

Viv stayed in a foul mood for all of two hours. The exhaustion of spellcasting and then meeting with a god compounded with her anguish to form a nebulous cloud of anger and confusion. She wished she could have stayed maudling for a day, reclining on a comforter and nursing her heart and a glass of sweet wine. Unfortunately for her, Viv had the sort of single-minded obsession that prevented her from dwelling on a problem she could not solve. Eventually, it all came down to a simple fact. She had a hurt soul that prevented her from communicating with the divine. She needed that soul healed before she could even learn what was needed to cross the veil back to earth. If it was even possible. She would get a healed soul later. In the meanwhile, there were limbs to reattach.

The first patient was to be Koro. The tall Amazon woman was still inconsolable after the loss of her arm. Viv brought her to the redesignated limb reattachment hut the very next morning while also trying to keep her expectations low.

“You can regrow my arm?”

“No, I mean maybe, I mean we think it could work.”

“You can regrow my arm?” she yelped, “Oh Viv thank you thank you I never expected you to come up with something you’re a real sister!”

Denerim wasn’t in the hut. Instead, they found Brenna alone mixing a fresh batch of goop. The town’s healer was fresh and rested now, a stark contrast from her harried self after the battle. She even looked a bit younger.

“Oh, here you are. I am standing in for the inquisitor. Neriad came to me in my sleep to share the knowledge of the relevant spell.”

She blushed slightly.

“What sort of dream?” Viv asked with suspicion.

“A woman doesn’t kiss a tell, my dear. Now let us get started, shall we?”

Viv pestered in her mind about not getting bonked in her dreams by god-like dudes, like, ever. There was no justice. Nevertheless, her patient was waiting and she started by forming the limb this time. She decided that it was best to cut the stump literally at the last moment so as to prevent her patient from bleeding to death. Shame she didn’t think of that before. Rest in Arthur, poor squirrels.

It turned out that reforming a human limb was not overly complicated compared to a squirrel limb, but also that the size difference made it a long-winded chore. Viv actually had to draw from her dagger’s power reserves to keep going. Koro was watching the thing reform with clear wonder.

“If it doesn’t work, we can still eat it. I always wondered how I tasted!”

“Squee!”

“No cannibalism in my operation room!” Viv reproached. The arm was almost fully formed now. She could see keratin solidifying over the fingertips and the muscles getting toned. The arm was white and hairless like a marble statue.

After hours of grueling labor, she had it. Probably.

It looked right.

“Can I move now? My ass hurts,” Koro told her.

“No. Now we cut off your stump and reattach the arm before you bleed out.”

“Oh.”

“I am ready,” Brenna said as she stood up from the desk where she had been working. She approached to construct and traced her own side with a light finger. It lit up and bathed her peaceful smile with golden light.

“Alright Koro, remember that this will sting a bit while your conduits are redrawn.”

“Cutting off my stump won’t sting?”

“We’re going to use an anesthetic.”

“A what now?”

“A painkiller,” Viv explained. Fortunately, the helpful apothecary had prepared quite a lot and he sure knew his stuff. Viv traced the place where they would cut with a pen and checked on Koro to see if the medicine was taking effect. The tall woman had crossed eyes and her tongue was slightly out.

“Koro?”

“Bblblblblblblblbl.”

She was high as fuck. Good enough. Viv signaled Solfis and the golem deftly removed the scarred tissue with the kind of expertise surgeons would kill for. Viv smashed the newly-formed limb against the stump just as Brenna activated her part of the ritual. The healer’s voice took on a deep pitch, one that felt mirrored by some other voice at the limit of Viv’s perception. Flesh melted into flesh as if it was putty and the fingers twitched. They turned pink as blood flooded Koro’s new extremities.

The fingers twitched again.

“Koro?”

“Blblblblbl yes?”

“Can you move your arms? Please?”

“The one I lost is sort of itchy.... Oh?”

She stared with childish wonder at her reformed arm. Her hand closed into a fist. Big, fat tears pearled in the woman's eyes then fell in a generous cascade over her ruddy cheeks. The new limb flexed with a little bit of awkwardness, but soon the amazon had every finger touching her thumbs in a rhythmical dance.

