become heavier again.

Chapter 98: The Hollow Mountain.

Sun rose over the Merl territory, its rays timidly peeking over the caldera where they had dug their homes. Viv packed up her meager belongings and enough food to last her a few days, courtesy of her hosts. Tweek sent her off alongside members of his family, including a worried old Merl woman who clung to him the whole time. The lone human was led outside by a Merl warrior with quite a few scars. Just like the older ones, he seemed wary of her.

Viv wasn't sure what to do and stayed silent while they walked through crags and ravines on their way through the mountainous region. The path first climbed the nearest slope, but soon they went through a narrow corridor to find more flat forest on the other side. Well, mostly flat forest.

Vegetation extended in the typical endless green she had come to associate with the Deadshield woods, a sea of fluffy canopies pierced here and there by the occasional meadow, except for one striking feature. Kilometers away in the distance, a lone mountain stood, and on its rocky surface, a face had been carved. A face of colossal proportion.

Or perhaps not. Viv wasn't absolutely sure. Three massive cavern openings resembled two eyes and a gaping mouth opened for a sigh or a scream. Overhangs and peaks could have been bushy eyebrows and a messy beard, or perhaps it was all just a coincidence. It was hard to determine at this range whether this was an accident of nature or the result of a conscious effort. What she knew for sure was that the scale was gigantic. Titanic. Even with earth mages working in concert, it would have taken decades to complete.

"Wow this is..."

Viv was at a loss.

"Hollow mountain," her guide confirmed in broken Enorian. "River there. You follow and see many humans."

“Did you scout the place?”

“Scout?”

“Look see find?”

“We looked, but dangerous. Feel dangerous. We go.”

“Hmm. Anything I should know?”

“Lizards that can hide. Also, old statues near the front. You can see soon. We go quick.”

With this, the guide fell silent and moved on. Just like Tweek had said, night fell before they could approach the peak so they stopped at an abandoned camp nestled between two trunks. They formed a natural arch that protected them from a light rain.

Remnants of past fires revealed that it was not the first time Merl expeditions had used this place. They ate fresh egg rolls and berries the pair had found on the way. The scout also boiled a large mushroom that tasted and felt like a plastic bag that would have been left in the ground for a hundred years. It was probably healthy, Viv told herself as she forced the thing down. With dinner over and alarm spells set, there was little left to do except twiddling her thumbs or meditating, so she tried to start a conversation. Viv wasn't sure how to break the ice, or even what would be appropriate to talk about so she started with the most obvious.

“So... you fought the beastlings?”

“Yes,” the scout replied, frowning with suspicion.

“Beastling shaman's monster?” she asked while pointing at a scar in a last ditch effort to salvage her attempt at socializing.

“Yes! Snake. Very strong.”

He stopped and tilted his head.

“Tasty.”

“And this one?” she asked while pointing at another.

The scout didn't waste this occasion to show off and Viv learned much through a mix of basic Enorian, very basic northern tongue, and wild gestures. His name was Shawak and he had been a child during the beastling debacle, one of those who were called to defend the walls despite being a bit too young. He had also taken it upon himself to barter monster remains with merchants from Losserec for medicine and scraps of food, hence his basic understanding of the tongue. Viv found the exchange's subtext interesting. The merls were quite prideful and cared a lot about their image. Although, to be fair, two male individuals did

not represent a meaningful portion of the population. Nevertheless, Shawak's distrust towards humans melted like snow under the sun as the night progressed and he narrated the grand battle over the wall. It sounded nightmarish to Viv, if she had to be honest, but the merl turned it into a tale of endurance and heroic will. Eventually, she asked him how old he was.

"Ten! My eldest child is already two!"

It confirmed Viv's suspicion that the merls reached maturity faster. It did not say much about life expectancy, however. Stats and paths impacted age, something Solfis had confirmed on multiple occasions. Willpower and endurance played a key role, though there were other factors. Viv wondered if it affected the merl or the kark the same way, and how important the biological factors were. Did mana prevent telomeres from shortening? Was it more metaphysical, like mana just regenerating cells? She had no idea, and without access to research, there was no way to know for certain.

She missed the internet.

The conversation petered out after a bit, especially because Shawak had no questions for Viv. She meditated until it was time to fall asleep. Shawak woke her up the next day at dawn, too early for her tastes, and they moved quietly through the untamed forest.

While Viv tended to go straight and shred every obstacle on her path, her guide preferred to move around them. It made the trip considerably slower and also meant less meat. The witch didn't complain, however. Her approach would work until she met a bigger threat than herself. Then she'd be dead. It was much better to trust a survival expert. Despite the detours, they moved with good speed and reached the base of the mountain in the early afternoon, under a mild cloud cover. She looked up as soon as they cleared the edge of the forest, and had to stop. The face was even more impressive at the base, and due to a trick of the perspective, it felt like its titanic eyes followed her movements. Tiny growths decorated the escarpment, working together to lend the battered rock a semblance of life. It was rather disturbing, moreso because it quickly became obvious that this was, indeed, by design. Stone steps led up the slope from long-overgrown roads, disappearing into the mouth of the giant.

Shawak led the way up. Here, the silence was complete. No birds, no creatures disturbed the otherworldly silence, as if the mouth was screaming and that scream drowned everything else. Viv disturbed a stone. Pebble and sand galloped down to the forest in a tiny avalanche that seemed to echo to infinity. It felt as blasphemous as having one's phone ring at church. Shawak shrugged though, and the ascent resumed.

They moved into the mouth cavern. The air there was cold and wet. She did her best to ignore the needle forest of stalactites hanging overhead like so many teeth. They were geological features, not tools grown to crush her into a broken mess of punctured organs and jutting bones. If she repeated it enough times, maybe she would believe it.

The mood of the place affected her more than her magic-reinforced mind should allow. Something insidious permeated the air. The scout was even more affected. His back was

bent, and he kept reaching for a pendant hanging over his thin sternum. He stopped next to the edge of the cave where the light of the sun still shone and pointed forward, to a side tunnel.

“The river is this way. You go. You take wood and swim!”

And with this, he turned away and ran, literally ran, off and into the forest.

Viv stood there for a little while, letting her eyes get accustomed to the darkness. The mana here felt pretty normal to her senses, with black being more common due to the darkness. Her unease must have come from something else. She was also curious about the statues.

The cave entrance led to a vast circular room as large as a cathedral, expanding deeper into the heart of the mountain. A circular platform occupied the center, now overgrown with mushrooms and obscured by debris. Five columns stood in a half circle facing her. They were each topped by a different statue.

Viv heard the susurrus of flowing water to the side as she moved down but she could not avert her eyes from the ancient stone works. Even the most ignorant goon would guess at a look that those were ruins of a civilization that must have predated even the Harrakan Empire. Her steps led her to the center of the circle. A feeling made her look up to a vertical shaft above her head. It must have let light through at some point of the distant past but it was now obstructed by dead roots. She grabbed in her backpack for a light stone and let it banish the shadows. She inspected each statue in turn.

The first one, facing her, was barely more than a pile of broken rock. The shape of a hand still held a club while two powerful legs supported half of a muscular torso. There were no signs as to whom they belonged to, however, but she did find inert runes engraved into the pillar. She had never met their like before and she decided to commit them to memory.

The second pillar held a familiar, hooded figure under a ritualistic mask. Those were the symbols of Enttiku, without a doubt. The figure was in a much better shape than the previous one, though the writing system underneath remained cryptic. She committed them to memory as well just in case. They reminded her of cuneiform. It was in moments like those that she enjoyed her stats-enhanced mind, otherwise she would have needed a notebook.

The presence of the goddess of death raised questions, but she decided to finish her inspection first and the next statue was intriguing. Getting close, she saw that it was a scantily clad woman with two pairs of wings coming out of her back. Her form was voluptuous and muscular at the same time as if the sculptors could not decide. It took her a moment and some squinting, but the wings finally gave up their answer.

Those were legs. More specifically, segmented spider legs.

Viv had to take a step back. The presence of Enttiku and the pedestals were a clear indication that this circle had a religious function. Her [polymath] skill screamed at her that possibly the whole mountain did. It only left one reasonable explanation.

"Octas," Viv whispered, despite herself.

The air suddenly felt much colder to Viv. The light made her a target, no, this place was dead and abandoned. It had been so for countless generations. She needed the light.

Maybe she was wrong. Turning around, Viv crossed the circle to check the fourth column but the statue on this one was broken so completely, only the feet remained. The last one displayed a corpulent man holding an axe. What looked like Zebra stripes were probably scars, of which he had many. There was only one god known for a large body and unyielding resistance.

The implication was baffling. She had never seen representations of dark gods, but she expected something more ominous like a giant spider or a pile of meat with an eye in the middle, not traditional anthropomorphic figures. Octas was even depicted to be attractive. It was eminently disturbing after having seen the real deal. More curious was the presence of Enttiku with the rest. It was also likely that one of the broken statues was Efestar, but it didn't explain the last one. There were only three dark gods she knew of.

Out of curiosity, she went to stand under Enttiku's statue and offered a prayer. Her prayer drained a little mana and she received a pulse of comfort in return, a hint that when she died, and she would die, and that was fine, she wouldn't be alone. It helped with both her mindset and the conclusion to her experiment. This was indeed Enttiku, and the cave was indeed religious in nature. The conclusion was clear. There was a time, long ago, when the dark gods were worshiped in the open. And Enttiku used to be one of them. Or was it more complex than that? She could not help but notice that none of the current pantheon was present.

The scale of the mountain was also a decisive factor. It implied that a lot of people used to live around, or at least gather here. And it stood forgotten, and had been forgotten for... a very long time. She wished she had a map. She also wished maps had a use in the Deadshield Woods. And she meant that for future reference because there was no way she was going to explore that place right now or any time soon, and especially not alone. A general air of unease still floated around. Whispers came and went at the edge of her hearing. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear the shuffling feet of worshippers, smell the cooking fires of the tribes as they gathered, but that was long ago. Something had broken this place, just as it had broken the statues of the... old gods?

The idea settled, reinforced by the polymath skill. The rational part of her decided that she didn't have enough information to go on. This was mere speculation based on the interpretation of five columns and three statues, an extremely small source of data, yet another part of her could not deny that one does not set up bad gods at the entrance of a major place of worship. It would be suicidal. Shaking her head, she was about to leave when her mana perception picked up something.

A black spot was slowly moving towards her. The shift in mana was barely perceptible. Someone without her skills and tendency to look for ambushes would have missed it. It used black mana as well in a way that reminded her of what Irao did, only this time it was not as good and she could perceive how it was done.

The thing moving towards her warped light around itself in a strange, cloak-like fashion. A quick glance only revealed the far wall and a slight distortion. Viv discreetly used mana to burn a circle on the ground, but otherwise watched, confident in her reflexes. She was learning a lot by merely observing the curious attacker. The stealth effect went beyond light to play tricks with her mind as well, which she found fascinating. Her gaze kept going up and down despite the firm knowledge that something was there. She felt the black mana try to convince the world this spot was empty.

When Irao had demonstrated his abilities, she had found it impossible to adopt the concept of being hidden because she was, she had to admit, noticeable. That had been a mistake on her part. Black mana didn't allow its wielder to blend in, just like Irao could never be taken for a normal laborer in the streets. Instead, it denied the world the ability to find them. It was actively affecting the target rather than subtly hiding the caster. And that made it much more manageable for Viv, for whom getting people to do stuff came naturally.

"Holy shit I'm having an epiphany. Oh, yes. Net!"

Thin, razor filaments emerged from around her to lash at the hole in space and the veil dropped as the monster behind shrieked. Viv noticed black scales and a lizard-like body while ichor dripped on the dusty stone floor. The witch made a snap call that it may not be enough. Her filaments gathered in a blast spell that cut through the beast from skull to rectum. It fell dead. The scent of blood and offal wafted towards Viv.

"And that's that."

She approached the body, which looked like a Komodo dragon dipped in oil.

[Dark-Scaled Stalker]

Nasty teeth on that thing. A pulse of mana attracted her attention and she used her focus knife to remove a small core from the creature's sternum. It was barely the size of her thumb but that was fine. They sold for gold talents. This one was aligned with black, life, and a smattering of minor affinities. She pocketed it.

And turned in a rush, pushing her round shield in front of her. A reflexive blast hit something in the shoulder. It yowled, but its weight smacked into Viv and she was pushed down. A quick excalibur ripped through her attacker's muscular body before it could recover. She fell with a massive weight on her torso. Innards spilled on her dress. It stank like hell.

"FUCK."

Idiot, idiot. Idiot! If there was one, there could have been others. She had let herself be distracted. Her trip through the forest had gone too well and made her cocky. Understanding a concept was useless if she died for it.

Viv pushed the lizard corpse aside and stood up, covered in disgusting fluids. She swore when she realized some of it was her own just as pain let her know she hadn't survived the

ordeal unscathed. She had a gash near her right shoulder and a small cut on her scalp that bled freely. Not alarming per se until she realized her complete lack of medical supplies. The constable's men had taken her mending potions.

"Dammit."

A quick inspection revealed two more wall creatures slowly making their way over from the back of the cavern. Fucking things. She moved to the side where the passage to the river ought to be, eyes opened for more surprises. The tunnel continued only for a little while before ending in another room. Viv blinked when she realized this was an underground pier.

A wide stretch of dark water moved lazily towards her left, deeper into the mountain. The light in her hand could not pierce its surface. A stretch of stone expanded into the river around the middle while stone pillars stood at regular intervals, possibly to moor small rafts. A long plank of wood was the only sign that the Merl had ever been here.

Viv suspected that whatever furniture had been here was long lost, but the stone remained. There were tables set against the wall on her side while stairs led up to her left, signs that the Hollow Mountain truly deserved its name. Viv almost slapped herself when she realized she would indeed have to swim. At least the plank would keep her belongings dry.

She almost jumped in before a groove on the ground grabbed her attention. A few steps back gave her a better look at a construct around the entrance. It was enchanted with a shield construct like nothing she had ever seen before.

"What..."

The construct was three-dimensional. Not even Prince Lancer's carriage had been shown this level of protection. The enchantment used the natural curve of the tunnel to form a double circle of different radius. More interestingly, there were no runes she could see.

She checked the way back. The lizards moved slowly, apparently unwilling to let go of their camouflage. They probably weren't all that smart. A hiss of anger and the sound of cracked bone let her know what was really happening. The lizards were eating their fallen.

Whelp.

With some time for herself, Viv raced through the stairs and placed some alarm spells. She cast another long one around the entrance, just in case something attacked from the river while she was busy. Fuck, this really wasn't a good place to hold, but she didn't want to get into the water without bandaging herself first. On a hunch, she moved mana into the tunnel construct, then more, then more. Almost half of her reserves were gone when suddenly, the construct flickered to life. Runes appeared mid air, ones she was thoroughly unused to seeing: the number six, unity, projection, protection.

A shield set in place then, expanding to form a half-sphere bulging outward. It consisted of hexagons fused together. Each shield fragment was semi-independent from the rest. Viv's contemplation was cut short by the feel of something warm dripping down her shoulder.

“Right. The bleeding.”

The witch had to salvage most of her small cloth and both of her sleeves to tie her arm to her satisfaction. She had used water to clean it, but knew it wouldn't do much in this dirty environment. And it would require stitches. And it would probably scar. She looked at her left arm, where the dragon-shaped burn scar remained from Arthur's first flame breath. Nyil was leaving its mark on her.

With her last breast band firmly held against her scalp wound, the witch focused again on the shield. Truly, it was a thing of wonder. The key runes had been dug inside the stone in three dimensions by an insanely talented earth mage, then projected outside by a projection rune. Could it be that modern Paramese had forgotten past techniques? Or maybe she hadn't seen its like because she had never left boonies.

As for the shield itself, the hexagon structure was a fascinating design decision. She could see from the way the tiles were arrayed that some could fail and the structure would survive. If a tile was attacked, it would offload pressure to the surrounding ones as well. It was an extremely efficient, extremely resilient design that sacrificed size for survivability. It was perfect for small passages or personal protection. She had to make her own, had to. It was just too good to pass.

The witch focused like never before, trying to extract the heart of the spell so she could use it herself. Redundancies were removed. Range got further reduced. Parts of the spell were designed to absorb great blows by moving with them, something that wasn't needed right now. Slowly, the vital elements filtered into her mind where they remained, waiting for completion. Viv stopped twice to check that she wasn't bleeding out and once to see if any lizard was approaching. One was, but it was on the other side of the shield.

It took her half an hour of constant effort, but eventually she managed to reduce the complex shape into its simplest components. It was there, her mind, ripe for casting. She ordered the symbols in her mind and they appeared, dark and familiar around her. The structure reminded her of something she had seen long ago at a honey sale. The idea settled into her mind.

“Hive.”

A black-colored ball manifested around her.

It was... magnificent. She could control each and every facet, directing power to them as needed. Her experience with the coating spell easily let her handle the many elements, even if it was significantly more taxing than a more simple shield. She exulted.

Lost Heiress (4/10)

All her regrets of not getting to fucking Helock without distraction disappeared before this amazing discovery. There was only one small, tiny problem though.

She could not see through the shield.

It was completely black and blocked her line of sight.

Oh well, she could find a solution later. It was nothing compared to the excitement of studying something obviously exotic. If she could learn from this... how many more constructs waited here or in forgotten corners of the world for her to find them? Maybe Harrak hid a treasure trove of secrets even Solfis had not been taught. Proprietary constructs and spells... The possibilities were... intriguing.

Viv turned her eye to the entrance when a flash of tongue momentarily disrupted the black mana cover of a lizard. It was smack in front of the entrance, but the presence of the shield obviously confused it. Viv took the opportunity to examine the creature more closely. Paradoxically, the shield blocked her mana perception, which meant that she had to rely on her willpower alone to track down its movements. The struggle against the monster's instinctive use of the 'stealth' concept sharpened her own, forcing an understanding through confrontation. It took an hour, perhaps, but eventually she felt her soul vibrate in harmony.

It was not stealth, but denial. Denial of light and attention, denial of the world. Black mana could remove things temporarily just as it removed others permanently. It could remove her if needed. She gasped with the epiphany.

Lost heiress (5/10)

Her soul pulsed and the lizard turned and fled, its own coating bleeding from its body like melting paint. She could do it. She could hide.

"Sneaky Cloaky."

For once the stupid name reflected reality. The world dimmed around Viv. Swirls of darkness wafted from her dark-clad form and she felt ever-so slightly that the world was paying less attention, which made it a real surprise when something screeched very, very loudly. The ear-shattering scream paralyzed the escaping lizard and Viv. An intense pressure crashed on her, backed by the most evil will Viv had ever felt. Even the Herald of Octas had not felt so vile, so destructive. She made to move and realized she could not. Her heart beat a crazy staccato while her lungs labored to find more air. She tasted bile down her throat. She was aching to flee, but her body wouldn't do that one last step of contracting muscles. Whatever

creature had screeched went far beyond anything either her will or the cloak could possibly negate. She was going to die here in this dark, hopeless place.

No.

It was all over.

No.

She did not stand a —

No!

Viv pushed back against the foreign thought. This wasn't her. She had to move. She had to move now! One step back, and she collapsed on herself. Her elbow hit a rock. It went numb. The familiar pain woke her up. She crawled to the nearest plank. It was all she could see and all she could do because the world was under the dominion of something terrible and only hiding or crawling would save her. The wood was grainy and wet under her fingers. She dipped in the river. The water was shockingly cold. Its icy grasp freed a bit more of her mind, barely enough to hear the lizard's whimper when it saw something it shouldn't have. A ghastly crack silenced the beast.

