

Inquisitor Denerim refrained from checking his armor for the umpteenth time. Simishe always said that it betrayed his nervousness. She would tell him to straighten and smile. Then she would probably slap his ass.

Denerim let the tiniest of smiles bloom on his lips and rectified his posture. He passed a hand in his beard and turned to Orkan, who had just kicked a stone.

“Patience.”

The sullen teenager gave him a vicious look. As usual, the glare lost its intensity after a second and morphed into a sigh. Orkan was a good kid. He was trying his best despite... everything, so Denerim placed a comforting hand on his apprentice’s shoulder and gave it a good, manly grip.

“We are intruding upon them when they are tired and probably just want to be alone. And we are figures of authority. It’s a normal reaction.”

“When a woman said that she was getting ready, it used to mean that she would return wearing very little,” Orkan said dejectedly.

“I would not count on it this time. Also there is a Kark woman...”

Both men smiled.

“Not that I’m judging,” the inquisitor said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Orkan chuckled and some of the pain left his angular traits. The younger man had enough scars for three veterans, and the tattoos marking his origin formed angry red lines across his muscular body from toes to forehead. Black eyes returned to stare at the closed door.

It opened.

Denerim ended up nose to nose with a powerfully built Kark woman with bloodshot eyes and a grumpy air. Her dark hair was mussy under a helmet, and for one moment, he thought his vision had gone awry. But no. There were two doors before him. The Kark had the other one strapped to her forearm.

“Come in,” she growled in passable Enorian.

They walked inside the house, finding a scene that he was definitely not expecting. The witch herself was armored, sitting in a throne-like chair before them, with a vicious-looking creature perched menacingly behind her. He briefly inspected her.

[ Black Witch. Dangerous. Second stage of her path. One who has forfeited other hues in favor of a deep understanding of black mana, a rare choice. Highest stat: Focus ( early fourth tier)  
Highest skills: meditation, mana manipulation, pain tolerance.]

More information filtered through his mind as the magic helped him interpret what his senses perceived.

[Decent melee combatant. Superior caster. Smart. Killer. Undead Bane. Lucky. On the rise.  
OCCULTED]

That was... unusual. His inquisitor path gave him access to many tools, including ones used to pierce the veil used by assassins and dark worshippers. The 'occulted' feeling came with a feeling of hitting a wall, one that was vast and absolutely unyielding. It was worrisome, but it did not extend to his other skills. Occultation was not always a sinister thing. A simple discussion would clear things out.

The sinuous creature on her shoulder was a drake of some sort. An unusual color as well.

Except.

Denerim counted the number of limbs.

Oh shit.

[Juvenile draconic creature. Not very dangerous. Highest stat: Finesse (late second tier).  
Highest skills: draconic combat. Others: awoken intellect. Gourmet. Truce. OCCULTED]

Not tamed. Not tamed! Occulted. Alright, calm down. That was... weird, but truce felt like the dragon did not see humans as prey, he could feel it.

And it was a dragon.

He was so damn sure. No paladin of Neriad could see that winged figure and take it for anything else. By the high one's fetching buttocks, what the fuck?

And occulted?

Ok. Enough. He had already spent several seconds staring at the creature who was now eyeing him with malevolent crimson eyes. Denerim lowered his gaze to the witch who was now eyeing him with malevolent emerald eyes. He bowed politely.

"Greetings to you, witch Bob. I apologize for calling on you at this late—"

"What the fuck are you looking at?"

Denerim's next words died out in his throat and he froze the tense smile on his face for the sake of his host. Simishe said that a public figure had to smile in tense situations. Apparently, it helped with settling things when done correctly. Easy for her to say.

Denerim straightened up one again and turned to his apprentice. The young man was baring his teeth at the Kark bodyguard, his tattoos glowing red like dying embers in the room's darkness. The Kark's expression had gone to the glacial neutrality of the consummate fighter planning her first strike. Things were going out of hand. He didn't want to start his investigation with violence.

"Orkan."

"They're fucking with us, we should—"

"Orkan."

"That big, disrespectful—"

Simishe always said that he was awe-inspiring and manly when he got serious. A rock in the storm. That's what he went for now. He was the center and he was as unyielding as a mountain.

"Orkan."

The boy calmed down. Despite his upbringing and the young rage in his heart, he found it in himself to rein his temper once more. Denerim smiled at him despite everything. Neriad welcomed all who fought the righteous fight, even if that fight was against themselves. Not all were born equal. Not all could tip the scales, but Neriad assisted each and everyone of those who fought for a better world.

Denerim would do his part.

"Sorry, mentor."

"You are forgiven."

"I'm the one who should be forgiving right now," the Kark woman grumbled, still in the posture that would allow her to smash Orkan in the ribs in a moment. Denerim wasn't too worried. Orkan and himself would win without...

