

“Now, onto my next question,” Viv continued, “do you have a house I could rent?”

Viv honestly expected the man to direct her to the town hall. Instead, it turned out that the church kept free estates south of the town wall for visiting dignitaries and their retinues. He happily rented the smallest one to her for three gold talents, for three months. She calculated that it was around the monthly salary of a knight, so it sounded more than fair.

The last task was changing money. Then she could go on a shopping spree and buy underwear.

Farren gently ousted them out of his office with instructions to go find Brenna, who turned out to be a large woman with grey hair handling the third wing of the temple. She welcomed them from behind a window through a thick barrier of iron bars that separated a storage room in two. On her side were rows of armor, weapons, but also strange items that Viv did not recognize. She inspected one at random.

[Orb of Counting (enchanted): when held by a combatant, this specialized item counts how many undead are slain in their vicinity. The poor craftsmanship means that they need to be replaced after a few years of use.]

It did not look too shoddy to her inexperienced eyes. The orb resembled a brass petanque ball, grooved, and well-used.

“Hello Brenna!”

“Marruk, good to see your head. Who is the other one?”

Viv would have to learn Enorian soon. There was no avoiding it.

“My name is Viviane, but you can call me Bob. We are here to change money.”

“Ah, nice to meet you. I am Brenna, one of the two administrators in charge of helping branch master Farren manage this temple. And how may I be of service?”

“I would like to change currency.”

“Is it deadlands loot?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Please be aware that, although we will exchange it at no cost, we retain a one in ten part of the value for any obsolete coinage seeing as it has to be minted again.”

“That is fine.”

Cernit had already informed her that the Church of Neriad facilitated life for the volunteer troops and mercenaries. She would not get a better offer anywhere.

“Alright, let me see it.”

Marruk placed the looted chest on the counter with a loud clang. Brenna tried to drag it to her. She failed.

“Ah.”

It finally occurred to Viv that pulling the sled to the city might have also been harder because the sled had been a bit heavier. Brenna walked to a side door and unlocked it, leading Marruk and Viv inside.

“Normally it’s against protocol but you two ain’t going to cause me trouble, are you?”

Both Marruk and Viv shook their head vehemently, to the point that Viv wondered if the woman also had the intimidation skill.

The chest was placed on a steel table. Brenna unclasped it to reveal its contents. The woman whistled. Marruk stared on, eyes bulging.

Beneath their eyes, gold and silver shone in the noon light falling from the overhead skylight. Coins in all shapes and forms spilled on the table, showing ten kings and twenty coats-of-arms. The unnamed necromancer had kept no iron. It was all precious metal. Some of the gold was dulled by age.

“By Neriad’s fetching buttocks, did you rob a necropolis?”

“We took it from a necromancer. It was his war chest.”

Two pairs of eyes shot up to Viv.

“You slew a necromancer?”

“Let’s just say that I was instrumental in taking him down. The knight in charge decided that I would have the loot, as payment for my contribution.”

Brenna blinked.

“You are a witch. A spellcaster. Wow, we don’t have many of you around here. It’s very noble of you to come here to fight the good fight.”

“Magician?” Marruk erupted.

“Yes. You cannot inspect?” Viv asked. Brenna’s expression turned judgemental.

“I know you are a foreigner and, huh, I respect your work, but we don’t ask such things around here.”

“Sorry. Yes, I am a caster.”

“I not know!”

“Hmm, Marruk, if you didn’t know then why approach me?”

“You looked in charge, like a mercenary leader.”

Well, that was... flattering? Viv’s attempt to appear unflappable and domineering had backfired in an interesting way.

Brenna quickly counted the coins. She may not have much power, but her finesse was impressive as she stacked pile after pile of coin with unerring precision, all while counting on an abacus that she had taken from her station. When she was done, five minutes later, she compiled a list of all currencies and their current value. Her attention finally resettled on the pair who had just been hanging there not knowing what to do.

“We don’t have enough coin here to change all of this. We’ll give you bonds that you can redeem at the bank. Or you can open your own account. I would recommend that.”

Her list of chores extended.

In the end, Viv accepted a heavy pouch of Enorian currency, the one that was used in Kazar, as well as a stamped letter for the bank. As they walked out, she heard a terrible growl like an animal dying. It was Marruk’s belly.

She dragged the embarrassed Kark to a private room next to the cafeteria, then spent two minutes colding the strange being into ordering what she wanted.

“I have no use for a starving shield. Look, you are too skinny.”

This last remark mortified her poor bodyguard beyond any insult. Her poor mood picked up ten seconds into their meal.