Viv let the current carry her away but could not stop herself from watching the entrance. A blood-splattered, white arm the size of a small tree pierced the static shield as if it were wet paper. Its clawed digit swept across the room languorously like a child looking for chocolate. The stone groaned. The creature was too large for the opening. Viv knew exactly what it was before she inspected it.

[Necrarch: :LETHAL, caster, cunning, Men Nightmare...]

Viv cut the skill before the information could flood her mind. She needed all the concentration she could get. A shiver shook her body and terror filled her heart when the creature sampled the air. It chuckled, the sound vicious and pitiless. It whispered one guttural word. Black mana flooded the room; it searched for Viv; it found her. It tried to invade her conduits.

It did. The thing was simply too powerful.

Viv fought it off with everything she had, claiming the sweet poison for herself. She was getting away, deeper into the lightless flow. The roof was getting lower above her head. Already, the creature was out of sight and still the spell persisted.

Her chest suddenly hurt.

You are suffering from mana poisoning.

You are suffering from cardiac arrest.

“Ah.”

The spell was fading. She had to hold on, fight it off. She wheezed pathetically in the dim light, one hand holding the shining stone and the other the plank she had grabbed. Her core converted the foreign mana coursing through her conduits as fast as it could even as cold sweat covered her brow. Finally, the last of it disappeared. She checked her pulse.

Nothing.

“Ok, bad bad bad.”

It wasn't even arrhythmia, there wasn't a beat. Compressions? Compressions. Viv placed a hand under her breast and pushed. The angle was wrong. The water reached to her chest. Changing tactics, she punched her side instead. Still nothing. The water slowed her fist down even with her improved strength.

“Come on, come on, come on.”

Desperate, she started to push with her leg to bob out of the water with every punch, just to give them some more impact. Her ribs screamed in protest. Her head started to swim from the increased oxygen consumption but her determination kept her focused. She would not die now and certainly not so stupidly, not after learning so much. Not before Arthur reached her majority. Viv roared and used a burst of strength to slap her side. The pain stole her breath, but the reward was immediate.

You are no longer suffering from cardiac arrest.

Willpower +1 (39)

Okay, okay that was better. Slowly, the pain in her chest faded away, replaced by wariness. Not dying right now. Or at least, not quickly. She swore when she realized that her bag had been in the water from the start and still hung from her back. She placed it on the plank to dry, hoping that the insulated outer fabric had kept the contents dry.

It was cold here, and silent. The waters moved placidly along. Viv's breath slowly calmed down until she was mostly back to normal except the small, tiny problem that she had almost died. Again.

A flash of white, corded muscle reminded her of Harrak, of the first necrarch she had seen. That one had been dumb and feral, unlike the abomination that almost killed her. Fuck, for all

her abilities, she was still small change before those freaking monsters. Still the same scuttling thing looking for an exit. And Solfis had killed two of those with his true frame? Insane.

Viv took shuddering breath after shuddering breath, pushing the panic down for now. She would be fine. She was fine now. The necrarch had been too large for the opening and the river ended so far away she would be safe. There was nothing in the water or it would have eaten the Merl scouts. unless it could taste her blood in the water. Fuck. Ok, calm down. Calm down.

Viv changed her grip and winced. her shoulder and head hurt. She felt feverish, but that was probably the mana poisoning. A quick glance at her naked hand showed black veins and pruney skin. How long had she been in the water already? That long? It felt like just a couple of minutes.

Slowly, adrenaline faded. It was replaced by exhaustion. The witch placed her head on the plank and fell asleep.

Viv woke up with a jolt and panicked. Her blood-crusted fingers closed on the light crystal, causing feeble yellow light to dawn in the darkness. She was trapped. She was in water. Raw dark stone covered the sky.

Oh yes, the underground river.

Okay.

Food.

Her backpack yielded a slightly soggy egg roll. It was cold but good, and it settled her. The merl had mentioned that it would take a day to exit the cavern but they had probably been swimming and she had merely floated, so she beat her legs and moved on. She didn't dare change the bandage on her shoulder or clean her crusted scalp, so that would have to wait until she found a more salubrious environment. A tiny voice reminded her that the stalker lizards looked like Komodo dragons, and those killed their prey via septic shock, but she silenced it. Besides, the bacteria were in the komodo dragon's mouth and she had been hurt by the lizard's claws, so there. She inspected her shield. It was, once again, pristine. No hint of damage. The merl had added skin and feathers at the back. It felt a bit more comfortable in her hand and would also soften the blow the next time an attack sent the heavy implement into her jaw, which would definitely happen, the way things had been going so far. Viv took the time to wash off most of the congealed blood in the stream with the rationale that predators would taste the lizard blood anyway so a little Viv seasoning on top wouldn't make much of a difference. Then, since she had nothing better to do, she paddled.

She kept paddling for a long time.

At some point, only the passing low roof over her head confirmed that she wasn't stationary. Thank the light gods for her strong grip because her sanity might not have survived hours of darkness without the light stone. The trip was still a grating experience that eroded her spirit as the hours went by. She thought her ordeal was soon over when the cavern opened, but it was too soon and she knew it. Instead, she found a cavern. It was not very big and apparently devoid of life. The river cut straight through the middle, with the shore entirely blocked by stalagmites. She still smiled because she was seeing light. It was a nice fuschia and radiated out from a peppering of crystals nestled inside the stones, so that the entire cave shone like a disco ball. The effect calmed her down further, even as she left it behind. She paddled with renewed vigor and told herself it helped practice her core. The thought was silly and made her smirk.

After what felt like an eternity, she saw a pink light in the distance. The sound of rushing water woke her up from the semi torpor she had been in. The roof gave way to a dawn sky with high clouds. She swam to shore, only to realize her feet reached the bottom and she could walk instead. There were trees and bushes around. The air smelled of sap and growing things again.

In front of her, the river joined a body of water so large the opposite side was still covered in fog. She approached it and tasted the liquid under her finger. No salt. There was only one lake that size adjoining the Deadshield Woods: Lake Hydon. Losserec would be a few hours away on the south side.

The sun rose above a distant mountain and bathed the world in warm light. A bird tweeted.

Chapter 99: The Taste of Freedom

The shores of Lake Hydon were not sand, but fat stones made round and cozy by eons of placid current. Viv's boots made sloshing sounds as she moved forward at a sedate pace through the clear waters, avoiding the thickest underbrush. There was no hurry. The sky was blue and pink with no hint of rain. Mana had also returned to the levels she expected from populated lands. The flows and eddies of the wild woods had settled into the tame pulsation she associated with her travel through Enoria. In the distance, she thought she could see the tall gray towers of Losserec. Chimney smoke trailed up from a much closer point, beyond some trees to her right.

Viv knew she was not metaphorically out of the woods yet, and she kept an eye out towards the trees. The presence of a nearby settlement indicated that there were no major monsters around since those tended to be quite territorial. Nevertheless, it only took one stone to the

skull to become beastling food so she kept her guard up and her shield on her arm. The thing was rather heavy but by the gods was it durable. She poked at it. The many symbols adorning its face helped remind her that, although she was alone right now, there were plenty of people who knew her and had appreciated her enough to try and keep her alive.

It took a good hour of traipsing through shallow waters and the occasional patch of bulrush before she finally found a fishing spot. There, near the water, a small structure stood, barely large enough to protect someone from the rain and store the odd wicker basket. She followed the small trail inland until midday, stopping to eat one of her last eggrolls. Her relief was immense when she came upon a palissade. The village had small patches of leafy vegetables growing around its walled buildings. The plants were protected by traps, if the dead harrien hanging limply from a snare was any indication. Viv looked around and saw that a young man was bringing buckets of water to the field. He was poorly dressed and a little thin. A straw hat hid most of his features.

[Laborer apprentice: not dangerous, one who works hard to learn a trade. Dull. Determined.]

Well, time to meet the locals. Viv took a few steps forward to be visible and announced her presence.

“Hello.”

The young man yelped and turned, stumbling on his bucket. He fell, while their content spread to drown a nearby lettuce. Viv showed her hands in the universal sign for ‘I am not trying to kill you just yet.’ It took a few seconds for the lad to stop hyperventilating.

“Please do not be alarmed. I am just trying to find my way to Losserec,” she said in the most calming voice. Her leadership skill radiated soothing energy until her would-be host stopped shaking.

“Right, sorry,” he said.

Viv waited until he stood up and tried to brush off his trousers. Unfortunately for him, wet mud won that duel. He walked sheepishly closer to the solid gates and stopped, eyeing the edge of the forest with suspicion.

“Errrr, you’re alone, right?”

“Yes, as you see.”

“Oh, alright. Let’s go see my Ma. She’ll have my hide if I don’t finish watering the garden.”

“Got marauders around?” Viv asked to make conversation.

“What? No. Very calm around here.”

‘Ding ding ding’ went the alarms in Viv’s head, but she quieted them for now. Why would a boy ask her if she was alone if there were no marauders around? Because he had some

common sense, Viv's more civilized aspect answered. Even in safe towns, it would be unwise to open your doors to strangers. She settled herself and watched the young man open the gate by unlocking a wood mechanism, probably something to keep the wildlife at bay. She followed him in but kept her shield fastened to her forearm, just in case.

What she had taken for a village was really more an estate, all of its buildings cobbled together from local wood in a rather poor fashion. Even the half-buried house of the unnamed spider village had been better made than those, though there was certainly order and cleanliness. Viv judged that whoever had settled there didn't have the skills and knowledge to build a house and had tried their best anyway. Another garden filled a quarter of the courtyard, with an outhouse and garden shed sitting against the outer wall. Some of the small ostrich-like creatures she had seen in Kazar walked in an inner courtyard nestled between two one-story structures. It smelled like shit, which was expected when the main fertilizer tended to come out of assholes. A man was chopping wood with precise strikes while a woman hung clothes on a rope. Another was leaning against the wall of the largest block, right in front of Viv. They all stopped when she arrived.

She didn't like the glint in the eyes of the leaning man but that was fine so long as he kept his hands to himself. She was just passing by.

"She's lost. I'm bringing her to Ma," the boy explained. The pair just stood silently while the leaning man pointed a thumb at the door next to him. A couple of steps made of stone and mud led up to the least rickety part of the compound. Viv followed them to a large room filled with tools and bags made of dried plant fiber. A few leather rucksacks and barrels completed the warehouse look. A door to her right led farther in while a large desk – if one were lax with the definition – occupied the back of the room. Behind that desk was a corpulent woman with gray hair. She was inspecting an iron bit between two fingers.

"A lost traveler, Ma." the leaning man said in a mocking tone.

No. No, fuck that, Viv said to herself. She coated herself in the sneaky cloak right as her danger sense informed her something was coming from behind. The woman's face, which had turned into a vicious sneer, now displayed an expression of intense fear.

"She's a mage! A mage!" she yelled.

Viv kneeled and called the newest spell in her collection. Something smashed into her protected neck and disintegrated as it came.

"Get her!"

"I'm trying, Ma!"

"Hive," Viv whispered, and the small bubble of hexagons closed upon her like an egg. Something else smashed against it with no discernible result. It might have occurred to Viv that she was not truly in danger. In fact, many things could have occurred to Viv if she had been in any state to pay attention. Instead, she brought up her status to check a single line,

a lonely piece of information she had to confirm before doing anything. Her mind wouldn't let that go.

Divine spark: luck

Viv read that line again and again, thinking something would change. It didn't.

"Okay. Okay, that's fine." she whispered. "That's just fine."

Something heavier hit the shield, but the sturdy spell destroyed that as well.

"Go get fire, anything! Kill the bitch!" the woman screamed outside of the bubble.

"Okay," Viv repeated.

She weaved another two glyphs into the construct, one for expansion and the other for split. She eventually added explosion for good measure. Outside, more people were screaming and trying to kill her. She gave her status one last look.

"Okay, if there is some sort of god of fate watching me right now, this is my way of telling you to stop," she whispered.

Then she took her frustration at being trapped in a spider invasion, the delay in her trip to Helock where she is still hoping to find a way to survive and possibly find out what happened, her anger at the little hunter's betrayal, her annoyance with Tarano's sexism, her outrage at her treatment, the terror of facing the true Necrarch and shoved it in the spell. The hexagonal plates shook with the added pressure and the overload of destructive black mana. Tendrils rose from her form, hissing in the air. The spell hummed.

Viv let go.

"Shatterstar."

The shield blew up outward, each pane sent out with the speed and destructiveness of a missile. Viv heard the typical hiss of black mana doing what it does best. There were holes in the ground, in the wall, neat, hexagonal-shaped ones. There were three in the pair of men around her. The leaning man's chest tilted to the side and collapsed before the legs gave out. Another one, she had not seen before. He was tall and quite fat with a truncheon in his hands. He was missing his head. This, Viv observed in an instant as she turned to face the last threat. The woman was holding the ruin of her stomach, gurgling curses. The trained part of Viv's mind knew she could still be dangerous, but most of her attention still swerved towards the quickly opening door to her side. The lock had been destroyed. It was the larder.

One carcass she recognized as a deer-like monster. The second was also missing its limbs and head, but its skin was pink and greenish. Small breasts rose on either side of the long

gash opened to remove the entrails. Ribs under the taut skin spoke of someone who had missed a meal or two. A tattoo adorned its flank.

Viv took a deep breath, it hissed in her lungs.

“Not okay. This is not okay. I am not okay.”

The gurgling sound of the dying woman turned into something else. Viv saw the ravaged skin bubble into new, cancerous flesh, a hell of abscess and chitinous plates. The woman's face was already turning into a maw of serrated teeth but her eyes were still conscious, for now, and they spoke of a hatred beyond words.

Viv cleaved down with her Excalibur spell, cutting the aberrant in half before the transformation could finish. The gurgling stopped.

She made sure she was unharmed and that her shield was properly strapped.

Her vision swam, but only for a moment. Had to push it back. There was something to be done. Absolutely had to be done. She stepped outside, hunkering behind her weapon. The boy who had led her was waiting by the steps, his mouth opened and eyes terrified. He died first. There was a hunter with a bow entering the compound. He drew on her, but Viv's net was faster. The man managed to dive to the side and avoid the first spell, but not the second and not the third. He managed to shoot once and missed by a meter. Viv moved on, sticking close to the walls. She heard footsteps. She moved to the side and back and the axe man lost his throat and both of his legs. The woman who had been hanging clothes screamed and turned to flee. Viv severed her spine then mercy-killed her with a spell through the head. Someone swore on the other side of the courtyard. Viv saw an old man with graying hair from a half-shuttered window, eyes bloodshot. He dove to avoid her spell, which destroyed the shutter and some furniture behind. Viv lost visual contact.

“Werfer.”

The wood wall lasted less than half a second. She kept going, but felt exposed. A woman came out of another entrance with a desperate scream and threw something, but it bounced against Viv's shield. She cut the woman in half. The old man bellowed in anguish. Viv knew where he was now, right behind the wall. She threw a blast through it and him. Blood flew in a geyser. It left a spray on another shutter. A freezing cold spread across her chest. Viv knew it wasn't a physical wound. Just... she was not really okay and this wasn't really okay either.

Viv kicked the door from where the woman had come in and breached, shield held up. It was a kitchen. A pot bubbled on a fire. Viv didn't check its contents. The next room over was a barn of sorts, and it smelled like bird shit. A man was sobbing near the entrance, hidden from view, while another shushed him down. She cast two blasts at man's height. A corpse fell with half its chest missing but the other missed, its target having crouched. She saw the top of a hat from the hole it had left behind. A fork clattered on the ground and the young man ran. He got in her field of fire. The first net caught him in the waist and the second

silenced his cries. She went through the wings of the compound methodically but found no one.

Viv stepped outside. The white noise in her head was so loud it eclipsed everything else.

The place was silent. Expanding pools of blood spread across the savaged corpses in crimson halos. The ferric smell was potent and familiar, overwhelming those of the farm. There was an outbuilding. She decided to secure it. On the way, she heard someone whimper in the outhouse.

“Werfer.”

Only a few planks and a pair of shoes remained, the legs severed mid-calf.

Viv walked to the outbuilding and smashed the door in. A chorus of screams answered. Shield up, she moved in. Many targets, stationary. An excalibur would work well. The power filled her hand, molding to her will. Black mana sang in her veins.

Something else filled her chest, not the cold detachment of anger beyond anger, but a warm yet foreboding filling. Golden light reflected in the eyes of the young girl shielding the children.

The light pulled her from herself. She let it because it was familiar and friendly. She saw herself from the other side. The Viv there was a harbinger of doom and terror, a killer whose aura terrified those around at thirty paces. It spoke of powerful talons, of impenetrable skin, of an unbreakable will and a cloud-like breath that would destroy anything in its path. The Viv in front of her didn't have a pleasant, diplomatic smile. Auburn hair didn't rest on her shoulders. Her stained dress and missing sleeves, her bandages had disappeared under a nightmarish armor the color of the abyss. Dark spikes emerged from its surface and danced at the whims of an unseen current. Some of them angled towards her would-be victim. Her green eyes were the only visible parts of her body and in them, there were no signs of mercy. The monstrous woman bore a steel shield covered in unknown sigils and she wielded a blade of pure dark energy. The girl's family was dead. The green-eyed calamity had slain them where they stood, like the avatar of vengeance the girl thought might come one day to punish them for their crimes. The girl only wished the children could be spared, but she knew, looking in those emerald stones, that they would not.

Viv saw herself and the golden light faded, but with the last spark came a tired request.

STOP.

Viv stopped.

She blinked.

She pulled the draconic intimidation back in.

Neriad's will had come and gone and she felt more herself. There were five children in front of her, four of whom couldn't be older than ten years old. They were utterly terrified and mewled pathetically. It smelled of piss. Her gaze crossed that of the older one, the only one with a hint of defiance on top of the terror.

"Run," she ordered, then she turned around and walked out. Right in time to see a man grabbing the dead hunter's bow. In his teary face, Viv saw hatred and despair in equal measure. Then she saw surprise.

"SkraaaAAAAA!"

The assassination attempt on Viv's life ended with a faceful of pissed off dragonette. Arthur bounced to Viv with eagerness, her improvised landing pad not having survived first contact with the enemy.

"Ma petite chériiiiie," Viv gushed, dropping the cloak to hug her timely savior.

She bent out of habit but soon straightened when she realized Arthur's head rested on her shoulder without issue, though the dragonette stood on her hind legs.

"Wow, you grew up again."

Spider queen.

Delicious.

Helps.

I am biggest and strongest!

"Maybe one day. Right! Let's get out of here, but before that I need to wrap things up. Arthur?"

“Squee?”

“See that house there?”

“Squee.”

“Burn it to the ground.”

The dragonling jaw hung open, though stars shone in her eyes.

Whole.

House?

“To the ground.”

“SKREEEEEEEEEE.”

Viv let Arthur go incendiary on the accursed place and kneeled on the ground. She used black mana to carve the holy symbol of Neriad into a nearby stump and prayed, immediately feeling the drain on her mana as it was offered to the God of Righteous Combat.