"Is this a dream? Is it?"

"No," Viv answered. She felt moved as well as they both watched the regrown limb with a mix of hope and apprehension. Even Brenna was holding her breath.

"By Neriad's fetching buttocks, have we done it? Did it work?"

Viv nodded, quite happy.

"Looks like it —urg."

Koro had taken the smaller woman in a bear hug strong enough for Viv to count all her ribs.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

"Hey. Hm. You might still feel some discomfort."

"Thank youuuuuuuuuuu I will name my first daughter after you I swear. Where is Yan? I am going to declare. YAAAAAN! You tight-assed stud! Where are youuuu?"

The woman crashed through the door despite Viv's best efforts to hold her back — the outlander would have had a better chance at stopping a bull — and disappeared somewhere in the distance in a blur.

"Did she use a skill?" Viv wondered.

//We may want to change the protocol for the following operations, Your Grace.

"I don't think using restraints is such a good idea," Viv replied.

//Then perhaps a more resilient attire?

"Yeah."

Viv had unleashed a drugged up horny two-armed bare-chested amazon upon the poor owner of the city's brothel. She wished him all the best.

"Alright, I'm exhausted for today but let's regrow an eye tomorrow."

Unfortunately for the tired Viv, the news of her achievement traveled across the land at the speed of a sprinting Koro and a party was held that night in her and Neriad's honor. Her reputation had grown so much that, by then, most of the city knew that she was an outlander. Denying the truth proved pointless because the Kazarans were like a bunch of excited kids given a big secret. They whispered it among themselves while eyeing strangers with suspicion. In this case, it just meant the prisoners. By the next day she had seventeen people lined up to regrow fingers and arms. All her tasks were delegated and she would spend most of the day in the operation building. Monster flesh was regularly retrieved by an overly enthusiastic Koro at no cost. Also, for some reason she received a message from the bank to inform her that gold swap for silver would be set at a guaranteed and generous fixed rate for her and her immediate companions only. No idea what caused that.

It only took two weeks for the first ripple to make itself known.

"We want to join Kazar."

Viv reclined in her chair, breathing in the fresh air brought on by the Kazaran tree outside her tower's window. She took on Marredyn's appearance. The mountain tribe leader still wore that incredible big hat thing on his wizened head and a pleasant smile adorned his face. She thought that she could detect a hint of tension in the way he held his tea cup. She was not sure though.

Also, last time he had tried to influence her with magic and that still pissed her off so she let him marinate in the following silence. Served him right.

"Join us?" she finally allowed.

"Yes. A long-term alliance that goes beyond the military."

A moment passed again quietly and it was clear that the tribe leader's patience was fraying.

"Just like the one we discussed during our last meeting."

"What changed?" Viv deadpanned.

Marredyn grit his teeth.

"Your new ideas are more pervasive than I thought, and many, including my own son, have expressed a great interest in rediscovering our roots. I find them hasty and careless. Perhaps I was too, when I was young."

"Why don't you tell me what you had in mind and I'll write a treaty?"

"Any chances that you remove the tax on the transfer of goods?"

“Of course I will, wouldn’t want to hamper trade and thus reduce the federal tax.”

The man froze in his chair, tea cup held in a frightful grip.

“What’s a federal tax?”

Viv gave him the most evil smile that centuries of bureaucratic legacy could produce.

“I am so glad you asked.”

In the end, the mountain tribe joined Kazar as a separate state in what was starting to look like a federal republic, or a federal empire maybe since there were no elections scheduled and Viv had no plans to do so. The treaty was airtight thanks to Solfis’ vast and really weird expertise on the matter. The golem had access to hundreds of years of imperial records and jurisprudence. The key was to keep it simple. The tribes were part of the alliance but they retained their own local government, local laws and customs. The rest would be smoothed out by increased interconnections and the end of entry, exit, and trade fees.

Two days after that, Ban returned and asked for Viv as she was resting from shoving someone’s new eye back in its socket. The ancient head of the heavy infantry detachment was wearing his full armor including the pennants he and his men had started to attach to various parts of their gear. He showed the tree of Kazar as well as his rank. He had a pair of younger men with him.