The waiter who brought their food proudly explained that Kark’s diet consisted mostly of cereals and tubers with only a bit of meat. They absolutely loved buns stuffed with creamy vegetables, as her guest soon demonstrated. Viv decided to turn this into an impromptu feast by ordering a expensive dishes with crispy fresh water from a mana-rich source and a dense liquor made from local fruits. It was early afternoon when they left, but the shieldmaiden had lost her edge.

It returned when Viv fed Arthur.

“You are tamer.”

“After a fashion.”

“What?”

“Yes. Arthur is mine.”

“Oh, alright.”

Marruk went to retrieve her weapon as they left, and by doing so, answered one of Viv’s interrogation.

If the Kark was so broke, how comes that she still had a weapon? Could she not have sold it?

The answer turned out to be: because her shield was no proper shield, but indeed, a door.

An actual door.

Taken from some jail or something.

“That’s a door,” Viv said, as she pointed at the layer of planks held together by solid iron bars and nails. It had a leather bracer and handle combo at the back to tie one’s arm, also nailed on, and the head of some monster made of iron squat in the middle. It was clearly a door-knocker, though someone had removed the knocking part.

“Is not,” the fearsome woman muttered back.

Then Viv pointed at a hinge that was still hanging for dear life on the side. The other had been torn off.

Marruk pinched the guilty ornament between two thick fingers and popped it off like a cherry from its stem.

“Was. Is not,” she insisted, growing increasingly flustered. Viv slowly nodded. She was not willing to die on that hill.

Viv has treated the woman like a human so far, and that had worked to some extent. The Kark was... guarded, still. Viv did not blame her. If she had been desperate and then her situation dramatically improved in fifteen minutes, she would be wary as well. Either she was getting scammed, or fate was just winding up for one teeth-shattering uppercut.

Viv just had to take it slow. Trust took time.

They bought a mana shield for Marruk and left. The next stop was the bank next door, or rather, the Manipeloso Bank and Exchange, where they were let in by a city guard.

“Milady witch,” he greeted her.

Hey, she was famous!

Inside, she found a packed but nicely decorated lobby in pink stone, with plenty of columns and a few seats in warm-colored woods. The man behind the ornamental desk who greeted them surprised Viv with his appearance, to the extent that she had to keep walking. He was very dark-skinned, and possibly the first person she had met who could pass for native in her own realm. His very light brown eyes followed her as she walked in, widening slightly as he inspected her, no doubt. He had the freshest haircut she had seen since coming here, with the left side of his skull shaved and the right covered in thick black hair held in three strands by golden rings. He did not have facial hair either. As she approached, she realized that he wore a sand-colored, robe-like outfit that clung to his chest with pointy cloth extensions over his shoulders. It looked expensive.

[Manipeloso uniform (enchanted): a traditional robe reinforced with enchantments designed to protect its wearer against manipulation.]

Wait, did magical influence exist in this world? Like Jedi powers? That would be... eminently disturbing. Brainwashing scared her. She would have to ask Solfis about it.

“And you must be the witch, the most recent addition to our lovely town. Welcome!”

The man’s voice was smooth and cultured, the building smelled of soap, and the silence was merely broken by the sound of their footsteps.

“Beware the northerners and their sugary lies,” Marruk warned in a low voice. She and the banker tried to slay each other with glares.

“Ahem, yes, your.... companion is welcome, of course. Please make sure that she remains on a leash.”

“Marruk is my bodyguard,” Viv retorted, “I will request that you treat her courteously.”

“Of course, of course...” the banker immediately responded, the smile firmly held in place, “please, tell me what it is you seek. I, Tom Manitaradin, will do my best to assist you.”

“I would like to open an account,” she declared, and handed him the church bond.

The unctuous banker checked the amount and blinked ever so slightly at the amount. One hundred and thirteen Baranian gold. It was a nice sum for an individual. And one hundred and thirteen was even a prime number!

“Why, we can certainly accommodate you. Please, follow me.”

Viv followed the man into a study, where the banker took out a blank piece of paper — Viv noticed that it was almost as good as what you could get back on earth — and drew a contract with a speed that a printer would have envied. All while talking to her. Marruk was staring around as if the tax office itself was waiting in ambush to seize their dubiously acquired assets.

They were brought klod in large goblets by a beautiful woman in a similar outfit. She dropped them on the table and sashayed out without a word. Viv checked her ass when Tom turned to grab more ink. It was a nice ass.

Ok, focus.

“My cousin,” the banker explained.

“Is this a family business?”

“It would be more correct to call it a business of many families. I take it that you did not come from the north, then?”

“No.”

“A shame. Our land is very welcoming.”

He stole a glance towards Marruk, who eyed the door with suspicion. Viv hoped that the woman did not have a grudge against doors. She had to leave hers at the entrance, maybe she was already looking for a replacement?