“Since you seem to be paying attention,” she said, “or at least enough of it to make me spare cannibal kids, I’d like you to tell whoever’s responsible out there that I have a message. The message is simple. I have had it with the civil wars, succession wars, gender wars, assassination, coups, and power grabs. I am fed up with the monster attacks, the beastling tides and whatever fucked up thing that tree worm was. The necrarchs and abductions and politics and intimidation and mad races under the moonlight can get fucked as well so now I want to make it absolutely clear that I FUCKING HAD ENOUGH. I am going to have a NICE and RELAXING journey to Helock or I swear to fuck the first thing that stops or sidetracks me will get a disintegration ray the size of a Redwood shoved up a natural orifice so filthy the dark gods themselves wouldn’t touch it with a ten-meters-long rusty poleaxe am I making myself ABSOLUTELY FUCKING CLEAR? HUH?”

Nothing answered but the blazing inferno of the dragonfire-wracked cannibal den. Viv coated herself in mana again to block the heat and left, the scaled menace by her side, like death come to punish the sinners.

Far up in the City of the Gods, Neriad stood flabbergasted at the message he had just received.

“But... I had nothing to do with any of it...” he complained.

Meanwhile, Maradoc believed he had found his most entertaining outlander to date.

Viv left the burning compound behind her, having spared the outbuilding where the kids lived and, hopefully for them, enough to survive and reach the closest city. She couldn't be arsed to care about the little shits. They were already lucky not to be screaming minced meat like their previous protein supplements. With the way to Losserec clear, she followed a beast trail due east, only stopping to drink a bit. Arthur was exceptionally protective. No spiderweb escaped her vigilance. More than one squirrel perished between her mighty jaws so they wouldn't threaten Viv with accidentally dropped nuts or something. Viv appreciated the thought, and the incredible babble of explanation that came with it.

I breathe fire on people behind you!

I am behind you!

Then, you are so far!

I know.

So I fly fly fly.

Flap wings very fast.

Only stop for seven snacks and one bath.

Saw a big bird!

But it didn't see me.

Sneaky dragon!

Did mother see the big bird?

It was so big!

Looked stringy.

That spider tasted weird.

Oh, pretty flower!

I saw a big tree and smelled you.

But you were gone.

Tree says you were here an instant before.

Senile!

Then I find a mountain.

But you were gone!

And I flew over you.

But couldn't see.

Searched searched.

Ooooooh, what is that thing?

Blegh, it stinks.

Found mother again.

I want meat, can we have meat?

“As soon as we're inside the city, I'll get to the bank and then we can have some food and a proper bath.”

If mother... if mother needs gold...

Arthur looked despondently at her pouch, nestled preciously between her claws.

I could... lend you some.

Arthur blinked back a tear of horror at the horrible idea.

With small interest.

Moved by her incredible sacrifice, Viv provided scratches.

“I should have waited before explaining that. In any case, parents should lend or give money to their children, not the contrary. I will accept your proposal only if we cannot get to the bank.”

“Squee!”

“No, we cannot burn it.”

The dragonling's presence brought with it a sense of normalcy that took away the shadows of what had happened. Viv realized she had fired, no, cast, same difference, on fleeing people.

She had almost killed children. That wasn't acceptable, even if they had consumed human flesh. They were not responsible for their actions. She had just gone into a dark place, something that had never happened before and should not have happened period. Her high mental stats should have protected her. Or perhaps they had, but she had been through a bit too much, a bit too fast. She didn't think there were therapists around but she did know she needed a serious break from all the bullshit. Hopefully, Losserec would provide that. She knew Helock could be reached by river ship from there, so a nice eventless cruise might be for the best.

Near noon, Viv was warned of the presence of humans by songs. She reached the edge of the nearest copse and found the end of the forest. A meadow appeared before her, a calm expanse of nice grass with a couple of open tents protecting long tables from the summer sun. Women danced in two concentric circles around a smiling one crowned in flowers, her dress long and well made. As she watched, the music accelerated and the circles swapped, the inner dodging under the extended arms of the outer. They moved clockwise, then back. Some swirled and clapped. The song was a joyous one, wishing the bride much success in Enorian. Men were drinking and playing a distance away around a pair of duelists planting wooden swords in pillow armor. Everyone seemed to be having a merry time around the clearing.

First, one of the women noticed Viv, then another. Her presence soon brought the dance to a stumbling halt. The normalcy, and apparent wholesomeness of the situation had been so weird, so... just not what the world had been for a moment. Viv took a step forward and showed her empty hands for the second time that day. A matronly woman approached her, with a fist gripping her skirt close.

Friends?

"Maybe? Be nice," Viv said. She used the opportunity for a quick inspect.

[Wise woman: not very dangerous, one who follows the way of the physical and spiritual healer. Minor caster. Life mana user. Resilient. Observant. Pillar of the community.]

The woman came close enough and gasped.

"My poor dear, what happened to you? Come with me, quickly. Are you safe? Are you being pursued?"

"Hmmm I think I'm safe and I don't think I'm being pursued."

“Come here, come here. Estrella! A chair and my bag, thank you. Irelle, bring me some boiled water, quickly. The rest of you lot better continue that song. And you dear, come. We will take care of you.”

“Hmm. Thank you,” Viv said, taken by surprise by unexpected kindness.

“Is that a marsh drake? Lord Selok has one, in the city. Expensive beast, I heard.”

“She took good care of me.”

“Good, good, pets are family, I always say. Sit there. Let me have a look at you. ESTRELLA! Ah, here she is. Silly girl. Except the head and arm, are you hurt anywhere?”

“Only scraps and bruises.”

“Let’s see everything. Do you want to eat something? Some meat? We have spit-roasted deer.”

“I couldn’t eat a piece of meat right now, but Arthur might want some if it’s no problem.”

“Squee!”

“Aw she’s adorable.”

The girl called Estrella dropped a massive cotton pouch filled to the brim with supplies and dry herbs on the table.

“The men are here.”

“Hmph,” the matronly woman eloquently replied. “Give me a moment, dearie, old Sanle will make sure we’re safe.”

The conversation happened outside of the tent, and could be summarized in the local patriarch asking questions and Sanle telling him to check the perimeter and otherwise leave Viv the fuck alone. Viv took the opportunity to realize that she looked like absolute shit. There was a large scab in her scalp, she had no sleeves to speak of, and a large bandage protected her arm on top of quite a few minor lacerations. Her dress was absolutely ruined and covered in several layers of dry blood.

Sanle returned with a washbasin and started with Viv’s head, checked she didn’t have a concussion, then moved to the arm. The wound had bled quite a bit and it was red and angry. Some pus stuck to the filthy cloth. Sanle cleaned everything thoroughly then grabbed a very thin bone needle with some thread. All the while, she had been smoothly interrogating Viv about her circumstances. The witch had no problem telling her about being lost in the forest following a battle, then monsters inflicting the wounds. She shivered at the memory of the necrarch.

“I need to seal the wound shut before I cast, or else you will have a large scar.”

"Hmm, fair warning. Life mana doesn't work very well on me," Viv said, and seeing Sanle blink, decided to elaborate.

"I have a strong affinity to black mana."

"I see? I didn't know it worked that way, although I could tell you were a caster from, well, please don't be alarmed but I have inspection as well."

Viv did nothing, and when the woman realized that she started to work on stitches. Viv endured in silence. Estrella brought her tea, her eyes widening at the sight of the wound. Viv had a sip and found it nice and fruity.

"This isn't your first wound, it seems," Lanse commented idly. She finished and decided to wait until everything was clean before trying to cast.

"It tires me a lot, and it will tire me more if your body resists me."

The matron returned to cleaning the last few cuts on Viv's back while the witch had some more tea. She should have checked if there was poison but to be honest, if the old woman wanted to poison her, she could just use an unguent or something. Viv had to calm down. This was civilization.

"Look you have been evasive but as far as I can tell with my skill, truthful as well. If you have secrets, you can keep them. I don't need to know. I'll help you anyway."

"Even in times like these?" Viv asked with some surprise.

"The war never reached Losserec. The borderlands have it tough, we only have higher taxes this year but the harvest has been good. Besides, it's almost over now. The tyrant's army surrendered at Green Edge. His majesty Sangor is taking cities as fast as he can reach them. He will occupy the southern capital before the harvest festival, it is said. And you are a witch. The other side doesn't employ witches. As I said, you can keep your secrets or you can share but no matter what, I'll send you on your way to the city."

"Are you sure? I could be a criminal," Viv retorted, unable to accept any kindness at face value right now.

"Criminals don't have the lingering aura of Neriad about them, dearie. I am not the strongest but I can see very well."

The old woman nodded to herself and Viv found that she believed her. It was the same with the inquisitors, who shared a similar skill. They could tell no falsehoods themselves.

She decided that she wouldn't share who she was because she saw no way that would benefit her, but she would tell the woman about the cannibals. They lived only a few hours away and the smoke of her fires ought to be visible already, or would soon be visible. It was better to give her version first.

“I was attacked before coming here. An estate by the river. They tried to kill me and when the door of the larder opened...”

Viv let her emotions twist her traits. It was better to appear genuine than tough here.

“There was a woman’s body, or what was left of it anyway.”

“Are you sure?” Sanle whispered, horrified.

“Completely sure. Young woman. She even had a tattoo near her flank, something like an anchor. I didn’t have a good look.”

“Sardanal’s mercy upon us I knew there was something weird with those FUCKERS.”

Sanle stood and approached the tent’s flap. She gave a few orders to get the local patriarch coming. Viv felt kind of bad for ruining the marriage but, well, cannibals.

A short explanation later and the village sent a runner for the local lord, especially after learning that Viv had left survivors. Honestly, it didn’t look like anyone would have regretted her wiping them out, but Viv had to draw the line somewhere. Besides, as she told Sanle, the children could corroborate her tale. The use of a complicated word made the matron frown.

“Right, let’s see if I can close that nasty gash you got. Could you pull your aura in?”

Viv did so. It just required her to push her mana down her conduits towards her core. It wasn’t difficult, just unpleasant.

Despite her efforts, whatever mana Sanle managed to pull failed to make her flesh comply. Viv’s body remained soaked with magic, and what was hers only let itself be pushed languidly, like a sleepy tiger consenting to moving only after much coddling. Sanle stopped barely a couple of seconds after starting.

“I cannot do it. I will collapse before I have closed half of those. You, my dear, are powerful.”

Viv realized the woman had never asked her name. It was an interesting decision.

“Would alchemical healing work?” the matron inquired.

“It has so far.”

“Oh, good.”

Sanle retrieved a small mending potion from a pouch and applied it with much care, first to her arm and then to her head. Viv was healed.

“Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it you poor dear. Have a quick wash and then join the party. They must have exchanged the vows by now. It’s time to eat!”

“Squee!”

“Oh what a clever little girl you are, yes we have meat for ya. I’ll have it ready, don’t you worry.”

They brought her warm water, soap, and a change of clothes. Estrella barged in on Viv mid wash with clean shoes and blushed, which was not expected. Finally, she was invited to the feast. The married couple welcomed her and jokingly asked her if she was a good omen. Viv elected not to reply so she wouldn’t traumatize the poor darlings.

“The bride is my granddaughter, Nissa,” Sanle explained with pride. Viv gave the expected compliments.

Somehow, the sight of her clean and healthy while Arthur ate meat with all the dignity of the baroness relaxed the guests. They kept offering her apologies and well wishes.

“I always said those were some good for nothing dark gods worshippers!” a white-haired busybody growled at her, “Just like that scoundrel my nephew married. From Koltis. Whores and thieves the lot of ‘em!”

“Yes, grandma, why don’t you have some more liquor?” someone else offered.

All in all, Viv had a good time until mid-afternoon. Even the passing guards didn’t give her more than a passing glance after she was vetted by Sanle, though a few guests whispered about her appearance. No one questioned her eye color to her face. In fact, the going theory was that instinctive casters like Viv were strange and had quirks, which Viv found utterly ridiculous. She didn’t have quirks. It was the spark of luck’s fault.

Eventually, the party wended down for the extended family and a taylor family offered to take her back on their cart. Viv accepted, but not before a farewell to Sanle.

“The custom is to offer gifts during weddings, and when you are a guest as well,” Viv said. “So I’d like you to have this. I’m sure either you or your granddaughter will find a use for it.”

Sanle looked at the tiny green-flecked stone on Viv’s palm. It was the brown core she had found on the weird insect thing. It was probably worth half a gold talent or even more, which still represented a large sum for laborers. Sanle understood immediately.

“I can’t accept this,” she said, blanching a bit. “It’s too much for an old wise woman, dearie.”

“Look, you were here for me at a very difficult time. It would make me really happy if you accepted it, and I’m sure you can find a use for it for your family. Please?”

“Oh, you are going to insist, are you not?”

“And I will leave it on the table if you don’t take it.”

“Then... I accept. Thank you. May I ask your name?”

“I’m Viv.”

“Are you sure you are human Viv, not a benevolent spirit?”

“I am definitely human, and most definitely not benevolent. Thank you for everything, Sanle. I really needed a bit of humanity.”

Chapter 100: Down.

The late afternoon sun was setting on the peaceful plains around Losserec. Viv reclined in the somewhat uncomfortable carriage bench, studiously ignored by the other occupants. The family who had agreed to take her to the walls were discussing tomorrow’s tasks in low voice while the young boy in front of her focused on a toy, only raising his eyes to cast shy glances at Arthur. The dragonette coiled lazily around Viv. She had categorically refused to leave her for a single second.

Viv just relaxed and watched the landscape. While Koltis down south had been packed within the crowded confines of its walls, Losserec had sprawled all over the land, trailing estates and small villages everywhere. More meaningfully, people were smiling. The war was about to end with their victory, and they knew it. Conflict had never reached the cozy shores of Lake Hydon. The harvest was bountiful this year if what she had heard at the wedding was any indication. She was catching, perhaps for the first time, a glimpse of what prosperity meant on this monster-ravaged world. It felt strangely peaceful.

Even more peaceful, she was being ignored. Dressed in peasant garb and dragged on a family carriage, Viv was no longer a war caster, just one more ordinary laborer going back home after a day of relaxation. Arthur was too low on her lap to be seen from the road, though people behind her sometimes frowned at the white tail hanging from the edge. She had covered her hair with a shawl. To anyone around, she was only one among many.

It reminded the outlander of an Arthurian tale she had read long ago. The story told of the vile Meleagant abducting Gwinevere. Knight Lancelot agreed to ride a cart against information about her whereabouts, an extremely dishonorable treatment for a knight. Today, Viv was not on a horse, wearing armor and escorted by a stout Kark. It felt like a vacation.

Or it would, until someone looked down on her or tried to piss her off, which would definitely happen at some point.

Sleepy hamlets gave way to vast, tilled fields as the path led a bit inland, then they turned left directly towards the lake. The city sat on a small elevation jutting into the waters, which provided a natural moat around two thirds of its tall gray walls. Circular towers rose to the skies, bearing the heraldry of the local lord on sheet-sized flags. Soldiers in blue and yellow livery guarded the main entrance. The woman in front turned to Viv and asked in a slightly embarrassed voice if she had identification. Viv could read between the lines and decided to spare the tailor family the indignity of being in her mantle of catastrophe.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll make my own way.”

Viv climbed down. There was a line waiting to enter the city, though it moved quite fast. Important people didn’t wait in line. She was important people. In fact, she couldn’t not be important people so long as Arthur was around, so Viv decided to own it instead and walked confidently to the gate. Quite a few of the guards noticed her immediately. She had met an instructor with a sixth sense when it came to anomalies, able to pick up a person acting weird out of a hundred in a crowded train station. Here though, she suspected a skill might be involved. They were serious but not alarmed just yet. Viv hoped it would stay that way.

“Hello. I’d like to get into town, this is my first time here.”

One of the busy guards who hadn’t seen her come turned with an angry face.

“Get the fuck back in... Oh.”

Arthur glared at him and stood on her hind legs. Her eyes were level with the guard as this was on the short side. He took a step back so she returned to Viv’s side, crimson eyes inspecting everyone with malevolent focus.

The ensuing silence lasted for only a short time. A grizzled sergeant with impressive, graying chops stepped out of the guardhouse with a mighty scowl. He walked to Viv with confidence, eyes going out of focus for a second which she associated with inspection.

“Caster huh, an instinctive one?”

“Yes.”

“That figured. What’s your purpose in Losserec?”

“I seek passage to Helock by ship.”

“Alright. You got any identification with you?”

“I have a Manipeleso bank chit.”

That got Viv some raised eyebrows.

“I was attacked and lost my gear,” she explained. “My clothes were destroyed and blood-soaked. Some kind souls gave me those.”

“I see. The roads are not safe these days. One more question. Have you been involved in the civil war?”

Viv was rather sure the man could detect falsehoods, so she decided to be mostly honest.

“I fought side by side with Sangor the Nigh King in Green Edge, but I left afterward. I also fought loyalists on other occasions. I’ve never fought against your side.”

Some of the guards shifted at the mention of Sangor, and she got her explanation as to why shortly after.

“His Royal Highness Sangor,” the sergeant politely insisted.

Viv tended to forget it, but Nyil had a much more hierarchical society than nowadays France. Here, people had to show respect to their ‘betters’. She had to keep it in mind or risk annoying the sticklers for protocol.

“Well, sure, come on in. Do you have coin?”

She shook her head.

“I lost almost everything in the attack.”

“That’s fine. Bearers of the chit don’t have to pay the entrance fee, but you might want to go to the bank first. It’s on the main square.”

“It always is...” Viv mumbled.

“Indeed. Now if I could see it?” he politely asked.

Viv spent an embarrassing two seconds lifting the chit from her modest cleavage. The sergeant remained entirely professional, thankfully.

“Everything’s in order. Do you have a leash and muzzle for your drake?”

Ah.

“Ah.”

“Squeeeeeeeeeee?”

“I assure you this is not necessary. Arthur is extremely well-behaved.”

“If you don’t have one I can have a kennel leash modified on the spot...”

“No collars.”

“Squeeee!”

The sergeant looked strangely at Arthur, probably wondering if she could indeed understand human language.

“Look, I was told someone else has a drake here,” Viv said, eager to defuse the argument before it could turn incendiary. “Do they have a leash and collar?”

She sure as fuck hoped not.

“I am not privy to the governor’s habits,” the sergeant coldly replied. “Still, if you have her under control...”

“There isn’t an entity on Nyil that can get her under control. Look, we’ve been to two major towns without incident before. I’m sure you are just being understandably cautious, however leashes are a no go.”

Violence?

Viv sent back a ‘no’.

“Could you just let us through? We won’t cause trouble.”

“And if you do, it’s my head,” the sergeant replied.

He bit his lip, considering his options.

“Tell you what, I’ll get our local kennel master. If he says it’s fine, then it’s fine. Would that be acceptable?”

“Certainly.”

“Then, errr, Lathas get the lady inside while I fetch him. Mage Urin’s office will do.”

Ah, the time-honored tradition of kicking problems up the chain. Viv considered that Arthur might be recognized for who she was, or rather what she was. It should be fine. It would happen anyway in the larger city.

As she walked by the gate and got into the guard post, a part of her wondered if it would have been wiser to get Arthur over the wall by flight. She expected people in a capital city to be reasonable, sensible human beings. She was just being stupid. Now to hope she was stupid and lucky. Not that sort of lucky, the real kind.