His thoughts trailed off as he saw something glint at the edge of his vision, something yellow. He turned his head and saw what looked like a bone statue.

[golem]

He did not take the time to inspect more, because at that moment, the construct's eyes flashed again, and in them he saw a depth of malice that sent a chill down his spine. There was a centennial hatred buried in those orbs that no living creature could ever hope to match, a cold intellect with a will defying logic itself. It would kill him with glee. Denerim did not exist as a person in what passed for the thing's mind. It was merciless murder incarnate.

He felt a deep pressure coming from the caster, a sense of pressure that he knew meant a primed offensive spell. She was also pushing against his soul with a threatening aura, but Denerim had stood shoulder to shoulder with the greatest fighters of Param as an elder wyvern bore down on him. She was still a pup.

"Perhaps we went off on the wrong foot. Would it be fine for me to introduce myself again?" he said in an attempt to salvage the meeting.

"Could you introduce yourself to the closest latrines instead?" the witch asked.

"I assure you, I would not be bothering you if it were not important."

There were too many things to consider, but it would have to come later. He had a mission that took priority.

The witch looked at him in the way that screamed 'inspection'. She had short, messy light brown hair and beautiful traits. Very exotic. Her elegant poise could have allowed her to pass for a noble were it not for her eyes. They had an edge that more experienced court animals would have smoothed over. And they were a unique green hue that he had never seen before. She was clearly from afar. Even her skin was very pale with a visible network of black veins, but with a healthy flush. It was all rather eye-catching. Dangerous, that.

She made a sign and the Kark stepped back.

"Alright, let's hear it."

The throne and the fact that they were not offered seats sent a clear message. Perhaps she was noble after all? Having them stand as if this were a palace and not a rental cottage in the ass end of Param was within the range of dick moves he would expect from a Baranese countess.

"We have come requesting your assistance in a delicate matter. We have been contacted by an officer of the law to assist with the track of a dangerous criminal."

"Is that so?" the witch asked in a cold voice. He felt a spell priming again. The... baby dragon hissed.

“Yes. and that criminal has been living in Kazar for at least two years,” Denerim precised, having anticipated this sort of reaction, “that is why I think that you could help, since you are a recent arrival.”

She blinked.

She frowned slightly.

Denerim wondered what she had been through to show that level of distrust. Perhaps she was a noble after all.

“You are not a prime suspect, if that is what you fear. I really came here to ask for your support,” he said, and called upon his Truth skill.

It was an interesting thing, his Truth skill, a double-edged sword that allowed him to detect falsehoods, but also made him much more reticent to lie. When he activated it, people would feel the candor in his words. Just like the witch did now.

She sat back in her modest throne and gestured for him to continue. By his side, Orkan settled down.

“What I will share with you is confidential information. I will ask you not to share it, or the cultist will flee and we will lose them.”

“Cultist?” she asked with a frown. His truth skill whispered that her reaction was genuine. It was pretty much a gut feeling.

“I will get back to it. A few days ago, town people went to cut down a stretch of the woods to clear the way for more farms. They found a charnel pit. Five corpses in a mound.”

“Wow.”

“The bodies were... heavily damaged, but fortunately the citizen of Kazar called upon their prime investigator who recognized the precise cuts used on the remains. Missing thighs, cheeks, calves, biceps. She called us in turn. I do not need to tell you what this means.”

She looked very confused.

“Errr. You do.”

Again, a genuine reaction. She was innocent.

“You have never heard about Gomogog?”

She did not move in her seat. Her immobility betrayed an attempt to hide her reaction. To Denerim's experienced eyes, she might as well have been babbling.

"Very well. Gomogog is the dark god of flesh, renewal, and hunger. He offers immortality to his followers in exchange for the sacrifice and consumption of sapient flesh."

"Those cuts mean that someone harvested meat from the bodies..." she realized with widened eyes. The Kark made the sign of Enttikku, goddess of death. A shiver shook her mighty frame. Orkan just rolled his eyes.

"Precisely. Prime investigator Tars correctly guessed that the bodies were killed every two months or so, but also that the most recent one dated to a full year back. I suspect that the cultist changes the burial location from time to time to avoid gathering too much attention."

"How do you know that it's one cultist and not several?"

Oh? A relevant question. Usually, the first thing people did was to claim that their beloved town could not possibly have such a monster in its midst.

"The cuts are practically identical. Individual cultists always prepare the... meat... themselves, it is part of their ritual."

"I see. Why not dispose of the bodies farther into the woods, by the way? Monsters would help them disappear."