“Lady Viv, I have returned and I bring two recruits with me. Those are my cousin and my eldest grandson.”

He tugged nervously on his long white beard.

“I vouch for them, on my honor!”

“You know the score, Ban. Either Solfis says they make the cut or they don’t.”

//They will be granted their chance.

The golem exited from the operation room and deployed to its full height. One of the young ones looked him in the baleful orbs and took a valiant step forward which was either a credit to his courage or a total lack of survival instinct. Viv could not tell.

“I would die for Kazar, sir!”

//That is a start.

//Now let us make sure you kill for her instead.

Little by little, the heavy infantrymen trickled back into the camp now that the food situation was good enough. The exceptional harvest set people at ease and they saw it as a good omen and a sign that Sardanal had blessed the city. The recruits built a large barracks and training fields complex to house themselves. It had to be expanded once when the tribe warriors arrived, then another time because of an influx of crossbowmen recruits from the ranks of the refugees, mostly women. Viv assumed that a lot of folks were fucking but Solfis managed to maintain discipline.

Koro married Yan on the first day of autumn, just as Viv finished reattaching the last missing digit. Nothing would ever get her used to the scent of base-material goop. It was now time for the second phase of the 'fuck the prince' plan.

"Ok now that everyone is rearmed and relegged, we need to prepare the terrain for the arrival of the punitive expedition," she told the council at their next meeting.

"It cannot possibly happen before next year," Farren replied, "are we not rushing things?"

"Can you be absolutely sure about that?"

"Yes, we are mostly sure."

It was Brenna who had interrupted the argument before it could really begin.

"And it doesn't matter," she continued, "because we have another reason to set out."

Viv nodded at the invitation to elaborate.

"In his message, Neriad said that he would send people our way and also be miffed if they end up in some monster belly. So to summarize, we can leave most of our regular troops to be trained here while setting out with the scouts so we are not exactly interrupting anything. Second, it will allow us to escort the next batch of refugees through the forest. Keep in mind that they will mostly be crippled until we can heal them. Third, it will allow us to recon the next battlefield and fourth, if I spend another day cooped up in the operation room, I'm liable to stab someone. Seriously."

The others nodded.

"We can imagine that someone who enjoys fighting her way through hordes of undead would find this life dull," Farren said with a supportive voice.

The others agreed and voiced their sympathy.

"We're grateful for the healing and guidance. We'll manage while you go kill and cook some monsters, don't worry."

"Yes. We can hold the fort while you unwind. There is plenty of forest for you to thrash to your heart's content!"

“And please take Arthur with you. Please.”

They nodded vigorously. Viv didn't really trust herself with an answer so mostly kept silent until the end of the council.

The next expedition was set to leave soon. Denerim and Orkan would join, but they would not return to Kazar afterward.

“We stayed until the spell was ready, but now it's time to return to the fold. Besides, we received a sending,” the old knight had told her.

“A sending?”

“Like a dream, but when we woke up we knew that we were needed in Enoria. I do not know the details but I suspect that it relates to the civil war. Many people will die and have died already. This means horror, pain. Aberrants. Contracts with the dark gods. I suspect that a lot of inquisitors are converging on middle Enoria right now. We'll know more when we get there.”

Two-Six would also join them as the top scout in Kazar who also happened to be comfortable with people. Viv asked Solfis to stay and oversee the training of the new recruits but her idea was immediately shut down.

//Absolutely out of the question, Your Grace.

//You may not travel to the deep woods on a scouting mission without me.

//This project is certainly more dangerous than retaking Kazar was.

//Additionally, you do not have my database knowledge on endemic monster species.

//Additionally, none of the meatbags here have my short-range detection capabilities

//Additionally, Ban can handle the two months of physical conditioning and basic drills required to turn this provincial chaff into decent candidates without my input.

//I would even disobey a direct order to stay as it would contravene a main directive.

“I was not about to ask.”

//Forgive me for doubting the integrity of your decision-making centers.

“That is the most roundabout way of calling someone stupid I've ever heard.