Mage Urin’s office was a small but tidy affair, a packed office with more books Viv had ever seen together in Nyil with a window pointing north. The rays of the late afternoon painted the

walls outside red, yet it also made the place feel more familiar. Add a laptop and a phone on the desk, and it could be any scholar's office back on earth. The murmur of conversation outside made for a pleasant background.

The guard by her side cleared his throat. She had been daydreaming. Without hesitation, Viv sat on the guest's chair and turned to the guard, who looked distinctly awkward.

"Lathas, was it? Do you think I could get something to drink and then maybe you should return to your post?" she suggested, letting the leadership aspect of her soul leak a bit. The tiny amount of soul mastery she had helped as well, though modestly.

He blinked.

"Oh, yes goodmother. Sure."

He saluted and left. Viv received her cup of piping klod while she was inspecting the nearby books. Arthur squealed happily when she found a copy of 'The Desolation of Aristan', her favorite book, though this copy lacked the nice illustration of a big black dragon roasting the town and its defenders. The diversion lasted until someone subtly poked her with transparent mana, or rather, someone had pushed mana in an expanding bubble and she had been hit like a fat submarine. She was pretty sure it was rude, so she flared her own mana twice, her best attempt at conveying 'Yes I am here'. Ten seconds later, someone knocked on the door.

Three people let themselves in. The first was an older mage with a belly who had the decency to look sheepish — probably the cause of the magical sonar spell. The second smelled a bit of beasts and looked gruff and annoyed to be here. Too much sun had tanned his skin a deep red, and he wore leather armguards with deep bite marks on it. He looked quite attractive in the gruff and muscular kind of way, and his biceps bulged under his sleeves, which was nice. The last was the most nondescript woman Viv had ever met.

The trio awkwardly moved around the table, with the mage hesitating, then sitting at his desk. The narrow confines of the place made the gathering that much more stifling, but Viv had been in political rallies. This was nothing. At least they smelled mostly clean, and she had tea.

"So, errr, why are we here?" the mage asked.

"Hello, my name is Viv. I would like you to allow Arthur to move freely around the city while we visit. Without a leash."

"And, errr, I wasn't aware that we had regulations on the treatment of drakes?" the mage asked his companions.

"We have regulations on people bringing dangerous beasts within the walls," the person Viv assumed was the kennel master said. "Let me get a look at the drake."

"Oh," Viv said, "I never said she was a drake. Arthur? Say hello."

The dragonette uncoiled from Viv, lifting her head from the witch's lap and rising above the desk, where she put both of her arms. The claws clicked on the varnished wood with terrible finality.

"OH SH—" the kennel master gasped, and he fell on his ass.

Viv raised both hands in a calming gesture while the mage looked askance, wondering if he should do something. He had a shield half-raised, but he had refrained from any offensive casting yet.

"What's going on?" The mage asked.

"Arthur is a dragon."

"Squee!"

"She says she's a good one too and consents to grace your city with her presence if you provide good meat."

Viv considered her words and leaned forward, comforting them with a conspiratorial tone.

"I'll pay, don't worry."

It didn't work well. The mage and kennel master started arguing while the third person... was there a third person? It probably wasn't very important.

It was clear they didn't know what to do.

"Listen," Viv cut, "I have been in several large cities before."

They didn't look pleased by her interruption. That was fine. Viv didn't want to spend the evening on it.

"We never had any sort of trouble. So long as no one attacks her, and there is no reason to, then nothing will happen. We just want to find a ship and relax for a few days."

"I just want to hear one reason why we should let a dragon inside of our walls," the kennel master grumbled.

"Ha, I believe I can give you an answer," Viv said with a pleasant smile. "Let me demonstrate how refined and polite Arthur is. Arthur, if you would find a good book for our hosts here?"

Big dragon book!

'Yes,' Viv sent back.

The dragonling slithered to a nearby shelf and picked the 'Desolation of Aristan', delicately holding it between two clawed fingers. She placed the precious tome on the desk in front of the terrified mage and opened it with surgical care.

'Reasons for desolation,' Viv sent, and the dragonette patiently flipped pages until she reached chapter two. The others did not dare move.

With imperious grace, Arthur tapped the chapter header.

"Why don't you read it for us?" Viv suggested.

The mage glared, but he obeyed. The proximity of a fanged maw made his diction a little hesitant.

"Ahem. Chapter two, in which we examine the causes of the tragedy. Accounts of the buildup leading to the fateful event remain fragmentary. Indeed, most of the legal documentation as well as the men and women involved in the process were lost on the third day of the battle, when the administrative district burnt to the ground. Whatever second-hand account and fragmentary documents remain have been widely dismissed by contemporary authors (see Tavus' 'The flames of Fate') as being too unlikely, however, I believe that the original theory was indeed accurate, and that the devastation was indeed not caused by a single great disagreement, but by an escalation of petty and minor issues, culminating in the great ultimatum as recounted in the northern toll office accounts. Indeed, the question of dragon whelps... Ah."

Heavy silence descended upon the room. Arthur glared. Viv inspected her fingernails, which were a bit filthy and needed a cut.

"We could just decide that putting a leash on a dragon is a terrible idea. I will spend a couple of days in town and spend a lot of money, then I'll be out of your hair and someone else's problem," Viv suggested.

"Or we could make it difficult."

Arthur puffed a little smoke. The scent of overheated metal replaced that of old book then was gone just as fast.

"She's under your responsibility and we'd better not hear about any incident," the mage said. The kennel master approved with a nod.

"Of course," Viv agreed amicably.

The two left and Viv made to abscond as well, but a hand placed on her shoulder brought her down. Viv frowned. It was the nondescript woman.

"Any chance that you would be willing to work here?" the woman asked. Viv felt the grip but, strangely, her danger sense was quiet. It should be screaming at her, she thought.

“No, I’m really here to relax and leave,” Viv replied.

“Excellent. I’ll send someone and make sure you’re not bothered. By anybody.”

“That would be nice,” Viv muttered.

“And one last piece of advice. Your intimidation was cute and effective, if a bit heavy-handed. You are young. You are also not familiar with large cities, so please remember that as dangerous as you are on the battlefield, there are folks in the capital who follow paths that... solve problems.”

A veil lifted. The nondescript woman was a wiry girl with a pointy nose and squarish traits, someone who felt dependable and overall pleasant but there was something off about her smile and when Viv looked down, she saw that a finger rested on her skin, at the base of her neck. That finger bore a strange jewel with a claw at the end, and a skull on its surface. The woman tapped it gently three times.

Viv noticed that Arthur’s jaw was very close to the woman’s chest as well. The two had placed themselves in a stalemate without Viv noticing.

“Sometimes, keeping the peace requires a sacrifice. The dragons know that. We have shown time and time again that we were willing to go all the way.”

“I’m really here to relax, not to attack anyone,” Viv assured.

“I believe you, I really do. And I like your shrewdness. Consider it a, ah, friendly reminder. Enjoy your stay.”

And she was gone. Literally. Viv could not feel her anywhere.

“Squeee?”

“Yeah it’s a big world and we are not the biggest yet. Let’s go, darling. I don’t know about you but I need to unwind.”

Viv finished her cup then left.

The streets of Losserec were idle, and Viv was reminded that today was rest day, obviously. The public attention was a bit annoying. She knew they’d get over her in a couple of days though. Her first stop was the bank. Finding it wasn’t difficult, she just had to follow the main road into the city. It still took her more than ten minutes of fast walking. Losserec was large,

really large. Tens of thousands of inhabitants at least. It also smelled surprisingly good for a place this large. The signs of magic were less in the people casting in the street like in Kazar and more in the wards, lights, and other enchantments that decorated the streets. Some of the more affluent citizens wore enchanted doublets though she was not yet good enough to discern what some of them did. She saw a lot of glass windows and shopfronts. More subtle signs also revealed it was an old, well-established place, such as the walking rule. Rich people walked in the middle of the street while wagons and poorer people walked on the sides. A particularly arrogant [merchant] tried to have his guards move her away from her path, which she had kept somewhat in the in between, but a display of black tendrils and Arthur's hiss had dissuaded them without issues.

"Don't even try," Viv had warned.

Besides that, the trip ended without incident on a large square plaza at the edge of the inner walls, where the keep stood. She made a beeline for the familiar stout building with its thick Doric columns and dim interior. The doorman let her in without asking for her chit once again and she found herself in the familiar, dim and luscious interior. She was offered access to her cash and a few recommendations by a flawlessly polite associate in a form-fitting dress.

Her questions about Marruk and Solfis were met by a wall of silence. Since Marruk was a customer, the associate claimed, she could not reveal any details about them without their express permission.

"I cannot reveal any information on the golem either, as it would be akin to the same thing," she explained with a knowing smile.

Viv froze and realized what the woman had done. She had heavily implied that Marruk and Solfis were currently or had recently been together, so she knew about them, and so they were alive. Viv breathed a sigh of relief.

"Can I leave them a message, perhaps?" she asked.

"You may. We will convey it during their next visit to any branch of our institution."

"That's a relief."

The witch wrote a quick letter and left them in the bank's care, then she left with a full purse and a good idea how to spend it.

Viv walked to a nearby hotel and was almost stopped by bouncers before a majordomo rushed out and invited her in. She rented a suite to herself and made a list of requests. She could see the man almost salivate when he realized she was going to burn the yearly salary of a knight squad in only a couple of days.

The first order was for clothes and luggage. She was escorted to a famous tailor who took an order for traveling clothes, formal clothes, and stuff she could wear in the city since she was planning to spend quite some time in Helock. The tailor was a smooth old gentleman who sold her a mix of Viziman and Enorian influence to match her 'exotic looks'. Viv had the distinct impression he was indulging himself as much as her but she didn't mind and paid three gold talents plus a few silvers for the whole set. The man threw in some gloves and hats as a commercial gesture. Next, she bought a massive travel case with some good locks from a nearby leatherworker, and got a discount price because the original buyer had died at war. There was even a silvery pane to place her own enchantments later. By that time, night had fallen and she retired for the evening with some good food and a long-awaited bath.

The next morning, she dressed in her newest outfit, which had been delivered at dawn. It was a comfortable, though conservative dress with a high skirt and a small, waist-long cape. Arthur approved of the colorful green and gold dyes. They walked to the pier to find a ship, going through poorer parts of town without more than a feeble attempt to steal Viv's purse, one that got foiled by a 'nondescript' man who issued a warning and a boot up the ass. The largest shipping consortium gave her some good news.

"We have a personal transport ship leaving for Helock in ten days with another passenger. We can guarantee your safety and comfort for a modest fee."

The 'modest' was a lie but Viv paid another gold talent plus change anyway. She wasn't skimping on safety, not anymore. Her only concern was the cost of tuition in Helock, although she could probably find ways to get an income, and there was no way a semester cost more than the hundred and fifty gold talents she had in her account right now.

Viv spent the day shopping for necessities, then came the part she and Arthur looked forward to the most: relaxation. They found the most expensive and slightly illegal brothel and used it as a spa resort.

"Although we do service female customers on occasion, they are usually more worried about their image than you appear to be," the courtesan she employed commented.

Viv shrugged and signaled for another basket of ribs for Arthur, who lounged in her own bath pretending to sink a toy ship. She didn't care much. The spa only entertained her for a day, then she had another amusing moment selling the two monster cores she had gotten in the forest for a solid four gold talents. The price surprised her.

"Cores used to be so cheap, traveling merchants would carry them, in the olden days," the matronly owner of the auction house told her around tea. "Of course there were bad things about the olden days," she corrected immediately. Viv waved to dismiss her concerns.

"Lord Mildery told me about the time before the civil war when the land was united and expeditions delved into the Deadshield Woods."

"Yes. That poor boy. I hope he finds love once more, after this is over. Green Edge deserves to bloom again."

They exchanged a bit more on the topic, with the old lady reminiscing about a time when people didn't object to her owning the auction house instead of her husband.

"Thankfully the complaints all stopped when he died, Enttiku rest his soul. Would you like more tea?"

Viv's contact with Losserec's population at large stayed polite and distant over the next few days. She was invited for tea by a few women of the good society she met in various stores, and accepted, if only to learn more about the situation. They tolerated her peculiarities on account of her nature as a visitor and an outsider. The men seemed to avoid her as well, mostly. The social events helped distract her from the thorough lack of tourist attractions. Or rather, there were landmarks to explore, but the Enorians didn't see them that way. It reminded Viv that Romanticism had marked experience and discovery as part of self-actualization. People here preferred conforming and social climbing. Nevertheless, she enjoyed her down time immensely.

Arthur had a harder time with the city and spent many long afternoons fishing in the lake. She would only return at nightfall, sometimes carrying a fat fish Viv had the kitchen cook for her. Viv also found primers on Helock's university and the courses she could expect. Apparently, there were general classes on a variety of topics like etiquette she would absolutely need to attend and on which she lacked even the most basic things, so the outlander resolved herself to night of studies once again. At the same time, she was a special case as an instinctive caster and also as someone who was, well, old. Most people attended the university starting from the age of sixteen, so probably eighteen in earth equivalent. Viv was twenty-five. She was technically a post-grad. Admission would require some back-and-forth.

At the end of the ten days period, Viv walked to the pier with her luggage dragged by a hotel employee. No one had tried to kidnap her, no one had stolen from her. She had received a few invitations from suitors but none had reacted strongly to her refusal. No one had started any fires. She had not been involved in any crimes. Viv had spent ten days taking it easy and she felt good and that was awesome. Nodding wisely to herself, she reached the only logical conclusion.

"Next time the spark of luck fucks with me too hard, I'm burning down another village."

"Squeeeee!"

Chapter 101. Shipping

Viv stood at the prow, letting the breeze coursing over Lake Hydon whip her hair back. The fresh air tasted particularly crisp after the fishy stench of the piers. The sun felt nice on her skin. It reminded her of walks by the sea in Nice when she was young, in April, before too many tourists glutted the sidewalks of the Promenade des Anglais. Even Arthur looked like a fat seagull as she dive-bombed fishes with a victorious screech. If one was generous.

The outlander sighed. A break felt fine. She just had to stay out of the way of the sailors and enjoy the cruise aboard this ship. Although, to be fair, it was more a large river tug than a proud three-masts frigate. It ambled across the placid water with all the grace of a grazing cow.

Viv stayed where she was for a good part of the morning, focused on shaping exercises and sight-seeing. Lake Hydon had a smattering of smaller islands dotting its calm surface. They came across more than one fishing boat, their occupants dragging nets up with efficient strength. Near noon, she was invited to eat lunch in the captain's cabin. For all its bare-boned appearance, the 'River Flower' had a proper kitchen for warm meals and the food was rather pleasant. Her host introduced himself as master Leit. He was more merchant than skipper, preferring to leave the technical details to his first mate. Contrary to most men she had met around Losserec, Master Leit was clean shaven with a softer touch and a softer voice as well.

"The river feeds many cities. A man who knows each and what they desire can make good money upon their shores. My father retired a rich man! Didn't give me anything though, just this ship. By the way, I wanted to take the time to thank you for getting out of the way of the crew. Much appreciated. You would not believe what some of our passengers have demanded an hour into the trip. Why, I remember a baroness ordering us to stop the boat from bobbing so much."

"I've been on a ship before. I understand that the departure can be a busy time."

"Yes, I could tell right away that you were a woman of the world. May I inquire about your business in Helock? If it is not too rude to ask."

"I was hoping to attend the academy."

"A mage!"

His reaction surprised Viv. She had not cast any spells and her shaping had remained discrete but surely someone who worked as a merchant would have a focus over twenty, if only just by doing accountancy stuff? She remembered that stats and skills were considered private and asking about them the universal social faux-pas, though if it was obvious...

"You didn't know?" she hazarded.

“Oh, the office expects discretion from us transporters of goods and people. And using inspect on someone can be considered unfriendly, especially since talented mages tend to realize it.”

He smiled indulgently.

“I hope you are successful. I know the academy has stringent acceptance rules, yet I often heard that anyone determined enough could eventually enter, if only for a few classes. I have a cousin who took defensive warding courses there. In the evening, after work! He was so proud too.”

“By the way,” Viv suddenly remembered, “we have another passenger, right?”

The merchant’s expression turned carefully neutral.

“Why yes, though he is... unwell for now. I will ask if he would care to join us tonight, though he might decline, and I am afraid we will have to observe the boundaries he will have set.”

“That is fine, I understand wanting to be left alone.”

Captain Leite appeared relieved and excused himself soon after. On her way to pick up soap from her cabin, Viv picked up a quick aura flare from behind the door, from the mysterious stranger. The polite thing was to reply, probably, so she flared in return. When no more reaction happened, she kept going.

There were expertly made wards on the door, she realized on the way back. They were not the showy kind. Interestingly, they all used colorless mana, which made them harder to weave but also more difficult to perceive. An interesting choice. Back on the deck, Viv busied herself cleaning the smell of dead fish from Arthur’s talons under the crew’s flabbergasted gaze. The fact that it tickled made the exercise dangerous, but that was the price of hygiene and proper education for you. The little hooligan was resisting her effort, squealing piteously.

Mother.

Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?

“Young lady, you are not stinking up our cabin with the stench of old kills. So stop fussing.”

Arthur spent an hour sulking after this sudden but inevitable betrayal.

Towards the evening, the tug left the lake behind and floated into a river that was just as wide and slow. Viv learned that there would always be a pilot at the helm, and that they alternated in shifts of a third of a day. Higher stats made those men more attentive. Nevertheless, the risk of getting grounded remained real.

“Are there monsters around?” Viv asked.

“Nothing that would endanger us so long as we stay away from the shores. All the river beasts were hunted down long ago. Sometimes, snakes and the like reach a critical size, then one of the duchies sends a hunting squad. The waterways are too vital for transport to let monsters go through. The main risk is bandits.”

“There are bandits?” Viv asked, suddenly concerned.

“Rarely. Some towns ask for a toll and those who skimp or dodge can meet some unfortunate accidents, if you catch my meaning. I’ve never been bothered though. I’m part of a guild. We negotiate our dues and take measures long before it becomes a problem. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and I have good news. Our other guest will be joining us tonight. He asked about you after learning of the presence of a fellow caster. Of course, I extended the same courtesy to you as I did to him, so he knows little. I will be happy to introduce the two of you and do away with the mystery.”

“Fair enough.”

Viv joined the captain in his cabin for dinner. He had a small table nailed to the floor, the location cramped but not overly so. A man was already waiting for Viv.

Many things could be said about the stranger, but Viv’s first impression was that he had picked a fight with a wood chipper and lost. Badly. A robe covered most of his body, yet did little to hide the marks on what little skin he revealed. A glove covered his left hand while his right was devoid of fingers. A great scar marred one of his chiseled cheeks while a band covered his left eye. Deep wounds had left bald patches in his wavy dark hair. A cane leaned casually against his chair, hinting at hidden lesions. Despite his poor state, he sat with flawless poise while his keen, lone eye studied Viv with the same attention she had given him. They both refrained from inspecting, for now.

“Good evening,” Viv greeted neutrally.

“And to you too. You will forgive me if I do not stand. I fear good manners were the first casualty of my circumstances.”

His voice was smooth and cultured, with a light lilt Viv could not quite place. The scars on his dark brown skin looked rather recent now she had a closer look. The second most interesting part was his aura, which was the most controlled Viv had ever felt. Even Varska had not been quite so composed. The stranger emitted the barest amount of mana and all of it was colorless. Viv was certain that if he did not want to be felt, she would not feel him. The level of mastery required to achieve such control spoke of more than mere skill. The unknown mage had worked hard to achieve it.