“... to most,” he finished.

In the end, the banker tried to offer her a few more services, as she expected. He offered to sell her traveling bonds that only she could redeem, something that she had no use for in the short term. He also offered to draw her will, which she agreed to do later. They left and walked across the plaze under the shade of its colossal tree.

“Your people and his people fight often?”

“All the time,” Marruk muttered, but she did not elaborate and Viv did not pry. The large woman was now fully in bodyguard mode with her door, sorry, her shield, on her back.

“Don’t you use a weapon in your other hand?”

“I can punch a man’s heart from his chest!”

“You sold the weapon, didn’t you?”

“...Yes.”

Viv sighed and they moved to the shopping part. They went to a large mercenary general store and bought sundries, a massive iron mace, and a basic leather armor for Marruk. The tall woman categorically refused to let Viv pay, trying to use the advance Viv had given her. She paled as soon as the clerk had mentioned the price.

“One gold, four silver, fifteen bits, please.”

“Marruk. This is the bodyguard weapon and armor. I, uh, lend them to you. You can give it back if you decide to leave my employ.”

The embarrassed Kark stared at the heavy implement in her hand. It had bluish extensions on four sides and looked like the kind of weapon used by the right hand of the evil wizard in a cheap fantasy movie from the 90's. She weaved it up and down.

“Mass of the bodyguard. I understand.”

[Mass of the bodyguard: this cheap, decently made mass of iron can be devastating in skilled hands. It is also the badge of office of the Kazar witch's bodyguard.]

...What?

Wait, no.

Ah, whatever.

Viv paid, noticing the bulging eyes of the clerk when her large pouch clanked with the sound of indecent wealth. Marruk growled softly, and the man averted his eyes. They left the store, then Viv had to coax Arthur into climbing down from the tree. The dragonling was gripping one of the boughs with desperation, squealing at terrified guards like one big stupid fruit.

The witch sighed and put on her leather armor.

“Come on Arthur, you can do it. Hop hop!”

The tiny one jumped and managed to turn on herself and more or less successfully crash into Viv's waiting arms.

“Ooof.”

She was still super small, but she was growing fast. The cute one had barely reached her knee when they had met. Now, her head bumped against Viv's mid-thigh when she begged for more meat.

Viv could tell that the guards were unhappy about the display, but they said nothing. She was a caster, a member of the 'don't fuck with me' class. It felt weird to be so privileged that people left you alone at a glance.

She would try not to abuse it, except, as far as Arthur was concerned. And queuing at restaurants. And dealing with annoying civil servants.

Dammit.

It was a lost cause, wasn't it?

Their steps next led them to a clothes store, a small family affair attended by a curious young man filled with questions. He was soon censored by an older woman who seemed to be his mother. She got Viv's exact measurements with a glance, or so she claimed, and promised her several sets of underwear, undershirts, the work. An entire wardrobe delivered over three days by implement. It cost another two gold, but Viv did not mind. She could already see weaving station in the back room moving at preternatural speed by wrinkled hand. A soft, melancholic voice started a song and a few other voices soon joined. It was nice. She left that shop with her spirits up.

They passed by a small market on their way to the south gate and away from the deadlands. The houses there were in a better state than the other side, and the people bustled doing their everyday things. There were a lot of weavers around, and she saw thick rolls of cloth piled in compact crates for export, probably. There was a lot of food too and she negotiated a solid stock of flour, oil, meat, and large green beans. Marruk guided her into buying roots and spices as well. They were set. The sled left through the south gate and they found their new home easily. It was a cubic walled mansion with four bedrooms and even a cellar. Viv let Marruk have the one that faced the rising sun and picked the one that looked the most comfy.

She slumped on her new bed, freshly made apparently. The walls were white and bare, but there was a window to a small garden and a desk that she could furnish. It was hers, for now. She felt... weird. As long as she was squatting in a tower or enjoying massages in an, ahem, inn, she was a transient. A vagrant on her way home or at least, to a solution. Now, she had settled.

In her heart, she had accepted that this was her new reality, for now. No internet, none of her previous friends, no family. Monsters. Magic.

Power.

She shook her head. Do not let pride and greed get to her head, that way lay dragons. Err, the not cute kind.

"Squee!"

"Yes, yes, I'll help you."

Ten minutes later, they had settled with Arthur's den and Solfis' corner placed at the entrance. Viv had explained that Solfis was a golem, and Marruk had only screamed in terror for two seconds when the ancient being had uttered a few words.

//Kark make excellent auxiliaries, Your Grace.

//You were wise to pick her up.

//Do bear in mind that honor and promises mean a lot to them.

//If you cheat her, she might try to kill you.