//I am delighted to be expanding your horizons, Your Grace.

Marruk was coming, of course.

“The last time I crossed it was as a caravan hand. I didn’t get to see anything except the next set of latrines. I’m eager to see what the forest has to offer!”

“You mean food, right?”

“Of course!”

Viv left the Kark woman listing mushrooms and recruited the next member of the expedition.

“Squee!”

“I don’t know, Arthur. I have never seen oversized squirrels before”

The expedition set out with heavy backpacks and a small cart dragged by two harnesses. It contained additional supplies, mostly food, as well as Solfis. With the deadlands warding stones left behind, the golem would be back to limited operation time. They departed at dawn at a brisk pace. Denerim spent the first hour discussing details.

“We can take turns dragging the sled. Don’t even need two people if we stay on the road. Two-six and Viv should be exempt.”

“I would prefer to scout ahead, yes,” the dark-haired and dark-eyed woman confirmed. She was wearing a forest armor made from a gambeson covered in a variety of cloth and furs. The irregular brown and green patterns probably helped with her stealth.

“Hm I appreciate it,” Viv said, “but I’m not sure I should get the preference treatment.

The rest of them exchanged a few embarrassed glances.

“Hm no offense lady Viv, but how high is your power? Early twenties?”

It currently stood at seventeen after weeks of effort running through the forest.

“Not even that? Neriad’s balls that’s low.”

“Hey!”

“No, please do not be annoyed. This is what we meant. All three of us stand above forty. Your time would be better spent keeping an eye out. You will tire more easily than the rest of us.”

“Fair enough.”

Viv was not mad to have spent months of crushing training back on earth just to be some sort of cute weakling here. Not at all.

Denerim then split the watch, of which Viv was not exempt, as well as various duties including latrines, foraging, and setting up camp. It was all done on the fly, in under an hour and with no one complaining. Viv thought that he must have a skill or something. They kept going and Viv immersed herself in the strange sensation the woods brought. The sounds grew smothered and this vague feeling of infinity soon clung to her mind, giving her a slight vertigo when she allowed it. Her mana mastery let her feel a stream of mana as thick as syrup flowing through the world around her. It was no more conscious than a wave is conscious, but it could be just as overwhelming. Viv wondered if the effect could increase if one stepped away from the main path. Come to think of it, mana behaved strangely around the straight line, as if it avoided the stone scar cleaving through its territory.

“That road is ancient, right? How can it not be overgrown?”

She thought she might have already asked Varska. Perhaps the others knew more? It was Solfis who answered. She should have guessed.

**//The Deadshield trail was built at the dawn of the Age of Expansion, Your Grace.
//Empress Kadiran ordered its construction after her husband was slain visiting a neighboring kingdom.
//Records from this aura show inconsistencies and wild exaggerations.
//As expected of indoctrinated meatbags**

“Wait, are you not all about indoctrinating meatbags?”

**//Soldiers and citizens yes.
//Record keepers no.**

“That is not worrisome at all,” Orkan commented with a wide smile. Denerim shrugged. Viv thought that he might be jaded. He proved it an instant later.

“Unsurprising if you consider who pays the chroniclers and why. We had the same problem before the temple founded an order of historians. The first great sagas were meant to sing the praises of those who paid to have them done. They served a purpose and that purpose was not reporting the truth.”

**//How perceptive of you.
//Ending digression. Returning to main subject.
//Later chroniclers disagree on what means the Empress used to create the path.
//However, they all agree that it must have been a vile and scornful spell.
//Something that would kill the land for centuries.
//Nevertheless, the width of the path has been reduced by over two thirds compared to the original way.
//It will disappear within a few more generations.**

“Wait, really?” Viv asked with surprise.

//Yes.

//The woods are ancient.

//They always return.

//Always.

With that slightly ominous comment, silence returned to the group. Viv realized that she enjoyed walking through the seemingly endless forest. The peace came as a pleasant contrast to the rush of activity of the past few weeks. With summer ending, the heat was manageable. A light wind brought to them a bit of freshness and the pleasant scent of living things. She was only missing music.