The most interesting part was that he was really handsome in an Arabian knight kind of way, despite the scars. They would probably make him look more virile after they faded from 'angry and recent' to 'good story'.

"Viviane," she introduced herself.

The man was about to reply with a pleasant smile when he stopped, hesitant.

"The honored guest goes by Mr. White for now. I would like to state that the guild made a background check and that you two are both, ah, persons of interest to some parties, but those parties are completely different and we are confident you have no previous ties. I was not told details, of course, only that there should be no issues."

He served himself a glass of sweet wine and took a gulp.

"If, however, it so happens that you two are at odds, I am willing to drop you at the port of your preference, so long as it is on the way, and reimburse you in full for the trip. Any attempt on the life of another passenger will be met with the appropriate measures by the guild."

Viv raised a brow at the now distinctively nervous merchant.

"They hire assassins," Mr. White helpfully explained.

"Oh. Well, there is nobody alive I have a grudge against right now, if that helps," Viv said.

"My enmity is with Glastia and its agents. Even then, I would happily keep a truce for the duration of the journey."

Viv quickly remembered Glastia, a northern city at the edge of the jungle. It was the one the merls had defended against the endless beastling horde.

"Wow, seems like Glastia has created a lot of grudges," she observed.

"My dearest motherland tends to use and discard the people who love her, I'm afraid. You know the saying. A child rejected by the town will burn it down to feel its warmth."

He shrugged.

"I fear I may have indulged."

That was just too many hints for Viv.

"You know what would be crazy?" she asked no one in particular. "Really crazy. Insane. What would be crazy is if you knew Sidjin."

The man froze. His aura coalesced while the temperature seemed to drop. Viv's danger sense woke up, though it did not scream quite yet.

“Hooooooly shit you’re him aren’t you? Wow, just wow, that’s, well, I suppose I should have expected something like that.”

This was just like the spark of luck to make something so unlikely happen.

Sidjin, the man who had saved the merls from extinction.

Through teleportation magic.

“Can we talk in private? Sorry, it’s sensitive and important,” Viv asked the captain, who retired graciously and without a word.

Mr White, or Sidjin, was looking at Viv with suspicion. Viv was sure he was a finger away from pulping her on the ceiling so she made to explain quickly.

“Listen, I was lost in the Deadshield Woods until a couple of weeks ago and I met the merls there. The ones you saved. They talked about you.”

The pressure in the room doubled. Sidjin gripped the table with his good hand, fingers clenching with enough strength to make the wood crack. Slowly, painfully, he stood up to his full height. He topped Viv by half a head.

“This better not be a joke,” he growled.

“I swear it’s the truth. They’re led by Tweek, the last of their shamans. At least for now since there is a new generation growing up. Small guy, a bit old. Loves theater. They named their city ‘Sikoua’. That means —”

“— peace at last,” Sidjin finished.

He fell back in his chair like a toppled tree, swaying back and forth. Viv realized he was crying, sobbing silently with great heaves that shook his entire frame under the cumbersome robe. He tried to speak, but choked.

Viv felt a little bit awkward. She made to tap his gloved hand in what she hoped was a comforting gesture, but Sidjin removed the covered appendage with a hiss of anger.

“Sorry! Didn’t mean to.”

“No!” he interrupted. “No. You are not to blame. I apologize for the unfortunate reflexes. Just...”

He choked again, then chuckled. The strangled sound turned into a full belly laughter.

“They made it. By all the light gods, they made it, the insane bastards. They’re alive. It worked. Enttiku save my soul, it worked. Gods. You have no idea.”

He breathed a few times to calm down, then made to stand but forfeited with a wince of pain. Instead, he pointed at a cupboard screwed to a wall. Viv got his meaning immediately and fetched the bottle of strong booze. She topped his glass.

“If you would... thank you. I thought I had it. I was sure it had worked. I could see the trees on the other side, despite the pain and the fear, but there was always this little seed of doubt that haunted my fever dreams. Made me wake up in a sweat more often than the torture ever did. What if? What if I messed up and sent them into a death trap? Back in the jungle, surrounded by death and teeth? But they made it. They are fine. They are fine, right?”

“They seem to have adapted. They have those hanging gardens, with fruits hanging from there. Bird nests.”

“Yes. Yes, to protect them from a majority of insects, the bane of the jungle.”

“They have a statue of you. Didn’t sculpt the face though.”

“Perhaps for the best,” the disfigured man joked, brows jumping in self-deprecation.

“I don’t know. You’re not too bad in a rakish sort of way,” she shamelessly replied.

“Flattery will lead you nowhere,” he replied, then coughed a bit. He gulped more alcohol and Viv gave him a refill without prompt. It looked like it was going to be a long night.

“I fear my impressive physique was also a victim of that little stunt, so a rakish face is the most I can manage at that point. Still, thank you. I just wish they had not chosen a statue. I always found having a statue of oneself while still alive to be the height of grandiose arrogance.”

“Difficult to get your likeness when you’re dead, though.”

“And that is why, dear Vivane, you must hire a good portraitist, who will show you to your advantage. With a little financial incentive, they might even be convinced to show you to a great advantage.”

“I’m not sure if I would care after I’m dead.”

“A fair point. And though I am already extremely grateful for the news, I would ask that we continue this conversation with a proper split of the roles: you talk, I drink.”

“That doesn’t sound very fair.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“I want to hear about teleportation,” Viv immediately replied.

Sidjin seemed to close on himself.

“So does everyone, these days.”

“I’m an outlander. I was sent here against my will. I don’t even know if my friends are alive, I don’t even know what happened to my original body. I don’t know if I died. I don’t know what my parents are thinking. I want to hear about teleportation.”

Sidjin nodded slowly, his lone eye boring into Viv’s with singular focus.

“You will hear about teleportation.”

“Okay. So, here is what I saw.”

Viv recounted her tale, sometimes stopping to refill Sidjin’s glass. The mage stopped drinking after a while, apparently suitably buzzed. He asked questions about people besides Tweek, but Viv had not been introduced to the other leaders. He was pleased that they thrived.

“The jungles are much warmer than the Deadshield Woods, especially in winter. I’m glad to see they adapted,” he explained. “The merls are, well, their population can bounce back pretty fast. They just had so many dead. You cannot imagine the bloodbath the walls were. Day after day.”

“I’m sorry, it must have been hell. Speaking of, everyone thinks you’re dead!”

“I wish they’d been correct.”

He sighed deeply. His face was still flush with alcohol. He shrugged.

“I am sauced enough to talk about it, I guess. Never thought I’d share with someone I have just met.”

“We’ve been talking for half of the night already.”

“Half of my life should not be enough. This booze is deceptively strong. Ah, who cares? On the night of the ritual, I murdered the city’s quartermaster.”

“Ah.”

Viv wasn’t sure where this was headed. Given how it’d started, she thought it best to shut up and let the man spill. He obviously had a lot on his mind.

“Glastia’s standing policy was that the merls were expandable forces who would hold the line for as long as feasible. The council intended to milk them to the last drop, then quietly dispose of the survivors. The quartermaster was at the forefront of this policy. It was his cousin who cast a destruction spell on the segment of wall Siul defended. He was the leader of the merls, and my friend. I murdered the quartermaster and used a convoy of carriages to carry supplies to the lower city. I also picked the most corrupted guardhouse on the path and executed them to the last man. The ritual took place near the merl’s main habitation center,

during the night. The guard found me at dawn while the last of the merls went through. The beastlings found the segment of walls undefended and poured through the opening. Hundreds of soldiers died over the following two weeks to stem the flow. I have the blood of my fellow citizens on my hands. The council knew this. They threw me to the scalehounds.”

His gaze grew distant.

“I expected to die by public execution, but I underestimated the city’s most powerful motivator.”

“Greed?”

“Pride. What do you know of teleportation technology?”

“I know it can be done and that it’s excessively difficult.”

“The last mage who could do so reliably was Celerin Crest, a member of Nero Oleander’s group. Have you heard of them?”

“No.”

“Oleander was a traveler like you, who disappeared in the Shadowlands decades ago. He might still be alive, for all we know.”

“Did he ever lead an expedition into the Deadlands?”

“Yes, he did. Right to the base of the Imperial Ziggurat, or so he claimed.”

“Damn.”

It was their teleportation circle Viv had found near the camp, back in Harrak during her first night here.

“Crest was a mage of great knowledge who specialized in helpful spells. Her teleportation was actually a skill. I was able to observe the spent circles in several locations as well as her notes, and divine a way to reproduce the skill using colorless mana. It is... very intensive, to say the least. But...”

“Sustainable?”

“Precisely. Not only could archmages cast it, it could also be enchanted on surfaces for normal mages to use. Theoretically...” he finished with a ghastly grin.

“But I overloaded the spell frame after closing the portal.”

“Only you had the knowledge.”

“They could not afford to kill me. It was my mistake. I destroyed the circle to prevent my countrymen from following the merl, not expecting to be spared for my terrible offenses. Only, I was, after a fashion. The noble families who had lost their children took their pound of flesh, then council agents retrieved my notes and demanded explanations. I provided them.”

He glared at Viv, perhaps expecting a comment. Viv kept silent.

“They have struggled to conceptualize space, a requirement to cast the spell. But we can discuss technicality later. They kept me alive because they could not understand the notes without my help. Then the project stalled. Other priorities took over, and I was forgotten.”

“Seriously?” Viv asked.

“You would be surprised how much is lost to administrative inertia.”

“Oh no this I can believe, but grudges?”

“One among many. My demise was no longer considered a priority until one of the youngest princes needed an extra mage for a... shall we say confidential mission of his. I was released after completing it.”

“Really?” Viv asked with some disbelief.

“Oh, it was nothing simple. The youngling tried to betray me but he changed his tune when I activated fragmentation runes on everyone else’s backpack.”

“It sounds like a messy affair.”

“I believe the proper term would be ‘chunky’ in this specific context. In any case, freedom was mine at last. I moved south and worked in secret. I spent most of my time and earnings to repair that wreck of a mortal coil I was left with. This, for example...”

He moved his glove hands.

“... mimics the effect of tendons, of which I was deprived.”

“I don’t know how you can not be filled with rage.”

“There wouldn’t be enough room for that much hatred in a single person’s soul.”

Viv frowned, suddenly remembering the world in which she was.

“I received whispered promises, if that is what you were wondering. From all three. I had to decline. My days of serving the undeserving are over.”

“Understandable. Any long term plans?”

“Trying to live in this body is a long-term plan. What about you? If I may ask.”

Viv decided to keep her offer for later, when the two of them wouldn't be sloshed. She had regeneration, he had teleportation. They were made for each other. In theory.

It wouldn't hurt to open up to him a little bit and increase their mutual trust. He seemed as desperate for social interaction as she had been during her first meeting with Varska, spilling everything in an emotional meltdown. Despite his aloof airs, she could tell he'd been through hell and back. His homeland was lost to him as well, perhaps forever. They had much in common.

So Viv began to talk with a sleepy returning Arthur on her lap. She didn't share too much about Solfis' ability or some of the less reputable things she had done, but she shared enough to get a few comments on magic. The man appeared... driven.

"You'll have to demonstrate some of those instinctive spells tomorrow. There is much I can teach you about colorless mana as well. You must study it rigorously, as it will compensate for most of your weaknesses. Combat is merely one aspect of what a proficient caster can accomplish."

His face turned red.

"I believe I have drunk enough for tonight, we can... owwww."

Viv had to help Sidjin stand up and return to his cabin, for which he apologized profusely. He was... very light. Too light for a man his size, which made Viv concerned. The two had clicked. It was rare when it happened. And he had suffered, and was still suffering, and that was not fine. Unacceptable. Viv decided that she would help him. Mention it in the morning.

Morning turned out to be mid-morning, since the captain's booze was a sneakier hitter than she had expected. She apologized to the man for the secrecy, though the canny merchant had not taken umbrage.

"I was more worried that you two would not get along," he explained with a smile.

"You did take a risk," Viv conceded.

"A minor one. The likelihood you knew each other was very low according to what I found out. And war casters who live long enough to deserve the title tend to have common sense, thus realizing starting a magical duel in the middle of the river might be unwise."

"True. Speaking of, can I ask how you found out who I was or is it a guild thing?"

"Both. Losserec has some of the best spies in Param. As valued partners, we can request some, ah, reinsurance. If a ship is lost, the economy is weakened. If it is weakened, Losserec is weakened. You are well known to them."

Viv thought she was lucky they had not decided to dispose of her, but remembered that Solfis was a major deterrent when it came to assassins. Of course, he was a poor bodyguard because of design limitations, but spies did not know that.

“So yes, it was surprising that you would request some privacy, but I do not begrudge you my cabin this time. Mage business can take strange turns.”

“We’ll be sure not to exile you again. Oh, I assume casting aboard is not a problem?”

“So long as you do not endanger us or interfere with the crew, you can do as you wish,” the man replied.

As agreed with Sidjin, Viv and he regrouped on the deck in the morning, with the mage clearly excited by the thought of talking shop.

“Emulation leads to progress more surely than isolated studies. It is good to meet another passionate practitioner. Why don’t you show me what that black mana of yours can do?”

“See that stone?” Viv asked, pointing a finger at the shore.

“Which o —”

Before he was done, Viv wordlessly cast a quick blast spell, the smallest artillery she could manage. It whipped out of her hand with the tell-tale hiss and lashed a car-sized boulder, leaving behind a clear cut.

Slowly, the upper half of the boulder slid forward and crashed on the mud below.

On the deck of ‘River Flower’, the crew froze in place.

Sidjin didn’t speak. He moved his gloved fingers in a complex pattern, then the air in front of him shimmered and grew opaque. Viv realized what was going on. The man had turned the air into a pair of lenses.

With transparent mana.

They moved in concert until Sidjin was satisfied. Viv wondered how good the lense was but she would have to get close to the man and he clearly valued his personal space. Sidjin hummed and turned to her.

“I wanted to see the damage from up close. The surface is so smooth it could have been done by a talented blademaster. I have to say that I had never seen such localized

destructive potential with a fast spell before. You must be quite deadly in direct confrontation from mage to mage, or to take down dangerous targets.”

“Yes.”

“But your utility must suffer.”

“And flexibility,” Viv admitted.

“How is your... colorless magic?” he asked.

“I can block sound, make simple shields, find the north... Hm.”

“What about fire?”

“You can make fire with colorless mana?”

“You can make anything with colorless mana, though it is usually terribly inefficient. Observe.”

Sidjin lifted an arm and a series of circles and glyphs appeared around it. They were almost transparent and felt more blockish and regular than her own, like computer Arial to her cursive. For all its apparent rigidity, the spell shot out a series of smoldering red marbles with vicious elegance. They landed on the nearest muddy beach. Each ball expanded and exploded with a loud bang, sending soil and torched stones in the air. A wave of hot air made the sails flutter. Sidjin had essentially carpet-bombed the place, leaving only dried out, smoldering craters.

“I would normally pair the spell with red mana for the sake of efficiency. This is merely a proof of concept. I dislike the term colorless and prefer the term arcane. Arcane magic is the most complex and versatile school there is. It is also the most underused.”

He leaned against the railing. The casual gesture led to the crew working again. The two casters had offered quite the distraction.

“Please do not take my words as the ramblings of an obsessed man. Attunement leads mages to understand a specific dye, and then they cast with the world, not against it. It is simply easier and more efficient to cast within a color one understands, and most casters are nothing if not pragmatic. Aspected mana is even more potent. Colorless mana, however, can do everything or reproduce near everything.”

He considered his next words in silence.

“I could expand on the limits both innate and forced by a lack of proper research, but it would take us the whole afternoon.”

“We can always talk about it over dinner,” Vuv suggested.

Sidjin blinked.

“Why yes, we can certainly do that.”

“Let’s drink less, though.”

Sidjin chuckled, then it turned into a full-belly laugh, and then into a cough, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Ah, normalcy. A thoroughly underrated feeling.”

Viv could relate.

“Oh, by the way, do you believe instinctive casters could become proficient at colorless mana?”

“Can you not already use it?” Sidjin replied, but then he reconsidered her words.

“Hm, my apologies, I forget that you are very new at this. Instinctive casters do not just understand aspects naturally, but also runes. You, ah, resonate with them. Therefore, yes you can cast colorless spells as well as any mages. Or rather, you will with enough practice. Are you going to Helock to attend the academy?”

“Yes. You?”

“I am going but not to attend, but to take back control of my research. I understand that someone wrote a thesis claiming to be, and I quote ‘on the verge of success’ of teleportation. Using my notes, no doubt. I intend to set the record straight on top of getting as much medical help as possible. You should definitely take a minor in arcane magic. Or even a major, since I doubt there are more than a handful of caster with a better command of black mana. I would love to teach you.”

“And I’d love to learn. Regarding medical help, well, let’s talk in private.”

Sidjin was intrigued, but he didn’t protest. It took longer than usual for them to walk to her personal quarter and by then, he was clearly tired.

“It’s probably not well-known yet, but I designed a way to regrow limbs.”

“What?” the mage exclaimed. “How?”

“Using black mana aspected to change magically charged monster flesh, and a church healer.”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“And it works?”

“Yes. It has worked many times.”

Sidjin looked shocked.

“Look, I’ll do it for you, so long as we get a couple of days and a priest. In return, I’d want you to teach me how to make a teleportation circle and use it. And if I can’t then maybe you could help?”

“Help with what? I do not believe I can send you home. It would require understanding how to cross boundaries between worlds!”

“Not that. My people...”

Viv stopped at that. When had she started to see the Harrakans as her people? They were, though. She felt responsible for them.

“My people need to reclaim more of the deadlands. Make way for new arrivals and expand, create a buffer to protect themselves against the next horde. So far, all of those who’ve wanted to fight back have always faced a major issue: the black mana saturation. It limits travel. But if we can teleport...”

“I understand the strategic advantage it would provide, believe me.”

“Not just the military aspect. We could do the most important thing: reclaim a real city, with walls already in place, ready to be repaired. We could cherry pick the best spots for colonization and carry troops from one city to another to hold off major attacks. It would be a complete game changer.”

Viv felt her leadership flare, the skill instinctively brought forward by her enthusiasm. She could have pulled it back if she wished, but Sidjin didn’t seem to mind. He also had social skills of his own, she felt.

“Look, if teleportation is set to develop soon, then pushing back the deadlands is not a bad way to start, even if it’s not the most lucrative pick.”

“And possibly one of the most dangerous,” Sidjin says. “But I have spent a lot of time helping civilisation stand against mindless savagery, and I do not intend to stop. You will cure me even if I do not manage to teach you?”

“Yes,” Viv said, sensing Sidjin would value an open hand.

“In fact, we’ll do that first, as I said.”

“Then yes, I will teach you what I know.”

Chapter 102: River

It only took one afternoon of discussion with Sidjin to convince Viv she had to make headways on arcane magic, starting now and then continuing at the academy.

“Colorless mana is used to bolster almost every spell at high level. For example, the artillery spell, the mainstay of battlemages everywhere when they do not have the time to do something more...”

“Take a deep breath,” Viv suggested.

“Sorry, yes, I tend to use longer sentences when lecturing. My apologies. The artillery spell uses transparent mana layers to prevent the colored mana from dispersing before impact.”

“So transparent mana makes the missile, and colored mana makes the payload?”