"Unreliable. Although people eaten in such a ritual never rise, body parts can still be found in monster lairs in case of a purge. We were really lucky to find those graves. Whoever that cultist is, they have patiently fed on drifters and scavengers over the years. The proximity of the Deathshield Woods and the convoys going to forts means a myriad of ways to explain a disappearance. Our quarry is clever, yes. Hmmm. They could have been operating for a century and we would not know."

"How dangerous is a Gomogog cultist exactly?"

Denerim refocused on the conversation.

"Depends on their food reserves. Alright, I need to delve into the depths of their depravity. Disciples of that foul god sacrifice others to stave off their own mortality, adding their victim's flesh to their own. They are... larger on the inside, so to speak. They will grow to monstrous size in combat, thus revealing to the world the extent of their corruption. The disciple consumes flesh to heal flesh. So long as they have reserves, they can close even the most grievous of wounds, mutating in a mass of ever-changing musculature."

"Also they stink," Orkan added helpfully.

“They can regrow limbs?” the witch asked with a frown, one finger idly scratching the dragonling’s spine.

“Yes. Grow, regrow, multiply. Older disciples can reach prodigious size, but they are always revealed in the end. The insane hunger of their masters spreads through their unholy bodies until they can no longer control themselves. It is always a matter of time.”

“Alright. Do spells work against them then?”

Denerim and his apprentice exchanged a glance.

“Yes,” the inquisitor explained, “you see, they might resist magic like all highly magical beings, but they use mostly life mana.”

“Really? That is... unexpected.”

“Life mana to sustain themselves, a little black mana to corrupt and change. As such, foreign black mana spells are extremely effective against them. As the antithesis of life and preservation, they burn and disrupt the ability to regenerate efficiently. I read Lieutenant Cernit's report on your inspiring contribution against the undead. Your specialty would serve us well in this struggle.”

“I see so that’s why you wanted me to join. Just to be on the safe end of things, there is another caster in Kazar we shou...”

The witch frowned and Denerim saw realization in her widening eyes.

“You are suspecting her,” she exclaimed.

Denerim felt the witch’s intense distress at the thought that Lady Varska, the resident witch, could be the culprit. She was not afraid, but worried. The two knew each other well.

“We suspect everyone,” the inquisitor continued, “but there are signs that can point us in the right direction. For example, disciples of Gomogog try to dwell in places with a high life mana attunement, and Kazar has one such a place.”

The woman frowned.

“The tree?” the Kark asked.

“Precisely,” Denerim said with approval.

“Aw no, anything but that,” the witch continued, “what other signs?”

“Well. They tend to be very protective of their personal space, for obvious reasons. And they would tend to eat a lot, mostly meat.”

The witch relaxed.

“Yeah that’s not Varska at all. She is a herbivore. Mostly. Except for her sweet tooth, really. Though I suppose a disciple would gorge in private?”

“Most of the time, yes. Be careful with your suspicion, young one. The mind tends to focus on its own worst fears instead of searching for the truth.”

“A disciple would live alone, right? Away from their family, if they had one?”

“Yes.”

“... I’ll try not to focus on my fear.”

“We can go tomorrow and assuage your concerns, and ours. It will be fine.”

“Yeah. Fine. Pass by after daybreak?”

“We will see you there. Be careful and make sure that your house is secure. Our arrival could have been noticed, though we have done our best to be discreet.”

There was a hint of defiance in the witch now, as she sat back into her throne.

“This place is safe now. I assure you.”

Truth. Or at least, she believed it was the case. Denerim had to remind himself to be careful, as being truthful and being correct were two entirely separate propositions.

“See you tomorrow. Take care.”

They left.

The door closed behind the inquisitor and Viv did her best to take deep breaths. It would be fine.



"It's not her," Marruk said.

Viv turned to the one who had started as precaution but was quickly turning into a friend. The Kark warrior's big, honest face showed a level of confidence that Viv wished she could share. Varska was an exile with little to lose. She bore a stigma in her flesh that Gomogog could perhaps heal. She lived near the Kazaran tree. It did not look too good.

On the other hand... no it would be too weird. Too big of a coincidence. She had invited Viv to her home. But what if it was to eat her... No. No. Or yes?

**//I agree with Marruk's assessment of the situation, Your Grace.**

**//Although mine is based on rigorous observation rather than fleshy wishful thinking.**

**//I have slain Gomogog disciples in the past.**

**//If your... 'mentor'... were a follower of a dark god, she would have acted before.**

**//Gomogog followers are not known for their impulse control.**

**//It is not her.**

"Are you sure?"

**//Almost entirely, yes.**

**//Set your mind at ease.**

"Ok. ok.."

Marruk locked the front door and placed a chair under the knob to block the access, for good measure. She yawned mightily, showing her large flat teeth in an uncharacteristic display.

"I'm going back to bed. Big hunt tomorrow."

"Alright. Thanks for being there."

"Always. Good night."