//And that would be a waste of perfectly valid fodder.

"I'll bear it in mind."

"Is talking skull evil?"

That was a difficult question, was it not?

"He is on our side," she replied noncommittally.

It was mid-afternoon for now, but before they could stop for the day she had one last important thing to do.

"Marruk, is the edge of the forest dangerous?"

It took a few rephrasing, but she managed to convey her question in the end.

"Only beastlings, sometimes. I win beastlings. Not dangerous. Further in, very dangerous."

"Let's take a walk then."

Her bodyguard looked at her with surprise, but she wanted to feel the grass beneath her feet and the trees in her face, and let Arthur have a bit of fun. The poor thing had been cooped up for too long without ever experiencing nature. Maybe she would just fly away. That would make Viv sad, but she would not keep the creature captive if it came to that. The bestiary insisted that dragons could not be tamed, therefore, Arthur had to stay out of her own accord.

"Arthur, come!" she invited. "Come!"

The tiny dragonling was obviously annoyed about being bothered so soon after making a new lair, but the mention of "flight!" pushed the excited bundle of scales outside. There, she followed Viv and Arthur, sometimes stopping to climb a roof and jump to her companion's waiting arm.

Viv just hoped that Marruk would not rat her out about the chipped paint.

They walked through small estates more designed for temporary stay than to cultivate anything on their way south. At some point, they heard baying in the distance, far to their left.

“Dogs,” Marruk explained.

So they had dogs. Viv wondered why she had not seen any inside of the city.

It only took them twenty minutes to reach free land. Arthur grew more and more excited as they approached the edge of the tree. She jumped everywhere, testing the grass with her paws. Or hands? Her forearm thumbs looked opposable. Ah, whatever. She was just happy and Viv had a good time smelling the scent of loam and sap for the first time in forever. She was sure that she would grow bored eventually, but right now, those were nice. The trees did not appear magical though. Besides the unusual leaf patterns, they were like any deciduous essence you could find in a temperate climate.

“Look, you can climb!”

Arthur was soon zipping from trunk to trunk like an oversized gliding squirrel. Viv let her do so. She sat on a stump surrounded by tall grass and just waited there, doing nothing. The wind blew in her short hair. Kazar stood in the distance, with the hill behind that turning from vibrant green to gray at the top. The sky beyond was dark and menacing.

“SQUEEEEEEEEEEEEE”

Viv jumped at the sound of alarm, and moved just in time to receive a panicking dragonling on her chest. She and Marruk stood to face the incoming threat.

It was... a rabbit. Well. Something that was like a rabbit, with a spotted pelt and an elongated muzzle.

“Harrien. Harmless. Tasty in soup. I cannot catch.”

“Some mighty predator you are,” Viv teased the poor reptile with a light laugh. Arthur huffed and puffed, flapping her wings and bouncing from one feet to another like a drunk goose.

“Yes, yes, threat averted. Well done.”

Arthur finally looked at the creature with interest, but her prey promptly vanished back into the forest.

“We shall speak no more of this.”

Viv left the dragonling to sniff warily at the nearby bushes and returned to her stump.

Nothing happened. She stayed there for an hour or so, enjoying the fresh air. At some point, Marruk joined her and sat as well, facing the forest.

“You something deadlands for long?”

It was so weird to speak in almost similar languages, but not quite.

How long as she stayed there anyway? The days melted into each other.

“Almost a month.”

“In a fort, yes?”

“Only two weeks in a fort. The rest of the time, I was moving.”

“Moving in deadlands, dangerous.”

“Yes, and tiring. Always grey, always dry, no wind, bad smell.”

“Not like the forest.”

“No. not like the forest.”

The shieldmaiden said nothing after that. She just hummed some song in a deep alto voice. Arthur eventually crash-landed nearby and manually climbed on Viv, signaling that she was spent. They headed back. The pair cooked food they had bought on a hearth and Marruk retired to her room soon after. Viv sat down by Solfis' side to charge him.

“What do we practice tonight?”

//Tonight, you rest.

//You have suffered several instances of mana poisoning, wounds, and traumatic experience over a short period of time.

//We can resume with light training tomorrow.

“Damn, what am I going to do with my evening.”

//You may want to look outside, Your Grace.

“Ah?”

She did as suggested and opened the main door. Arthur joined her as she dragged a chair and a cover in their small courtyard. It was a cloudless night, besides the ever presence of the deadlands on her right. Even the encroaching darkness could do little to mar the breathtaking beauty of the myriad of alien stars on a canvas of midnight blue, unblemished by light pollution. Two moons graced it with their presence, a gibbous white one and a smaller red one, angry and full. Viv held the warm dragonling to her chest and lost herself to her new world's beauty.