“An interesting turn of phrase. Something from your world?”

“Hmmm. Yes.”

“Weapons, I’d wager. But I digress. The answer is no. The colored spell is the missile and the payload. Colorless mana is used to reinforce and enhance it.”

“I see.”

“Arcane is not limited to reinforcements, it can also allow mages to achieve feats unique to specific hues, albeit at a higher cost. For example, flying.”

Viv’s mind went into overdrive, thinking of the possibilities.

“Hold on... there is a weight rune!”

“One often misunderstood or used for parlor tricks. And yes, very astute. Arcane magic lets a person reduce their weight until the smallest impetus propels them across the ether. You will never outdo a gray mana specialist, of course...”

“But I’d be airborne.”

“You can make light, which requires very little energy but is rather complex. Personally, I have never achieved the white color.”

“Hmm, my school days are behind me, but I think I might know why. You need to reproduce colors from all across the visible spectrum to achieve white light. You are probably creating light with a high temporal coherence, meaning it’s the same color all around, and huh...”

She wilted a bit under Sidjin’s intense gaze.

“And now I absolutely must ask you questions about your world,” he said. “And we are getting sidetracked again. Arcane magic has many applications. Someone like you will profit a lot from its flexibility. First, we are going to examine the most simple spell, as a proof of concept for you, so to speak...”

Sidjin coached Viv into making her own lamp. It took the light glyph and some measurements inscribed in circles, otherwise light would only occasionally flicker. The calculations made Viv’s head hurt and annoyed her on a fundamental level. Those were arbitrary numbers based on some nonsensical scale made by some old geezer who picked his favorite color as a base. Quickly understanding the problem, Viv ditched the pointless math and created her own spectrum, picking the ‘high’ and ‘low’ glyphs as anchors. It took her half an hour of effort, but she had a working light source she could dial between red and indigo. Sidjin glared at the spell for twenty minutes and asked her to change the color until the deck of the ship felt like a cheap rave. Eventually, the mage licked his lips and considered his next words.

“I believe I know how you ended up in Nyil. You mentioned your homeworld didn’t have magic?”

“Yes?”

“Then you would have been wasted there. I am not saying you could not have been successful. Successful people tend to be successful everywhere. I am saying that you are gifted, Viviane the Outlander. It would have been a shame not to have you here, converting mage spells into witch constructs.”

“Who’s being a flatterer now?”

“And by this, I mean that I expect your efforts to match your talent, because you have no excuses.”

“Alright, alright.”

At the end of the first session, it was done. Viv could cast light. She would not have to rely on her stone anymore. She decided that the teal/cyan wavelength was nice and strangely peaceful, and that it would be her standard choice from now on. After that, they discussed the theory of spell layering, adding colorless elements to other spells.

Sidjin coached Viv. He was amusingly intense and single-minded when it came to magic, which she found endearing. He also had a habit of storing questions for later, then asking them one by one and by chronological order. Viv was starting to think that under his guise as a scarred and kinda cute prince, the man was a little bit of a nerd when it came to magic.

Layering the artillery spell to make it go faster and farther proved to be excessively complicated, not because the principle was difficult, but because she needed to wield two different sorts of mana at the same time. It was the first time she was confronted with this difficulty while virtually every other caster experimented with mixes early on. The exercise was unfamiliar. Nevertheless, Viv did not give up, she would just need a bit more time. In the meanwhile, there was the issue of fire.

So far, the crew and Captain Leit had been willing to accommodate the two mages. However, mention of the fire experiments during dinner forced his hand. Sidjin had to promise he would keep Viv under control to assuage the man's fears, and the crew gave them a wide berth the next day.

The colorless spell was based around a very rare rune, that of friction. For almost a day, Viv could only manage to create sparks while Sidjin had flames with the same structure. She quickly concluded that an adjustment had to be made so she could cast as a witch, but couldn't exactly think of one until she realized the problem was fuel. Somehow, Sidjin used mana as fuel naturally, which she hadn't considered. She added an energy rune to hers and now she had an uncontrolled explosion. Mercifully, Sidjin stopped them before they could even escape the spell structure. It did give her some ideas. If she could compress...

"Do not get distracted by another concept," the mage interrupted.

"Yeah yeah."

"You were being distracted."

"I know!"

The witch expediently solved the issue by lowering the mana input. Now, she had tiny balls of flame at will, and could light a fire if she found herself without a lighter again. As Sidjin said, those were low-hanging fruits, but they displayed the sort of things she could accomplish.

And if anyone asked her to light a pipe or a cig, she could snap her fingers and make it happen. That was cool.

On the evening of the third day, the slow river tub stopped at its first destination. It was not a village, despite her first impression, but an extremely large estate overseeing the cultivation of the rich soil along the shore. The *'River Flower'* unloaded bales of cloth, tools, and luxuries, then charged its stores with oil from a large fruit that reminded Viv of olives except for its color which was a vivid red. It smelled particularly fragrant.

“Ganar oil. Cooks swear by it from the cold south to Halluria’s hot deserts,” Leit declared.

He frowned.

“Those Mornyr merchants can turn it into scented soap and perfume. They won’t tell us how, the beasts.”

“Trade secrets are always bad when it’s the other guys doing it, huh?” Viv teased.

Captain Leit rolled his eyes.

“I would not be so sore if my wife didn’t like it so much. Seven silvers a jar. Highway robbery, is what it is.”

Viv cajoled the canny merchant into admitting the gift wouldn’t be so appreciated if it were cheap. There wasn’t much to do on the shore, but Viv wanted to walk a bit on firm ground, and so they moved to the inner courtyard of the estate’s central building. It was as large as a football field, and surrounded by thick brick walls. Soldiers and scouts trained in a corner they walked by. They eyed Sidjin with pity instead of focusing on their damn forms. She heard the words for ‘cripple’ and a few insinuations from sneering warriors watching an ongoing spar. Sidjin didn’t seem to mind, possibly used to it all, but that rubbed Viv the wrong way, so she requested the use of an archery target for a little ‘demonstration’ on colorless fireballs. He traced the glyph slowly and with perfect control, each symbol and each layer appearing carefully to give her plenty of time to observe them. One smoking crater later, the jeers stopped. Sometimes, it felt nice to be petty.

“Thank you for the demonstration,” Viv said.

“No,” Sidjin replied with a knowing smile, “it was my privilege.”

They walked a bit more at a slow pace. It soon became obvious that Sidjin tired quickly, so Viv offered her arm to him, which he accepted with muttered apologies. He was clearly in pain. Viv also noticed that he didn’t eat much. There would be a lot of work before he was mostly fine again.

They moved on shortly after.

Viv realized the cruise would have been deathly boring if it were not for Sidjin. Leit was nice. He was also a man of habits whose interests were limited to trade and its intricacies. Viv could not relate to a man who thought the storage requirement of various kinds of cereals deserved hours of discussions. She didn’t look down on him for it. It just didn’t interest her that much.

Or maybe it was just that Sidjin was different. He explained to her how a single earth mage had changed the food production industry in his hometown and made it feel like a saga. There was spying, treachery, one murder, and a properly bedded diplomat’s wife.

The next few days were spent training telekinesis, or as Sidjin called it, far control. It required only two runes in its most simple configuration. It was also the single most complex and tiring mental exercise there was, a single lapse of focus sending the selected bottle to the mercies of Newton.

Mana mastery: beginner 9

“I know it can be frustrating,” Sidjin said as he placed a delicate hand on Viv’s own to guide her.

“Oh no, I find it quite rewarding,” Viv replied.

At her level of understanding of magic, perception and manipulation felt more intertwined than ever before, and she knew she was on the verge of a breakthrough. Besides, learning magic was fun, and that was before all the exciting implications of telekinesis came into play. Like doing a Darth Vader impersonation, or sending high-velocity ball bearings through someone else’s cortex.

About halfway into the trip, they stopped at another major city: Markeis. It was the last Enorian city on the river. Past that point, they would be going through the territories of the northern city-states. Viv was eager to go out and move a bit, especially because the ship would be staying the night. Unfortunately, her hopes were dashed as soon as the ship passed a bend in the river, and the city came into view on the southern shore.

It was an absolute fucking dump.

She could tell it at first glance from the tatty roofs to the damaged walls, even before she spotted the shanty spilling through the gates life fresh vomit. There were guarded fields farther up, so tents and makeshift cabins sprawled all the way to the edge of the trees going along the shore. The stench hit her like a hammer. It smelled like shit, piss, and unwashed bodies.

Leit leaned against the railing by her side as he brought a perfumed handkerchief to his delicate face.

“Markeis, the pus-filled abscess on River Shal.”

“What sort of business is there to be had?” Viv asked.

“The unsavory kind. But someone has to do it.”

Viv looked the man in the eyes and released just a tiny bit of her intimidation, a task made possible by the small control she already had over her soul.

“This better not be slaves or drugs or we’re going to have a problem.”

Leit scoffed.

“Of course not, the guild has rules, you know? Very stringent ones! And they have a very long reach,” he retorted.

The implication was clear, though Viv noted the beginning of sweat on his brow.

“I wonder how you intend to protect us while we are in this den of iniquity.”

“As your host, I can guarantee your safety so long as you remain on board. We have some understanding with the, ah, concerned citizens trying to keep some order in that lost place. We take no responsibility for your safety if you do decide to step out, though I would be happy to give you some piece of advice depending on what you seek. Just remember to exercise caution. There are many in these walls who are versed in the art of... disposal.”

Leit feigned a huff.

“Oh, if only the dukes kept a better handle of that place. Now that the war is almost over, things could change for the better.”

Viv thought it would take less effort to launch a nice SCALP missile on that rot and rebuild somewhere else. Just have to make sure not to do it downwind.

“Will you be going out?”

“Are there churches here?”

“I understand that Enttiku and Sardanal have a presence. Would you like to see a priest?”

“Yes.”

“I am sure it can be arranged.”

Leit gave Viv some advice on where to go. Fortunately, the city was not so large that Viv had to get lost in the seedier sections. The path from the pier to the church of the goddess of death was straightforward enough, and the only safe hotel in the vicinity was practically across the street from it. Viv could definitely use a night of sleep on solid ground. She also wanted to get started on Sidjin, if only to see how much work she had. A quick request to Arthur for monster meat yielded a mighty scowl.

You wait for me.

Too stinky.

Unsafe.

“I promise I’ll wait for your return, and yes, some of the humans here will be very bad. We have to be careful.”

You go with Sidjin?

“We’ll go together, all three of us.”

Mother fancies Sidjin?

Strong male.

Hurt, though.

“Maybe...”

Mother cannot make eggs too soon!

I am too small!

“I will leave my eggs unfertilized for now and the foreseeable future, thank you very much. Don’t you worry, you magnificent scaley lady.”

Okay!

Arthur left once more. Viv was getting concerned that the dragonling was spending more and more time ranging out. She wasn’t sure how fast dragons grew. Arthur’s growth was astoundingly fast, but maybe it had merely been put on hold by the complete lack of food in the deadlands. Maybe she was much older than she looked. Or maybe that was just proper stimulation. In any case, her presence in Helock might be much more troublesome than Viv had anticipated, and there, she wouldn’t be strong enough to protect her. It didn’t matter to Viv if a dragon armada burnt the place to the ground to avenge Arthur’s death. She would still be dead. Viv could not let that happen. She had to find a solution, but what? Her clock was ticking.

She would have to check with the academy. That was best. Failing that, she would find a way to make sure the dragonette had enough room not to feel cramped. She had to get to Helock. A dead Viv could not protect anything.

Sidjin joined the crew on the deck while they moored. The piers were perhaps the cleanest and most organized part of the city, according to what she could see from her vantage point near the prow of the River Flower. An official type of guy walked to Leit, flanked by sturdy men wielding truncheons. There was even a mage clad in gaudy robes keeping an eye out near the dockmaster office. Viv could perceive black and blue from here. She associated it with water and death. The mage paid them no heed, perhaps because they kept their aura under control.

“Do you want to have a stroll? I would warn you against the attempt, as I think your sinuses may not survive the ordeal,” Sidjin offered.

The mage had used a spell to make the air fresh around them for now, but had warned it could not be maintained on the move without some preparation and Viv was unwilling to risk getting too much attention from the local guards and mages. This was not the best part of Enoria, but a city that had what she believed was a third step mage playing grunt on their docks were bound to have some more serious opposition deeper in.

“I was thinking about a quick visit to the church. Unless you think it’s too risky?”

“The only people who are protected in Markeis are those who don’t need it, so we should be fine. If I may come with you.”

“I want to have a look at you for the healing spell, so yes.”

“Oh, shall we go then?”

“We wait for Arthur to return.”

Sidjin knew she was a dragon and frowned, perhaps concerned about the flammability of the wooden buildings. Nevertheless, he didn’t protest. Arthur soon returned with a pair of green-coated male harriens, their hare-like bodies intact beside the broken necks.

“Let’s go then.”

The odor landscape was just as fucking dreadful as Viv feared. Rancid waters and rotten fish piled on with the rest to lift the mix to nauseating levels. Viv had to grab a shawl to fold over her nose, which made the already warm temperature unbearable. They walked over cracked cobblestones at a slow pace to save Sidjin’s strength, which was fine. The passersby mostly ignored the show of weakness thanks to Arthur’s presence. People didn’t need to recognize a dragon to understand fangs and scales meant fuck off. Nevertheless, she saw too many calculating gazes for comfort.

The crew of Markeis was a mixed bunch. There were workers with grim airs laboring quietly and rather efficiently, but there were also lowlives of two types: the successful and the scum. Some of the scum had appearances she would have never expected to see outside of movies, complete with missing teeth and bloodshot eyes. There were also whores and street urchins, none of whom dared approach on account of, again, Arthur. They were hailed though, and asked for alms, or offered various services. Viv thought it better not to stop for anything and Sidjin didn’t protest.

They saw less bustle farther in. Beggars and vagrants lined the streets while stalls sold patched up shirts and watery soup. Thugs seemed to be the main occupation for men. More than once, Viv saw town folks disappearing into crowded, unmarked houses. They were offered mind-altering substances on seven separate occasions.

“Dream powder, lady? A walk on the wild side, ey?”

People finally left her alone when they arrived near the temple of Enttiku. Viv judged that finding a priest of trade and fertility in this city invited trouble, but death must be a familiar presence here, and she expected the place to be neutral ground. She wasn't disappointed. The temple occupied an isolated square around a statue sporting a cowl and a ritual mask, the symbols of the goddess of death. It was kept clean by a sweeping acolyte, and no one stood around to annoy people.

“You are rather guarded, Viviane. I may not look like much but I can defend myself and us, should the need arise. We could even find a shop for magical tools, if you wished it.”

“I'd rather not walk around too much. When I asked Leit if he intended to get slaves, he said the guild would not accept, meaning it's possible to find some here.”

“I would be surprised if you couldn't, though they will be called indentured servants or similar euphemisms since slavery is currently not tolerated in Enoria. Does the sight of slave upset you?”

“Yes. If I see something too horrendous, I might do something everyone will regret. Look, it's much easier for me not to do anything if I don't see anything. Call me hypocritical, if you must.”

“Then every person is. The correct balance between helping others in need and helping oneself is so difficult to identify. Many have tried and failed. If it's any comfort, one woman cannot fix this cesspit, not even with your powers and all the time in the world.”

“Thanks, Sidjin.”

“We can still murder idiots if it looks like we won't get caught. I can make the bodies disappear.”

“Thanks Sidjin, you're a dear. That would be quite the date.”

Sidjin choked on that, and dragged Viv onward with more strength than she expected.

The church compound began with dark iron gates. Past that was one of the most lush, beautiful gardens Viv had ever seen anywhere. The terrible stench of Markeis stopped once they passed through, to Arthur's obvious delight. Viv was tempted to walk to the large black brick-and wood edifice, obviously the main building, but Sidjin signaled to the side towards where they could hear a voice. They walked under an arched passageway laden with thorny bushes ripe with black roses, their perfume enticing. They stopped at the edge of a clearing surrounded by hedges and blooming trees. Four people occupied the center of the place near an artificial spring that bubbled happily in the background. There was an old man and a younger one, both clad in dark garments and showing kindly expressions.

[Priest of Enttiku]

[Acolyte of Enttiku]

Viv's budding soul sense revealed that the older man was quite more powerful than he let on, probably a necessity in this place. He was talking softly to a young man leaning on the ground, his skin pale and clammy. A cloak covered his chest, while one of his hands rested in the frantic grip of a younger girl on the verges of tears. Viv briefly smelled a waft of spoiled meat before the garden took back its hold.

They stayed at a respectful distance while the priest soothed his patient. The young man's breath was frantic, but it slowed down when the priest's voice rose.

"Forget your sins, for you are human and no human is without sin. Enttiku has weighed your heart and did not find you unworthy. Forget your mistakes, as you shall forget those of others, for only those who have never tried do not know the taste of failure. Leave without regret, because you are in the embrace of the cowled one. Sleep, now. Sleep."

The young man gave one last rattling breath, then he died. A light glow shone under his skin and his body slowly fell apart into ashes, not like a crumbling statue, like petals or leaves in autumn. Viv felt it wasn't so bad, though the girl cried hard. She quickly inspected her.

[Scullery maid]

Yeah, not the best option in such a lawless place. As far as she remembered, this path could lead to high administrative roles but she doubted the girl would be given a chance. The priest patted the bereaved by the elbow and gently guided her to a side door, where a nun took over, then he returned. Meanwhile, the acolyte had been collecting the ashes with a trowel and ceremonious attention. Suddenly, she could guess what they used as fertilizer. There were worse ends, she supposed. One could end up floating on the river Shal.

"How may I assist you?" the priest asked.

The man had lost his fatherly demeanor in favor of a more solemn poise.

"How may I help you today, my children?"

"I would like access to a room to conduct a healing ritual, and I need the assistance of a priest. I'm willing to compensate you for your time."

The man looked both relieved and annoyed at the same time, even more so when he cast a cursory glance at Arthur and the dragonette reacted in the normal way to being glared at: by rising on her hind legs and spreading her arms and wings in defiance. Like that, she was only slightly less tall than the priest.

It was the most adorable 'the fuck you want' Viv had ever witnessed. A part of her told her she should teach Arthur to be respectful but the greater part thought it was a lost cause in a dragon and she should just make sure Arthur didn't steal, murder, or pillage. Unprovoked.

"A healing ritual?"

“Yes. If you’ll accompany me, I’ll be glad to show you.”

“Madam, we are in a place of worship. Please do not waste our time.”

Viv immediately unleashed the full extent of her intimidation. The priest did not back out and his own skills rose up in defense. The acolyte staggered, however.

“You will accept, or you will refuse, but you will do so with respect. Goddess or not,” Viv stated with absolute finality.

“I expected a man of your stature to show more discernment,” Sidjin said. “All who seek succor can find it in the embrace of the cowled one. Is it not so in Markeis?” he asked.

The priest took a calming breath, then he nodded.

“Please do not take my doubts as refusal. Our door is always open for the needy, yes, but you are not healers. Neither of you. Are you serious?”

“Quite so,” Viv said. “Look, you have two casters obviously here for a ritual. Why would we be joking?”

“Hmm. This is highly unusual. Keep in mind that any magic that violates Enttiku’s credo will be met with maximum force. I am Kinnir, and I accept. Now please, follow me.”