That night, they made their camp at a prepared site at the edge of the forest between two large boulders. There were enough blackened pits around to know that quite a few people had camped there in the past.

“A popular place, but I suppose that you want something more complex?” Denerim asked her.

“Yes. I was thinking about something underground and easily defensible so that people can rest without worries from monster attacks. Speaking of which, do we expect anything soon?”

Two-Six returned from foraging then with her arms filled with nuts. Marruk’s eyes widened in anticipation.

“Nothing but beastlings. At most a few scalehounds. We are too close to the edge and the road for the larger creatures, and we are the optimal configuration as well.”

“What do you mean?” Viv asked.

“Well, the less people there are and the less traces we leave. This is also why we didn’t bring animals with us. Few creatures will notice us and some of the more mana-sensitive ones will avoid us as well. Large convoys are systematically attacked, hence the defenses.”

That night, Viv took the opportunity to finally see the result of the past few months of efforts. The wide variety of stuff she’d pursued in the past two months gave her a wide spread of progress. It wasn’t a bad idea to take a more generalist approach on occasion, if only because she would have gone insane just practicing the same exercises all the time. Solfis had approved.

Current status:

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

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 25.3%

This had not changed much except for her attunement, a constant reminder that her time was short.

Physical		Mental	
Power	17	Focus	36
Finesse	21	Acuity	36
Endurance	24	Willpower	37

Crawling through thickets had improved every aspect of her body while the endless practices on the change meaning and subsequent surgeries allowed her to push her mental stats towards the next level. Solfis had confirmed that she had all the signs of a young expert and anticipated that she would only keep progressing from now on, albeit more slowly.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 4
Survival	Intermediate 2	Householding	Apprentice 8
Hand to hand combat	Apprentice 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7		

It was the first time that those had moved that she could remember, and only athletics and survival were concerned. It had taken a lot of effort but she could feel the difference thanks to her experience on earth. Athletics did not teach her where not to walk. That had been Orkan. Instead, it acted as a small boost and guidance on how to move, how to breathe. It constantly pushed her to do better without her having to make a conscious effort. The same was true for survival. A look at the nearest underbush and she guessed that there were thorns under that, and quite possibly snakes as well.

Not for the first time, Viv wondered how a modern army would fare here before they could develop their interface. The answer was probably decently well so long as their supply lines were intact, but isolated squads would be wiped out too easily.

Class skills

Meditative Trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Beginner 6
Arcane Constructs	Beginner 7	Danger sense	Beginner 6
Leadership	Intermediate 1	Intimidation	Intermediate 7
Acuity reflex	Beginner 7		

Acuity reflex and leadership and made some good progress. In particular, her leadership now allowed her to spend much less time remembering, deciding and delegating than before. This left her a lot of free time without harming the quality of her work (that she could tell). It also meant that local armies and states could perhaps outperform some modern administrations in terms of performance simply because their civil servants were inhumanely good as opposed to, for example, the absolute brain-dead baboon of a woman who had handled the making of her passport.

She also suspected that acuity reflex, leadership and danger sense could not be trained the normal way. They had to be learned in context. As for mana mastery and arcane constructs, they had made massive progress. Without them, she could never have cast the spell to regrow limbs.

It was all very fortuitous.

Anyway, Viv was satisfied with the results and could not wait to kill new things and then eat them. What was life without some adventurous gastronomy anyway? She had taken spices and dry herbs with her.

The expedition progressed for two more days at a brisk pace until Viv felt a change. The trees were growing taller, so tall, in fact, that sunlight barely filtered through dense canopies when they stepped away from the road. The cries of creatures grew more common while strange and alien plants grew in colored copses, or spread over old barks.

On the dawn of the fourth day, Viv woke up to the moss behind her singing quietly. The sound reminded her of a choir heard through stone walls, subdued, yet still wonderful. A tree stood in the distance, its silvery leaves unfolding to welcome the growing light. Tweeting notes rose from a scarlet bird with an iridescent plumage. The beast stared them down from a dead branch as high as a small building.

//Welcome to the deep wood, Your Grace.

Then a white, scaly form smashed into the tree and the bird died.

“Squee!”