Viv rolled her eyes at the man’s back, clearly within sight of the bristling acolyte while Sidjin merely chuckled. The pair walked at their pace after the priest who had to slow down to match them. Viv leaned and whispered in Sidjin’s ear.

“He looked relieved before he heard our request. What was that about? Do you know?”

“I think he expected a euthanasia request. They are forced to accept, although it goes against their faith that all should meet Enttiku when their time comes, and not before.”

“Interesting.”

Viv saved this information for later. Maybe one day, she.... better not think about that. She would find a solution before black mana killed her. Had to.

The room they were offered was barely more than a clean cell. The first distraction occurred when she realized she had to prepare the monster flesh first. Butchers had done it for her, back in Kazar.

“You merely need to shred this, right?” Sidjin asked.

“Yes.”

“Oh, I can shred.”

And indeed, he could. The bucket provided by the church was soon filled with reddish goop. The main difficulty had been to keep the innards from splattering on the walls. Sidjin's spell was not nice.

"Remind me not to piss you off," The witch mumbled.

"Oh you would need to go quite far for that, Viviane."

By then, Viv was almost done drawing the healing spell on the ground, and the priest's expression had gone from dubious to amazed.

"You! You are her! This is a regrowth spell! You are Bob the Calamity! I mean, Bibiane. Of Kazar."

It was an improvement over "Great Black Slut", Viv judged.

"Alright, lay on the table, Sldjin. Hmm. Naked."

"I beg your pardon?" the fallen prince asked in panic.

"I'm sorry but I need to have a full analysis of your body's current state and... you should be naked. I assure you, this is a medical procedure. I will be professional."

"Right. Yes. Of course. I should have... anticipated that. Obviously."

"Do you need assistance?"

"What? No! No. But, hmmm, let me cast a warming spell. This place is chilly, and my constitution is not what it used to be."

"Of course."

Viv recognized a stalling tactic when she saw one, but if the prince needed a moment, she would grant him one. When he was ready, he disrobed, then awkwardly lay down on the cold stone.

It was just as dreadful as she had expected. The state of the unmarred skin reminded her of death camp pictures. The rest was filled with horrifying scar tissue. He was also painfully thin, though not deathly so. Entire muscle fibers were missing, leaving a crevice behind under the taut skin. Many of the lesions were burn scars. He had also been emasculated. Shaved completely. There was nothing left.

The emotion that welled inside of Viv's heart was not disgust, but anger. Anger that someone would do that to a person she appreciated. All of this for having saved a species from an unwilling sacrifice. She counted every wound as she checked his body and tallied them in case Glastia fucked with her one day. As for why he was still thin, it was clear to her via the diagnostic tool.

“You have severe nerve damage in multiple places. Are you suffering from chronic pain?”

“I have pain tolerance in the fifth tier, if you must know,” Sidjin said with a fragile grin.

Viv placed a folded band under his head as a pillow.

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Priest Kinnir, if you could put the patient to sleep?”

“No, wait!” Sidjin screamed.

The others froze. Even Arthur squealed softly from her corner.

“Please, no sleep. I can take the pain, but I can’t.... not know. Not move. Sorry.”

“Well, alright,” Viv said. “But no fussing or I’ll have to stop.”

“Agreed.”

Viv started with his left hand, which had no fingers left. The painful part was that she had to cut some of the scarred but healthy flesh to regrow the finger properly. Reattaching the tendons required her to work fast, but she had ample experience by then. One by one, Viv rebuilt his digits. Sidjin inspected them after she was done.

“I... can feel them. And this one, I used to have a scar on the last knuckle.”

Although it was possible to keep a patient awake during surgery, Viv found being talked to spooky and annoying.

“Please remain quiet while I operate, thank you. Priest Kinnir, if you would use your healing powers on the fingers.”

Blessed silence returned while Viv checked the other hand. Paradoxically, regrowing the tendons would be more delicate and require her to cut more tissue.

“This is quite a fascinating bit of magic.”

“Oh my god Sidjin, if you don’t shut up, so help me!”

“Sorry sorry sorry sorry.”

Viv finished soon enough, did the eye quickly since she had experience with those, then it was Kirrin who interrupted her.

“My apologies, caster, but the time for the night prayer comes soon, and...”

“Yeah okay, he needs to rest and recover from the blood loss anyway. One last surgery, it should be quick.”

“Yes, I was about to say, we will not have the time to heal this man within the next week I’m afraid, but I would happily stay a little longer.”

“Okay. Then, teeth. With this, we’ll have healed some of the most sensitive body parts so it should drastically improve his quality of life.”

The mage had hidden his teeth during all the conversation they’d had, but Viv had just seen the damage up close. Unfortunately, the surgery required her to pull out some pretty good prosthetics and that was a rather unpleasant moment for everyone involved. Eventually, however, Sidjin had all his teeth, both his eyes, intact lips, and functional hands.

It didn’t fix the rest but it was a start.

By then, Viv was more excited than tired, but Kinnir had duties to attend, and night had fallen. She helped Sidjin dress up since the stone had not helped with his pain. That left Kinnir hesitantly waiting for them by the door.

“Lady Bibiane. If I may. The church is willing to compensate you if you can leave the circle. We can —”

“Keep it. For free,” Viv interrupted.

Kinnir’s mouth kept moving but no words came out.

“I already told the church of Neriad they could spread the knowledge as far as they wished. Your difficulty is that you will need a black mana specialist to use the spell successfully, but I think someone may eventually find a workaround. Keep the circle, copy it, spread it, I don’t mind. Just credit me or something.”

Kinnir walked her back to the gates of the compound. From there, they only had to cross a square to get to the inn.

“I apologize for the way I treated you,” the priest said. He seemed moved. “I have been in Markeis for over a decade, trying to keep things together. Every request is a trap. Every favor comes with strings. I just... this place got to me.”

“Don’t worry,” Viv replied, suddenly mollified. “I think I understand. Arthur?”

“Squee!”

“Can you see if anyone is waiting for us?”

They could see the gates of the inn from here, but Viv was paranoid.

As it turned out, someone was waiting for them.

A human!

With a bow!

“Alright, we’re going to cross. If she draws the bow, land on her and kill her. No flames. If she doesn’t draw the bow, land on her and bite her.”

Bite!

Scary dragon!

“Exactly.”

“I could just walk you, they wouldn’t dare attack me,” Kinnir offered.

“That’s kind but we would be bothered tomorrow.”

Viv crossed the plaza with a shivering Sidjin. As they reached the large metal doors, a piercing scream shook the night somewhere behind them. Viv didn’t turn, and a few moments later, Arthur landed quietly by her side.

I bit her ass.

Sneaky dragon!

“Well done, Arthur. Thank you for protecting us.”

“Squeeeee!”

“Thank you, Arthur,” Sidjin politely added. “You are a true terror of the skies.”

The dragonette puffed up with pride. Her chin lifted, then she blew some smoke and walked towards the doors first.

The lobby of the Haven Inn was more fortified than the average bank.

“One night, one room, please,” Viv asked.

“You don’t need —”

“Look, Sidjin, you’re shivering. Let me help, okay?”

The man didn’t protest while they were led to a small but tastefully decorated room. It had a window leading to an inner courtyard, itself covered by a skylight. Lamps cast it into a favorable light as flowers abounded. So did the guards, and they wore mail.

Sidjin refused most of the help. He was only too happy to use his intact fingers again. Sometimes, he would flex them with exaggeration. Once they had changed into something more comfortable, Viv proposed that they should sleep. The bed was large enough to accommodate them both comfortably.

“Viviane. I have to thank you. This is... I never imagined I could get better. Really better. I am so sorry you had to see me in such a state, broken and ugly. I’m no longer much of a man, and — hmm?”

Viv leaned forward and kissed him gently. She made sure to give him ample time to push her away just in case. She also broke contact immediately after. Her proposal was on the table, so to speak.

“I think you’re much of a man, Sidjin. I think you have what it takes there,” she pointed at his head, “and there,” she finished, pointing at his heart.

“As for the rest, well, it’s a work in progress.”

She’d lost him. He was blinking owlishly, the expression almost comical on his scarred knight’s face. He placed his freshly healed fingers to his lips and pressed.

“I... errr. They tickle so much.”

And then he laughed. It started as a derisive chuckle, but soon morphed into a loud, free, full-belly laugh that left him panting. He opened his eyes to see Viv’s flabbergasted expression and laughed again.

“Sorry... sorry...” he eventually managed to croak. “This was just so forward! And unexpected! Ahem!”

His expression suddenly turned serious for all of three seconds before he broke into another fit. By then, Viv was laughing by association. It was just so bubbly and contagious.

“Ahem. Right. I, Sidjin, Ex Prince of Glastia, accept your courtship. Ah, Viviane. You have no idea. Normally, I would always be the one to take the first step. You just caught me off guard, but yes. Although it is too early for me to name the feelings welling in my heart, I think I want you as much as you want me, you foolish madwoman. With all of the passion left in this decrepit frame, I long for each and every one of our conversations and your smile in the morning. Yes, I long for you. I just didn’t think anyone would fall for me ever again. Or take the first step!”

“Ok good then kiss me again to make things less awkward.”

“Gladly.”

They did so, quite chastely, then when they separated, Sidjin had a twinkle in his eyes. Both of them.

“By the way, this technically makes you the head concubine. Would you like — “

Viv mock-slapped him.

Arthur sent a chastising message from her pillow nest.

NO EGGS!

They fell asleep shortly after.

The trip back to the ship went without a hitch. Viv was also pleased to see that Sidjin's appetite had redoubled now that chewing was not an exotic form of torture. He was giddy, though he knew they had to postpone the rest of the treatment until the next major city.

“I can wait a few more weeks. I'm just so happy to have some of my stuff back.”

He closed one eye and looked around with the new one.

“It works!”

“Of course it does,” Viv scoffed.

The mood plummeted once they reached the River Flower, however.

“A major faction the guild collaborated with has, ah, recently changed management. I'm afraid they have requested a renegotiation of the terms. They've asked us to dock at a private pier farther down the river, and I fear we might be a little delayed, but rest assured —”

Sidjin and the poor captain looked flabbergasted when Viv raised a fist to the air and screamed on top of her voice.

“What did I say? What did I fucking say? I warned you!”

It was time to test some new spells.

Chapter 103: Academy-approved Battle Magic

“You are not using battle magic,” Leit insisted as he worried his hands. “The guild has strict guidelines on hostile negotiations. If there is any sort of problem, we cut our losses and let their recovery division handle it.”

Viv looked up from the polished deck, where she and Sidjin were busying themselves tracing a complex array.

“Sure,” she said. “You do the negotiations.”

“We won’t stop you,” Sidjin added.

“In fact, we’ll cheer for you and be supportive.”

“We hope you succeed!”

“All the best to you.”

Then the pair returned to their tracing.

“This is technically destruction of my property,” the poor merchant mumbled without conviction.

“Normally, a fourth step war mage would charge upward ten gold talents for a semi-permanent defensive array,” Sidjin mentioned off-handedly.

“For now,” Viv added. “It’s a shield, not a weapon. Think of it as, uh, plating.”

“Besides, if someone spots it, it means they’re on your deck and by then it’s a bit late, don’t you think?”

The merchant didn’t seem relieved.

“Look, passengers have a right to defend themselves if assaulted, right? And it’s not your responsibility if and when they do, right?” Viv asked again, this time trying for the legal angle.

The merchant stopped, then made to talk, then reconsidered. Finally, he shrugged.

“This is technically correct. HOWEVER! However, if you attack the other party, then they will destroy this ship as retaliation.”

“They can certainly try,” Sidjin mumbled.

“If it’s about money, we can give it to them and have your recovery team compensate us later, yes?”

“Well yes, minus the fees,” Leit agreed.

Viv glared.

“Very reasonable fees, for expenses you see. But if the recovery division makes a surplus, the fee is waived!”

“What my companion is trying to say is that we will not interfere with tariffs, no matter how cutthroat they may be. It is the potential other demands we are concerned about,” Sidjin explained.

“Other demands? Why would they make other demands?”

Both of the casters sighed with eerie synchronization, sending a chill down Leit’s spine.

“Call it intuition,” the witch said.

“Or the strength of experience.”

“Squee!” Arthur added with definitive conviction.

Leit had a terrible feeling about this.

The *River Flower* sailed down the Shal river like the cautious fat lady she was, her holds filled with legally acquired and properly documented goods of dubious origins, all within guild guidelines of course. The mood aboard was grim. Most of the crew had not been allowed to get on shore leave, and the news of new negotiations filled them with dread. Sometimes, bandits and criminals loved to make a statement. Said statement would lead to a short visit by the recovery division, following which the river bandits would behave for the five years it took for someone more ambitious to get on top of the backstab pile. Then it would start all over again.

The knowledge that one’s death would be avenged was of little value to these simple sailors. They would very much prefer to be home safe, Viv could see.

She had no intention of letting anyone die. Not anyone on her side, at least.

She was also reasonably certain the metaphor would hit the fan, and as for justification for her belief, the arguments were thus.

Argument number one: the divine spark of luck.

That was it, really. The spark was both a necessary and sufficient cause for worry. Realistically, there were the questions of bounties, grudges, slavery-driven profit, greed, insanity and so on, all valid reasons, but the spark was the root of all evil. And most of the good, to be fair.

It was said that Emeric became king of the gods on luck, but Viv didn't believe that. He must have been given opportunities and seized them. Luck here was not a boon, it was a crucible. Viv didn't intend to flush away with the slag of history, so she was condemned to greatness. Or overwhelming violence.

The image of Solfis' yellow glare made her miss the old AI. She hoped he and Marruk would find a way to get in touch. The bank would let her transfer money to them, if they needed it. Without her, they were also at much less risk. She should not worry too much.

"An iron bit for your thoughts?"

"I have left friends behind. And acquaintances back in Kazar. I miss them. I'd feel much better if they were here. Oh, please don't take from that I do not appreciate your company."

"I assure you, my ego can take much more than this."

"Oh good, because I wanted to address the question of concubinage."

Sidjin's nonplussed expression satisfied Viv. It meant her attack would take him by surprise.

"You see, you are, by your own confession, an ex prince."

"Viviane?"

"While I rule over a large territory. I even have a loyal army. And a council."

"Viviane, no."

"My path is even that of the Lost Heiress."

"I got your point, thank you very much."

"So what do you think about Head Hunk as a title? Chief Himbo? His Sexyness?"

"I regret everything."

The 'private pier' requested for the meeting was barely more than a temporary jetty thrown across the muddy waters. The pontoon itself showed some rather inventive designs in

Sidjin's far-sight spell, including an articulated part hinting at its temporary and ultimately movable structure. Viv thought it was neat, even though the circumstances were not.

A welcoming committee lounged across the glade at the end of the pontoon. There were no crates of supplies, but there were horses and one cage. Every fiber of Viv's being recoiled at the sight, and she promised herself she would die swinging rather than allow herself to be captured. Or perhaps the cage was for Sidjin, who probably had a bounty on his head. She turned to him and saw the tense expression under the calm demeanor. Her friend was on edge.

She grabbed his hand, which he squeezed. The heat of his skin radiated up her fingers.

His shoulders relaxed ever so slightly.

"Neither of us is getting into that thing," Viv said, and the implication was clear.

"I have not just recovered my appetite to see it wasted on prison food," he joked.

Behind the joke, they were of one mind.

"Right. Arthur, darling."

"Squee?"

"Those are bad people, and we don't know if they want to attack us or merely try to scare us."

Kill them.

Burn them.

Take their gold!

"They're probably too poor to have gold, I'm afraid."

Meat?

"Stringy and stinky."

"SQUEEEEEEEEEEE."

"I know, I'm frustrated as well. But I have a task for you, if you don't mind. People might try to climb aboard while we talk. Could you pick them off the hull if this happens?"

Kill?

"Yes."

“It soothes me to know we have the terror of the sky looking after us,” Sidjin said. “Please accept my appreciation.”

The canny man ceremoniously offered a string of monster meat jerky to the dragonette, who munched it with all the dignity she could muster. Thus adulated, She-Who-Feasts-On-Spider-And-Gets-Much-Gold took to the big blue above, to start her squealing vigil. Viv’s heart grew more peaceful.

“How dangerous is she, really?” Sidjin asked.

“Arthur is a tiny disaster when she gets in the mood. Honestly, I’m not even sure how she can be taken down. Even a skilled archer would struggle.”

“Are you not afraid for her?”

“I am, but she’s not a human child who needs guidance for over a decade. She’s a juvenile dragon. It’s already a miracle we can work together and communicate. I think, one day, she’ll just leave. Try to find her own kind. I just adopted her. I’m probably not even that good of a mom.”

“You saved her life didn’t you?” Sidjin asked.

“Well, yes.”

“Then it’s a good start.”

He sighed, then looked at the quickly approaching pontoon.

“Were you trying to distract me?”

“Trying?” Viv asked.

“Thanks.”

The River Flower slowed down to a stop. A pair of worried sailors lowered the gangplank, then withdrew to a position near the sails, ready to leave on a moment’s notice. Viv made no effort to approach. She wouldn’t be leaving the ship.

Mouq’s number one rule about getting out of an ambush was: don’t get fucking ambushed you dimwit. This felt like an ambush and she had the advantage while on the ship, ergo, she wouldn’t take a step out of that arthritic tub. If things turned sour — and she felt they would — it would be preferable to stay aboard and to keep it mobile.

The thugs had noticed her presence. Viv counted twenty-four including nine archers and, unsurprisingly, one caster who felt like reliable earth and free gray mana. While the rank and files feigned nonchalance, a group of three walked the pier. Viv inspected them.

[River Mage, dangerous, one who specializes in water and air manipulations.]

[Unseen Arrow: very dangerous, one who specialized in shooting unaware targets from the shadows.]

[Blade of the Night: very dangerous, an assassin specialized in close quarter combat.]

All of them shared the killer trait, meaning they had taken quite a few lives over the years. The inspection also confirmed what Viv thought: her skill assessed the danger potential of each target not to the world in general but to her specifically. A knight like Lorn, the Kazaran temple captain, would probably stand a better chance against the assassin than against the mage. To Viv, a blade in the back was eminently more dangerous than a spell to the face. The spell, she could block.

What the inspection skill did not return was how young they were for leaders. The mage took the right, and he was a handsome lad with a square jaw and a scar running down his cheek. His robe looked ratty and pieced together from spare stuff, but she could also see a hint of mail under some of the folds. The archer was a woman with a short bow and a tightly fitting gambeson. She had rings under her eyes and a sour expression. The assassin took the center, clad in a dark armor of superior make, which felt enchanted. Viv could see a lot of dark metal, and yet the woman walked in perfect silence. She was also striking, with large, slightly manic brown eyes and a great many tattoos. They didn't look a day above twenty-five. They also looked cocky and bored, a dangerous mix. For them.

"Welcome to our little party," the assassin said, spreading her arms. "It's so good to deal with proper businessmen. Why don't you come and join us so we can have a little talk?"

"Of course," Leit said. "I'm sure we can reach an agreement between civilized people."

He made for the gangplank until the assassin turned her gaze on Viv.

"You too," she demanded.

"I'm fine where I am, thanks."

"That wasn't a suggestion."

The mood turned instantly heavy. Viv felt intimidation brush against her soul. It was pretty good, but it felt... blander than her own, more built up on repetition than on meaningful displays. In any case, it wasn't even close to making her sweat.

"I said, I'm fine where I am," she replied.

"Oh, you're a feisty one. Our boss likes feisty ones, don't he, lads?" she asked, and a few people laughed nervously. Viv wasn't duped. They felt wary.

"I'm fine where I am. You can say your piece here."

“That’s the thing, honey. The ship is one thing but there’s something that’s piqued our interest. You see, Darla here said she watched you go into a temple with a cripple, absolute wreck of a man, and when he came out, he was less of a cripple.”

Viv bristled. The term the assassin had used in Enorian was extremely insulting, especially in a culture where the man was expected to provide and fight. She didn’t like her boyfriend being insulted. Not one bit.

Unaware of Viv’s mounting anger, the assassin kept talking.

“So here’s the thing. A little bird told me the temples are in a tizzy, see? Someone came up with a way to regrow limbs. I’m sure you can imagine there are a lot of limbs to be regrown around those parts. It would be a flourishing business and also help the needy, as you can imagine. Lots of demand all around. My boss would like to create a, errrr, favorable business environment for the healing, yeah? So you’ll come down and discuss it.”

Before anything else, Viv turned to the acher.

“How’s the butt?”

“Bitch!”

“And I suppose,” Viv said, returning her attention to the assassin, “that the cage over here would be my carriage?”

“Only if you make things difficult, otherwise we’ll be happy with this,” she said.

Manacles, the magical kind. Viv remembered those were very expensive. You didn’t spend that much resources on a temporary investment.

So yeah, no. She’d fight that to her last breath, if that’s what it took.

“I’m not placing myself at the mercy of a crime lord, not now, not ever.”

“Look lady, it won’t be slavery either. You’ll get a fair share of the profit and we’ll let you go when you become too important for us to keep. Someone’s going to try and use you anyway, might as well be us because we’re far from being the worst out there. Not that you have a choice.”

“There is always a choice, and my choice is not to be used.”

The trio was clearly losing patience. Leit was slowly retreating up the plank, his face ashen. As for Sidjin, he was letting Viv take the lead. Viv felt more than saw his focus shift from one group to another, making sure no one attacked her by surprise. Viv also felt a lot of mana coiled within his being, hidden by a shield. He was letting her know, but she’d bet a hand the river mage had no idea. This was the level of control he had.

“Lady, I don’t know where you come from but this here is Markeis land, not your pampered backward shithole. It’s the real world. You’ll find that your fancy hair dye and nice clothes won’t count for shit when I have my blade kissing your throat, you hear?”

Viv judged here and there that diplomacy would lead nowhere. There was still a chance to force them to back down, however, and that was better than a fight. Fights were messy affairs.

“A glorified street thug telling me I need to see the world? That’s rich. You got it backward. Markeis is the isolated backward shitstain on Enoria’s knickers and you lots are just gnats feeding on it. You have seen nothing of the world... yet.”

Viv cast the sneaky cloaky, slowly letting the solid black mana cover her form. She didn’t see herself, but she knew from the village that the sight could be intimidating. Black tendrils coiled out, seeking through air like lampreys.

“You are not the big players here, you are street scum so out of their depth you can’t even comprehend it.”

She cast a telekinesis spell and the manacles lurched out of the assassin’s grip, her reflexes working against her as she let go to grab at a dagger. Viv grabbed the purloined restraints. The thugs were going for their weapons. She raised her new hive shield spell. The intimidation might still work.

And then Sidjin’s first strike hit the shore.

The explosive spell obliterated the entire pier and parts of the glade beyond. A cloud of wood shrapnel and red mist expanded out in a cone. The shockwave hit Viv like a punch.

Of the archer and the mage, there was nothing left.

The sheer surprise stunned Viv for an instant, then the first arrows plinked uselessly against her magical shield. Compared to the javelins Enorian military archers shot, those were barely mosquito bites, but she didn’t lower her guard. The assassin had instantly drifted out of the blast zone. A string of darkness threaded after her, showing her movement. Viv cast a net at her. The bands of black mana arched after their target, but the assassin used a skill and disappeared.

Slippery.

Viv focused on the archers next. Her net took into account the nimble warriors’ flexibility, cutting their escape options before skewering them. The last of the thugs were running for their lives into the nearby woods.

There was a terrible screech, a white blur, and the sound of flesh being submitted to forces it was not designed to withstand. A human voice screamed but it was cut short by a wave of heat. A last arrow clanged against a much larger shield surrounding the ship. Sidjin had rushed to the deck circle and placed the ship in a protective bubble.

Arthur's head popped over the railing.

"Squee!"

"Thank you," Viv replied, "but..."

She leaned forward and saw a trail of blood on her left, with the assassin's corpse slowly sinking in the mud. On the right, an enterprising fellow had tried to scale the wood and been scorched for his trouble. There was also smoke and, yep, the ship was burning.

"Arthur. You set our ship on fire!"

Enemy!

"You burned the enemy and the ship too."

"Squee."

"We are on the ship!"

The dragonette sheepishly moved her clawed hand. Water formed a depression, then a wave brushed along the hull, covering the small fire. It faded for an instant but the embers immediately started to smolder after the water was gone.

"Squee."

"Arthuuuuuuuur."

There was a burst of magic from the central circle and the fire petered out. Viv and Arthur glanced at Sdjinn, standing in the middle of the circle with dignity.

"The great Arthur has no need to trouble herself with this task. I anticipated that we may be fired upon — pun intended — and added a few defensive measures. Although, your fire is several times stronger than what human mages could manage so please refrain from hitting us in the future."

The mighty She-Who-Feasts-On-Spiders-etc consented to it with a graceful wave of her sinuous neck.

"So..." Leit said.

The shore was the scene of the most savage devastation.

"So yes. The negotiations, ah. Right. Say, your marsh drake, or what I thought was a marsh drake, is a marsh drake, right? Marsh drakes blow fire. Correct?"

Qualifying the little menace as an 'arson gremlin' seemed ill-advised at the time, Viv judged.

"I mean, the evidence is in front of your eyes," she bullshitted.

"Yes. Obviously, she cannot be a dragon," Leit said.

"That would be insane."

"Yes, well..."

A distant tree crashed down.

"I suppose we should be on our way then?"

"That might be wise," Sidjin said, looking behind.

Viv pocketed the manacles just in case, though she was also considering dropping the cursed thing at the bottom of the river. She was disappointed when she realized that besides telekinesis, none of the spells she'd practiced could compare to shaped black mana when it came to battle. She would need more time. The manacles were a nice acquisition, however.

"It appears we have picked up a tail," Sidjin said.

Behind them, two fast ships appeared from behind a bend. There were also three smaller skiffs that moved as fast as modern jet skis. Each carried a pilot, a mage, and a couple of archers. They all bore a crest like a shield with a fish on it.

"I think we're being pursued by the law," Viv idly commented.

It was her first time. Technically.

"I know, exciting, isn't it?" Sidjin added.

"Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear that won't do at all," Leit said. "By guild rule, I must stop!"

"Those are clearly criminals in uniform. They would have attacked us if we didn't refuse to be kidnapped," Viv said.

"Irrelevant to the situation," Leit said as the skiff made a quick approach.

"Don't you have a duty to protect your passengers from harm?"

"Well... yes... within reasonable limits."

"Those are reasonable limits, we just need you to keep going."

"Think of it this way," Sidjin added with a pleasant voice as he poured mana in the circle. "We won't allow ourselves to be taken, so if you still want a ship at the end of the day, you'd best move, yes?"

“Oh dear. The guild won’t like this one bit. Very well. Full sails!”

The cry was picked up by the few sailors remaining on deck. Others rushed out of the hold and busied themselves doing sailor things. It mostly involved undoing knots, that Viv could tell.

Meanwhile, the skiffs were getting close now. One of the mages cast a spell and his authoritative voice carried over the Shal river.

“We have found you in violation of the law of Markeis. Drop anchor, lower your weapons, and prepare to be boarded.”

“Oh, oh, oh, can I tell him no? I’ve always wanted to do something like that,” Viv said.

Sidjin nodded, clearly concerned, but Viv merely used a voice enhancing spell and clutched the railing.

“ANY OF YOU FUCKING PIGS MOVE, AND I’LL EXECUTE EVERY MOTHERFUCKING LAST ONE OF YOU!” she roared with excitement.

Sidjin sighed and raised the shields. It was probably an outlander thing.

In the dark recesses of a lightless, confined space, a pair of yellow eyes lit up. The ancient mind behind those ominous orbs inspected a new addition to its charge’s profile.

New Title added: Anarchist

//NO.

//DO NOT TRY ME, DEAD ONE.

The title faded away, having fulfilled its function. Nous, God of Magic, would never let his own death get in the way of a little bit of trolling.

Viv’s first spells hit one of the agile ships, despite the pilot’s desperate attempts to stop her. One of the nets killed an archer, but the mage reacted fast. He lifted a hand, and a black mana shield blocked her next spells.

“You are insane!” the mage screamed, spell still active.

Several offensive spells launched towards her, but Sidjin's larger shield blocked them without issue. The skiffs activated something, and a blue, watery shield expanded over them. A net from Viv penetrated only lightly, and the damage was almost instantly repaired.

Nevertheless, she could have killed another man if she had aimed a bit lower and the three fast boats sailed away towards the other shore, never slowing down. At least, they could not attack the other side of the River Flower since the old ship was still very close to the edge of the river. Viv switched to blast and fired once, arcing her projectile to hit the ship's center, realizing it could only move forwards and to the sides.

The smaller ship stopped where it was and let the spell land harmlessly in front of it.

"Wait, those things have breaks?"

"The blue mages use their power to stay mobile, but it's tiring business. Keep the pressure on!" Sidjin advised.

Their foes looked like they were changing tactics, seeing how useless attacking the Flower itself was. Viv shuddered to think what would have happened if they hadn't prepared.

Their new strategy involved a massive wave, which they were building up farther and to the right of the River Flower. The depression in the otherwise flat waters looked extremely strange, as if a turbid ocean had suddenly come from across dimensions. Viv realized the danger. Even if the wave didn't sink the ship, which Viv didn't think it would, the three fast crafts merely had to delay them until the heavier ships caught up to them.

They charged towards Viv, tidal wave in tow.

Which also made them much easier to hit. Viv waited, then arranged three blasts which she shot at the same time. The lead skiff tried to dodge and caught two instead. The ship disintegrated, though the mage and one of the archers managed to dive in time. The other two split up once it became clear inertia would do the job for them. Viv watched the wave approach and realized she was without recourse, once again. Fortunately, she was not without allies. Sidjin's circle flashed blue and the waters around it settled immediately. Only a tiny joke of a ripple came to lick the River Flower's Hull. Viv was aghast.

"Did you think of everything?" she asked Sidjin.

"I have something against wind attacks as well," he replied.

The worst thing was, he wasn't even smug about it. Perfect preparation was just a matter of fact.

"Okay then," Viv said, then she returned her attention to the two surviving skiffs. She targeted the one who had raised the black shield earlier, casting in quick succession. As expected, the first blast was blocked by a black mana shield, which made it perfect when the yoink hit.

The expression of pure bafflement on the mage's face was a memory Viv would cherish for a long while.

The next blast took the mage's hand with it. He screamed and the fast craft came to a stop. The last one disengaged.

The two larger ships didn't give up the chase. They were quickly gaining on the Flower. Viv walked to the stern and watched them approach.

"Can't we go faster?" she asked Leit, who was standing in the middle of the deck with fear-tinged dignity while his crew did their best.

"We will not outrun them," Sidjin replied.

"It is as the good mage says, I'm afraid. Patrol ships are designed to catch up with all but the fastest transport ships. They are not even at full speed right now. I fear... a confrontation will be inevitable."

Leit's next words were interrupted by a loud clang and Viv turned just in time to see a flash of metal. She reflexively shielded, but she was not the target this time.

Sidjin lifted a fist and punched forward. A woosh of displaced air heralded a terrible impact. Wood groaned, and only Viv's reinforced reflexes prevented her from falling. She looked down to see a harpoon smacked sideways into the hull. The shaft had only dug a few centimeters in, thankfully. If it had been the tip going in first, they would have had trouble.

A chain followed the harpoon, attached to the ship behind them. It was already growing taut.

"You stopped that?" Viv wondered. The projectile was clearly enchanted to the gills.

"No, I attacked the chain. It's not enchanted after the first ten links or so."

"Oh," Viv replied.

She blasted the chain and cut it cleanly.

"That will work nicely. They can still catch us, however," Sidjin said. He calmly walked down and returned with a metal plate engraved with symbols.

"Is that our spare heating plate?" Leit blurted.

"Yes."

The mage threw it in the water.

"I can reimburse you?" Sidjin suggested.

"At this stage, I think I can justify it as a business expense."

Viv was about to ask a question when a panicked sailor burst out from below deck.

“Something’s eating into the hull! We have a breach!”

Viv’s mind went into overdrive. She leaned over the railing the sailor was pointing out and saw absolutely nothing.

She could, however, feel the blue mana being hurled at the wood. It felt constructed.

“It’s the mage we sank, the first one.”

“Alas, protective domes seldom extend to the lower part of the hull. Can you handle it?”

Viv thought. Her disintegration mana was strong but also indiscriminate. It would disperse against the water before she could cover the bubble of blue she felt under her feet, and that was before she got through the bubble the mage used around himself not to drown. She imagined fighting a blue mage near water would universally be considered a bad idea, but it was done. If only she could see him and...

Actually, maybe she could.

Viv slowed down time and focused to release a very, very powerful blast of light under the surface. The rave-like purple glow lit the murky waters, revealing the frame of the mage floating under the surface. She cast immediately, and missed by a hair. She had not accounted for refraction.

“Fuck.”

Before Viv could strike again, the mage fled, spooked. Apparently, the man was unwilling to forfeit his life for a corrupt city. It did not surprise Viv in the slightest.

“They are gaining on us,” Leit said.

He was sweating a lot.

“I find it rather more exciting than I expected.”

“Will you reconvert into a smuggler?” Viv asked him.

“Gods no. I’m going to drink.”

“Speaking of drink, I believe the time has come to depart Enoria. The border is near. I propose to go out with a bang, Viviane dear, I’ll take the right and you take the left?”

“Gladly.”

Sidjin gestured and a whirlpool opened in front of his target, dragging it in. The prow was caught and led the rest of the ship towards the depression. Once it was close enough, Sidjin gestured again and the whirlpool turned into a maw of colorless energy blades. The crew yelled with consternation as their ship slowly, slowly dove into a blender.

“As I mentioned, the hulls are often a weak point,” Sidjin concluded as the spell faded. The damage was enough to put the ship out of order.

“Is it my turn?” Viv asked.

“Yes.”

“Alright. Hocus, pocus, draconicus.”

A screeching Arthur dive-bombed the remaining patrol craft, setting all the sails ablaze in a single pass. A shield blocked most of the remaining fire before it could turn the deck into a raging inferno. The pursuer was disabled, however.

“I call foul,” Sidjin calmly stated.

“I thought you would.”

While the pair bickered, Leit turned around and found a barrel to sit on. He removed a flask from his breast pocket and took a discrete swig, the container disappearing quickly when a sailor made his way to him.

“Captain, I don’t think it’s a marsh drake.”

“It is a marsh drake.”

“Okay...”

The journey continued for two days without incident. Viv did her best to practice mixing colorless and black mana, finding it surprisingly difficult. It was the first time she struggled to achieve what others took for granted. Sidjin had an explanation as to why.

“You love black mana and black mana loves you. Using it is second nature. You are struggling to do what comes naturally to other casters as a result. Don’t worry, and take your time. It’s just a minor hurdle.”

On the next morning, they arrived at a minor outpost where Leit sent a report to his headquarters via one of the guild's branches. Viv expected trouble for turning the ship into a fortress and dishing it out, but in reality, it was Leit who got chewed out and quite viciously too.

“Your negligence and lack of foresight led to the grave endangerment of your passengers. Not only did you stop at a dangerous destination, but you took no steps to address the risks inherent to changes in the gangs' hierarchy once you discovered them. After that, you knowingly led your charges into an obvious ambush. Their survival is due to their luck, skill, and wherewithal, not your services. Had they perished, you would have been removed from the list of approved captains and incurred serious penalties. Regardless, a disciplinary hearing will decide a suitable punishment. You may not decline carrying your passengers to their final destination, and you may not charge them for the repairs or the loss of your spare heating plate.”

The tongue-lashing had been delivered in a detached voice by the branch manager, since he was only here to relay it. The fact that Viv and Sidjin were present for the blame made it public, always a significant choice when humiliation was concerned. It either meant they cared about their reputation, or about Sidjin and Viv's future patronage. Perhaps a combination of both. She didn't think it could be an accident.

Nevertheless, she was more relaxed when they left since it was now someone else's problem and that's exactly how she envisioned her journey to Heloc. It made the following conversation slightly less nerve-wracking for her.

Viv picked a clearing near a waterfall, a short walk away from the outpost towards nightfall to have it. It was not going to be easy, and isolation from the other humans would not be a bad idea. She sat by a stone and shared a pile of freshly bought jerky with her adopted kiddo.

“Hey Arthur, I wanted to talk to you a bit.”

About stealing?

“Did you steal anything?”

Not.

Recently.

“It's not about stealing. I trust you are a big girl now, and you know why it's not a good idea.”

Thieving bad.

Looting good.

I know.

“What I wanted to talk about is that... I fear I may be reaching the limits of what I can do for you. Or rather, what I know I should do. You see, you’ve been growing very fast the past year, faster than any creature I’ve ever met. And certainly faster than a human.”

Of course.

All humans stupid.

Except mother.

And bankers.

“And here lies the problem. When we met, you didn’t know how to talk and you were very small. It was obvious that you needed food, water, and safety. That I could mostly do. Then you grew up and started taking things and I became generally sure you needed self-control and a sense of cause and consequences, if not right and wrong. Even then, it was a bit iffy because... you are a dragon. And I am using human logic and instincts to take care of someone who is not human by any means. It’s just the best I can do, the only thing I know how to do. It might not be enough.”

Mother provides good meat.

And gold.

“As outlandish as it sounds, there is more than meat and gold in life.”

The dragonette tilted her head pensively.

Also.

Scratches.

She nodded to herself, satisfied with her wisdom.

“And magic,” Viv said, getting Arthur’s attention. “And flight, and combat, and possibly etiquette. There are no books on dragon rearing. I’m operating on guesses, but it’s clear there is a lot for you to learn that I cannot teach. And I don’t want that, because I want what’s best for you. I just don’t know what it is.”

I am still happy.

And safe.

And not hungry.

Lots of magical meat!

I grow fast.

“Yes, you do. And you fly for longer periods of time, and explore much more than before. In bird terms, that would be called fledging.”

Am no stupid feathered thing!

“Leaving the nest, whatever you want to call it. Listen, there might be a point when you need to do more things or feel like doing more things. You can tell me. You can make your own plans. We’ll be going to Helock for a while, and I know you don’t like cities or being locked in for that matter. Don’t wait until you feel too sad to tell me. Talk to me. Tell me what you need.”

If I don’t know?

“If you don’t know what you need, we’ll figure it out together.”

Ask other dragons?

“Well... we may not have a choice. I just don’t know how to contact them without being roasted.”

I protect you!

“Sure.”

“Skreeeeeeeeeeee!”

Viv jumped at the sudden and unexpected scream, but Arthur didn’t show any sort of pain.

Called.

“Wait, what?”